

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

DEAR ABBY: Two years ago, I married a wonderful man. I am white and Kenny is African-American. After I announced my marriage, my father stopped taking my phone calls and e-mails, and refuses to have any contact with me whatsoever. He has never even met my spouse.

I continue to send my father cards on his birthday, Father's Day and Christmas, but I never receive any response. We live only three miles apart.

Dear Daughter: At age 45, you made a mature decision. You knew when you married your husband that there would be a price tag for your happiness, and this is it. Face it: Your father is a racist whose prejudice is more important to him than your happiness. Please waste no more time hoping he will "mellow." Live your life and concentrate on your future.

If you take Abigail Van Buren's advice seriously, there's no hope of family restoration between father and daughter over her interracial marriage. But Jesus was not such a pessimist when it comes to the racial biases inherent within the human heart. He had some Good News for bigots and He intentionally went out of His way to give it away.

In a historic move to liberate themselves from 3,000 years of oppression thousands of Dalits or "Untouchables" converged on Delhi to renounce Hinduism.

Although Delhi authorities attempted to block the rally last November (2001) by withdrawing permission to use the planned venue and detaining Dalits travelling to the city, still they came.

Dalit leader Ram Raj declared nothing would stop this event. They had waited too long. At the last minute, organisers relocated the rally to a compound named after the famous Dalit champion Dr. Babashaheb Ambedkar. Ambedkar rejected Christianity, because he observed: 'Indian Christians, like all other Indians, are divided by race, by language, and by caste. Their religion has not been a sufficiently strong unifying force to make difference of language, race and caste mere distinctions.' Although a much smaller venue, it was highly significant. Ambedkar had led thousands of Dalits to a casteless Buddhism, after experiencing rejection from the Christian church. The 100,000 at the rally also planned to embrace Buddhism. As the

crowds chanted “All humanity is one! All are equal” Ram led them into a dramatic ceremony as they converted to Buddhism. They had rejected Christianity because sadly the caste system has infected the church in India since its inception. India’s first Protestant church contained a wall separating different castes. It said to Untouchables who came to Christ that they were still Untouchable.¹

Jesus was traveling by foot with the disciples from southern Judea to northern Galilee taking the longer route through the mountainous country of Samaria. He could have gone the most direct route up the Jordan Valley and avoided all contact with the despised Samaritans. However, the Scripture says, “And He must needs go through Samaria.” John 4:4.

They had been traveling all morning and as the sun rose higher in the sky about noon, the temperatures soared close to 100 and Jesus was exhausted, hungry and thirsty. Jesus’ humanity was such that He just could not make it another step. While the disciples went on ahead into the village to purchase food, “Jesus therefore, being wearied with His journey, sat thus on the well.” John 4:6.

Now there’s no good reason to be out of town working in the heat at high noon drawing water. Better to go out early in the morning when the rest of the women went as a kind of community get-together. There’s no good reason I say for anyone, except someone who is trying to avoid contact with society. She doesn’t feel comfortable even around her own people because she has been shunned. This is very painful to her. If she tries to talk to her neighbors, she can sense their air of prejudice and contempt.

So what does she do to mask her pain? She puts on a calloused front pretending she doesn’t need them. She can live her life well without them.

She has just come down the path from the village and bumped into a bunch of rude Jews going up to the market. They knocked her off the path in their haste. Never mind, the whole lot of those Jews are bigots. They have nothing to do with Samaritans unless their stomachs are empty.

Now she has arrived at Jacob’s well and she sees this foreigner seated. The way He is dressed He is obviously Jewish. She is going

¹ Taken and adapted from “India’s Biggest Mutiny” by Debbie Meroff in the Parish Magazine of All Saints, Faringdon with St. Mary’s, Little Coxwell March 2002.

to give Him the silent treatment just like she gets from her neighbors. She ignores Him.

For Jesus this is no chance encounter. He is there for a definite purpose, but He must earn the right to speak to this stranger. He uses heavenly psychology. He is genuinely on the verge of dehydration. Here He is sitting on a well with water lying a hundred feet beneath Him, and the Son of God has no waterpot to lower into the well and is dependent upon others to supply His need. He is thirsty. So He asks her, "Give me to drink." John 4:7.

In that instant the woman had to stop thinking about her national pride as a Samaritan and prejudice against Jews, and think about Jesus' need. No one in the Middle East, where water is scarce, could refuse an earnest request from even a alien for a drink. We Americans think nothing of water. We can take it or leave it even here in dry California.

I was visiting in a member's home the other day and the gentleman, being a being kind host, offered me some store-bought, chilled water in a bottle. It was a thoughtful gesture on his part, and I drank some of it, but it was not a life-and-death issue for me to have that water immediately. I was already well-hydrated.

