

The Teaching of Jesus on Worship

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Introduction

No study of worship would be complete without a consideration of the teaching of our Lord on this most important topic. Christ's profound comments come in the midst of His interaction with a Samaritan woman at a well outside of Sychar.

The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. "You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:19-24).

Before we examine Jesus' teaching on worship we need to discuss the context of the passage and define the Samaritans as a people. The subject of worship arose when the Savior witnessed to an adulterous Samaritan woman. Our Lord was passing through Samaria on His way from Jerusalem to Galilee. When He stopped at a well to rest and refresh Himself He took the opportunity to reveal Himself to a needy sinner. It was only after Jesus applied the law to the woman's heart and supernaturally revealed the woman's sinful exploits that worship enters the discussion. After saying "Sir I perceive that You are a prophet", the woman raised the question of the proper place of worship. "Our fathers worship on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship" (4:20). It is this question that elicits the Savior's doctrine on worship.

It is important to note as we consider the context in which the essential nature of worship is elucidated, that even though it appears that the woman's question leads to a completely new topic, the Savior continues to point the woman toward salvation. Christ's discussion of true worship includes: (1) The necessity of the whole revelation of God for a true knowledge of Jehovah. (2) The acknowledgment that salvation (the covenants, divine revelation, the promises, the coming Messiah, the revealed ordinances) resides with the Jews. (3) A discussion of worship under the new covenant. (4) The Father's desire for true worshippers. (5) The nature of biblical worship, which is totally dependent on the Holy Spirit and His revelation. These teachings undercut the whole false religious system of the Samaritans. Our Lord points the woman to the whole word of God and Himself, the Messiah revealed therein, and says: "believe; flee your human traditions, your idolatry and will worship; God seeks true worshipers in every place." The Lord assaults the woman's sin with both tables of the law.

Before we turn our attention to the Lord's teaching on worship there are three things regarding the woman's question that need to be considered. First, was the woman's question sincere or merely a ploy to change the subject from her own sinfulness to the dispute between the Samaritans and Jews over worship. Some commentators believe the woman was very uncomfortable with the subject of her wicked lifestyle and thus was politely redirecting the conversation. For example, Pink writes, "Oft times a sinner seeks protection from shafts of conviction which follow the plain violation of the law of God, by discussions respecting

orthodoxy and heterodoxy."¹ Other scholars believe her shift to the proper place of worship is intimately related to her conviction of sin. If she were to receive forgiveness by blood atonement would she not need to consider the appointed place for sacrifice? The fact the woman's question is preceded by an acknowledgment that Jesus is a prophet is considered strong evidence that she was sincerely seeking spiritual guidance. It is possible, however, that her question involved elements of both views. "When Scripture does not reveal inner motives, it is generally best not to speak with the air of *certainty*."² Hengstenberg holds a rather unique view that the woman simply wanted to obtain a clear view of the main point which separated the Jews from the Samaritans before entering into further conversation with a Jew.³ In any case what is important is that Christ respects her question and treats the topic of worship as one of utmost importance.

Second, the question tells us a lot about the woman's presuppositions regarding the source or authority of true worship. The woman being a faithful Samaritan based her views on human tradition instead of the canon of Scripture. Instead of asking Jesus His interpretation of God's word on the matter, she sets the tradition of the Samaritans over against the opinion of the Jews ("you Jews say"). "The woman's readiness to quote the 'fathers' and their customs, is an instructive instance of man's readiness to make custom and tradition his only rule of faith"⁴ (This point will be considered in more detail below).

When this woman appeals to the fathers it is likely that she is not only appealing to the extra-biblical traditions of the Samaritans (which are pure human inventions), but also to the Samaritans reading of the Torah in isolation from the rest of the Old Testament, which they rejected as authoritative (see below). Abraham did build an altar at Shechem (Gen. 12:7), as did Jacob many years later (Gen. 33:20). Mount Gerizim was the place where the blessing of the people was spoken (Deut. 11:29; 27:12) and where, according to their corrupt text, the first altar in the promised land was built after they were freed from Egypt (Deut. 27:4ff. in the Samaritan Pentateuch). Also, according to their tradition Mount Gerizim was the place where Abraham was sent to sacrifice Isaac and where the patriarch met Melchisedec. When men or women appeal to the fathers it usually not only means an appeal to human tradition (i.e., autonomous ideas) but also to long standing perversions of Scripture. Such is the old playbook of Romanists who appeal to the church fathers when a doctrine or practice cannot be derived from Scripture alone.

Third, the woman's question and Jesus' response cannot be properly understood without some historical background regarding the Samaritans as a people. Their history began soon after the Assyrians conquered Israel (the ten northern tribes) in 721 B. C. The Assyrian king (Sargon) deported a substantial part of the Jewish population and imported heathen colonists to take their place. According to Jewish tradition the Samaritans are a mixed race of Jews and pagans. The two peoples intermarried and developed their own culture and tradition. Thus, the Jews despised the Samaritans as a hybrid race with a syncretistic religion. This view is supported by the account in 2 Kings 17:24-41. Note that in 2 Kings 17:28 we are told that an Israelite priest was ordered by the King of Assyria to go back to Samaria to instruct the heathen colonists "how they should fear the LORD." This passage is followed by a number of verses explaining the syncretism of these people with the following conclusions: "So these nations feared the LORD,

¹ Arthur Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975 [1945]) 1:202.

² William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953) 165.

³ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on The Gospel of St. John* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1980 [1865]), 1:231-232.

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John* (James Clarke: London, 1975 [1865]) 1:221.

yet served their carved images; also their children and their children's children have continued doing as their fathers did, even to this day' (2 Kings 17:41).

Some modern scholars disagree with Jewish tradition and teach that the Samaritans were not a mixed race at all, but rather were a group of Jews in the north who split away from the true religion of Yahweh to form their own sect. This view is inferred from the following observations: (a) Although the Samaritan religion is treated as false by our Lord (cf. Jn. 4:22), there are no clear signs of syncretism with paganism in their religion. It is possible, however, that the monotheism of the northern Jews eventually dominated and subdued the crass idolatry of the Gentile colonists. (b) After the conquest of Samaria by Assyria the book of Chronicles records friendly interaction and cooperation between the tribe of Judah and faithful Jews still residing in the north (e.g., 2 Chron. 30:10, 11; 34:9). This point, however, simply proves that a faithful remnant still dwelt in the north. The majority of the people prior to and even after the conquest were deeply involved in idolatry and syncretism. Thus, there are good reasons to accept the traditional definition of the Samaritans. (c) The verses in Ezra 4:1-2 which most scholars regard as pointing to the ancient enmity between the Samaritans and the Jews, says "adversaries" (NKJV) or "enemies" not Samaritans. While the designation Samaritans is not used in this passage, the adversary's description is totally in keeping with the standard interpretation. The returnees as exiles from Judah who had repented of their idolatries did not want the religiously syncretistic people of the north to aid them with the rebuilding of the temple. Those who hold the view that the Samaritans are Jews of the north who perverted the true religion date the split and enmity between the peoples at the time the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The majority view is that the building of the rival temple was the result of long standing political, cultural and religious differences between the two peoples.

It is interesting that Jesus treats the Samaritans as a special class of people neither Jewish nor Gentile. In Matthew 10:5-7 He gave the disciples strict orders to stay away from the Gentiles and Samaritans (i.e., do not preach or minister in their cities). However, after the resurrection (immediately before the ascension; see Ac. 1:8) our Lord commands a worldwide mission of discipleship beginning in Jerusalem, then Judea, Samaria, and the whole world. In Acts 8:1-25 we read of the highly successful ministry among the Samaritans. The