For Middle Easterners water is life. If you don't have water in those arid regions, if you don't come upon it in time, it could cost you your life. And so no one, no matter how socially alienated, could refuse the request of a stranger for a drink. Jesus placed Himself at the mercy of this woman.

This woman expected the silent treatment from this Jew. She expected Him to be rude. That's why she was so taken aback when she asked, "How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans." John 4:9. She now realized that this Jew was an exception to the rule. You just can't generalize and put them all into a box and say, They're all a bunch of rude pigs. This One was different. He was, in fact, exceptional!

Jesus didn't spend any time lecturing her on race relations between Jews and Gentiles. Multi-cultural sensitivity training was not the need of the hour. Something far more basic headed Jesus' priority list. "Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water." John 4:10. What a strange thing for a hapless traveler to say to a local.

“If thou knewest the gift of God.” Well, just what is that gift of God? It is He “that saith to thee, Give me to drink.” You see, Jesus has initiated this conversation with the woman at the well. He who has asked for a favor has already given her a favor. God has given her Jesus! Introducing God into this conversation has taken the whole encounter out of the realm of the commonplace to the transcendent.

Jesus suggests to her that knowing God’s gift would in turn prompt her to ask of God living water. This would not just be water that you would have to hike for miles to get to down in a well which was a holding cistern. This would be bubbling, sparkling water that would accompany the traveler wherever she might roam.

No one has ever seen a well of water springing up. Only the water in a spring springs up. The water in a well just lies there. So Jesus is not talking about a well. The woman had come to a well. Jesus has invited her to a spring. Now He adds that if she allows Him to place this spring within her, the spring will never cease but will continue to bubble away forever.

Imagine that you have just purchased a piece of property upon which you are going to build a house. There is water on the property. If the water is in a well, the water will give you no trouble. If you are there with your bulldozers to clear the ground for the house, all you have to do is push some dirt into the hole and the well will be gone forever so far as you are concerned.

It is entirely different, however, if the source of the water on your property is a spring. Try to do the same as you did with the well. You push some dirt over a spring, and it seems to be gone. Five o’clock comes. The workmen go home. But the next morning, when the workmen come back, the stream will be there again, having simply pushed its way through the ground. A well can be covered. A spring seeps through anything you may place over it.

This is what Jesus is promising you, dear friend. He is promising to place the spring of His endless life in you, which if unhindered will constantly bubble up. His constant supply of righteousness is an ever-present reality.

Human nature has not changed in the course of some two thousand years. To her it is a physical impossibility to come up with water without a line and a bucket; and Jesus has neither. “The woman saith unto Him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water?” John 4:11. She is just like most of us. She is thinking about water purely on the practical

level. Remember, she can't turn on the spigot and get fresh, pure water on demand any time she needs it. She has to expend great effort in order to obtain it and then in limited quantities; only that which she can carry upon her head back to the village.

Jesus has aroused her interest at least to the level where water is an inescapable necessity for her life and it would sure be nice to get it without expending so much effort.

Now He will need to lead her from the recognition of this physical need for water to live, to a much deeper need yet unidentified, which only He can supply. "Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again." John 4:13. You are going to continually get thirsty and have to come back to this place again and again. It is a never-ending cycle.

"But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." John 4:14. Now you and I know what Jesus was talking about. It's the same thing He told Nicodemus, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." John 3:5. Nicodemus' need was water too, but the kind of water that could wash out the sin-polluted sources of his inner life. Only the Spirit of God could produce such a radical transformation of the human heart.

But all of this was not readily apparent to the woman. She was no shallow thinker. The problem was she was thinking one thing and He was talking about something different. "The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw." John 4:15. She's thinking, that would be great if I had tap water in my abode. My place would become the community center. Why, I could even make a livelihood out of it, a cottage industry. I could set up a water-stand at my front door. I might even put a sprig of lemon or lime in it to make a little extra.

Then Jesus goes and spoils all of those happy thoughts and brings up her personal baggage. "Go, call thy husband, and come hither." John 4:16. Why did Jesus have to go and say that? because He was getting nowhere with her talking about water. Well, I shouldn't say nowhere. Her interest was certainly aroused in what He was dispensing. There is no hint that she questioned that Jesus could make good on what He wanted to give to her. This conversation was making progress in that sense. The problem was that Jesus needed

to help her realize her deeper need, the unrecognized pain, yes, the repressed sin of her life, which only He could heal and forgive.

So He spoke to her of her married life. Now that was a sensitive subject. When I visit with people for the first time, I'm always cautious about probing into their marital and family life. It seems that the greater percentage of homes have been impacted with either estrangement, divorce, or death of a spouse. You don't want to get people mad at you by asking too many questions before you have earned the right to go there.

Evidently Jesus felt He had a right to go there with the woman. He wasn't hesitant at all. He read her like a book.

The woman gave an honest answer, but it was an answer designed to throw Him off track and evade further discussion. "I have no husband." But Jesus wasn't to be deterred. She was going to get it whether she wanted to or not. "Jesus said unto her, Thou hast well said, I have no husband. For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly." John 4:17, 18. This was painful. What a sorry personal history of failure.

I heard a discussion recently led by a marriage counselor of the inroads that divorce has had upon our society. The counselor was asked, What is the average number of divorces that individuals you have had contact with experienced? The counselor said the average number was about three. What is the largest number of divorces a counselee has had? Oh, about seven.

Now think about this for a moment. This woman has had five husbands. The first husband was innocent true romance on her part. Perhaps he cheated on her having an affair and wouldn't quit, so she asked out and he granted her a divorce. Her innocence now gone, she entered a cycle of four more husbands, where somewhere along the line she probably was unfaithful. That's a lot of change, grieving, adjustment, falling in love all over again, and then crash and burn. She has given up on marriage as an institution, so now she's living with her current lover. After all, as my mother always said, Why buy the cow when you're already getting the milk? Shacking up and playing house without commitment and marriage is still sin.

Now Jesus has given her the Gospel which is Himself and the Spirit of living water. She doesn't sense her need or doesn't realize that her failure in marriage can be healed by Jesus. So the Spirit of Christ

must convict her of sin. Here is the Gospel first and then the law comes in to convict her of sin and drive her to Jesus.

In the city of Basel, Switzerland, there is a carnival each year called *Fasnacht*. It is much like the Mardi Gras that is celebrated in predominantly Catholic countries, but it is held during the first week of Lent instead of before it, presumably to show that Basel is Protestant. Whatever the case, *Fasnacht* certainly does not show the city to be Christian in the biblical sense, for the carnival is always a time of riotous behavior in which the normally restrained and stolid Basellers let themselves go morally. Everyone knows what goes on. There are even jokes about it. But no one knows precisely who is doing what because the revelers wear masks. Each year during *Fasnacht*, however, the Salvation Army makes an attempt to challenge people to a higher standard of conduct by placing large posters around the city bearing the German inscription "*Gott siehst hinter deine Maske.*" This means, "God sees behind your mask." God knows what is going on within and who is doing it.²

This is such a touchy subject with her that again she tries to divert His attention by making a truthful observation. "The woman saith unto him, Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet." John 4:19. I don't think she was trying to flatter Him. By now she realized that this stranger was really not a stranger when it came to knowing her. He knew all about her life history.

Still she cannot get past her national Samaritan pride and prejudice against the Jews, so she engaged Him in a theological discussion as to the right forms and ceremonies of worship. She said, "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." John 4:20. There was a long story about how the Samaritans had built a rival temple on Mt. Gerazim to worship their gods in competition with the Temple at Jerusalem. Their temple had been destroyed a long time ago.

Jesus was willing to go down this road with her because she saw worship as an external act done at the right location rather than a life changed by the Spirit of God and in conformity with His standard of righteousness, the ten commandments. So He responded to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father." John 4:21.

² James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1, pp. 286, 287.

In our day and age you would expect a clergyman to give an ecumenical answer to this sort of question, Where should we worship? Well, it doesn't matter where you worship just so long as your heart is right. You can go to a Protestant church or a Catholic church, a Mormon meeting-house, or a Monday morning businessmen's prayer breakfast.

However, Jesus told her plainly, "Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews." John 4:22. The Samaritans were imported from the ancient Assyrian Empire. They had intermarried with local Hebrews in northern Israel. They had brought their ancestral gods with them and mingled their religion with the Israelite faith. It was all a religion of the Samaritan's own making. There could be salvation in that.

But God had revealed the true religion, the only saving grace to Abraham in the everlasting covenant. Its primary feature was a God-given Sin-bearer who died for the transgressions of the people as revealed in the sacrificial system. To the Jews was revealed the plan of salvation which had they been faithful was to be exported to the world.

The only way that God can truly be worshiped is by His promise given in the everlasting covenant. God's promise is to forgive sins and write His laws upon the heart and the mind. This is why Jesus said, "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him." John 4:23. "The law is spiritual." Rom. 7:14. That is, it may only be kept by the converting power of the Holy Spirit in the life conforming it to the ten commandments. The words of the law are not graven images on tables of stone. They are living words written by the Heavenly Penman. It is such worshipers that the Father seeks. Jesus has an unquenchable desire for such. He will not be denied. And there will be those who are responsive to the Saviour's need and believe His covenant promise. These are the true worshipers who have the Holy Spirit and keep the truth—all the commandments of God including the fourth to worship Him on the seventh day.

"God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." John 4:24. There is no article "a" in the original, God is not one of many spirits, but He is Spirit. There is none besides Him; every other being derives its existence from Him. Let it not be thought that because God is Spirit, therefore He is not a real being.

Spiritual does not mean immaterial. God is a spiritual being, yet Christ is “the effulgence of His glory, and the very image of His substance.” Heb. 1:3. Christ’s body was certainly a spiritual body after His resurrection, yet He was a real being, and could be handled. No one need have the idea that God is not a real person.

God is Spirit; therefore they that worship Him must do so in the Spirit which He supplies. He provides the means, and does not ask us to worship Him in our spirit, or in our conception of His law.

This Samaritan woman had been trying to divert Jesus’ attention from probing her personal life by getting into a discussion about the right place to worship. Now she expressed her faith in the coming Messiah. “I know that Messias cometh, which is called Christ: when He is come, He will tell us all things.” John 4:25. The Samaritans had a more pure faith in the coming Messiah than did the theologians of Jerusalem. They assumed He would be a political animal that would lead a revolution and deliver His people from the Roman oppressors. There would be a lot of bloodshed and then freedom at last.

The woman’s simple faith expresses her concept of the Messiah as the Christ—the anointed one of God. God’s appointed servant would come and teach them about Himself. He would be a prophet, a priest, and then a king. She was really saying to Jesus, When the Christ comes, I will follow Him.

Jesus was able to unveil to her what He could not reveal to the great teachers at Jerusalem. “Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am He.” John 4:26. Because of her faith, He told her that He was the great I AM, Jehovah, the self-existent one, the God of the everlasting covenant. At Jerusalem He would have been hooted out of town and stoned for blasphemy, but here, in alien territory, He was received by a woman’s simple faith. She was quite a remarkable woman, sinner though she was.

“The woman then left her waterpot, and went her way into the city, and saith to the men, Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?” John 4:28, 29.

“Our Redeemer thirsts for recognition. He hungers for the sympathy and love of those whom He has purchased with His own blood.”³ It warmed Jesus’ heart when He saw the responsiveness of the Samaritan village. “And many more believed because of His own word; and said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy

³ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 191.

saying: for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.” John 4:41, 42. They saw in Him what most of the religious world has failed to see down through the ages. He is “the Saviour of the world.”

The greatest scholars in the world can humble themselves to learn from him. You can learn to “see” a lot of theology in just a few moments when you are crucified side by side with the Son of God—if you will believe. This Man is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He is “the Savior of the world” (John 4:42), Paul’s “Savior of all men” (1 Tim. 4:10). He is the second or “last Adam” who has reversed all the condemnation that the first Adam brought on the human race.

How can Jesus Christ be “the Savior of the world” (John 4:42), and “the Savior of all men” (1 Tim 4:10), when so many people in the world reject Him? How can He save people who don’t want to be saved? Is He forcing people?

No, He will not force anyone. But if God wants “so [to] love the world that He gave His only begotten Son,” He has a perfect right to do so. He is the Creator of the world, and of “all men.” Why can’t He love them if He wants to?

That means He did “save the world.” And the clear evidence that He did so is that you at this moment are taking a breath: your physical life is full proof that He took your death and gave you His life; otherwise, you would be locked into the throes of the “second death,” which is darkness forever. Yes, we must confess, He has “tasted death [the second] for every man” (Heb. 2:9). Isaiah 53 says, “The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (vs. 6), and that means just what it says—us all. “The chastisement of our peace was upon Him” (vs. 5).

That means every moment of “peace” that anyone in all the world has ever known has had to be balanced by a corresponding payment of torture that He has had to endure in our behalf. Think of all the pleasure that countless millions have enjoyed without the slightest realization of what their “fun” has cost.

And He “so” loves them that He sent His Son to save them; that was His job description. And He did what He was sent to do: “I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do,” He says (John 17:4).

As they drove home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, “Mommy, there’s something about the preacher’s message this morning that I don’t understand.” The mother said, “Oh? What is

it?" The little girl replied, "Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. He said God is so big that He could hold the world in His hand. Is that true?" The mother replied, "Yes, that's true, honey." "But Mommy, he also said that God comes to live inside of us when we believe in Jesus as our Savior. Is that true, too?" Again, the mother assured the little girl that what the pastor had said was true. With a puzzled look on her face the little girl then asked, "If God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn't He show through?"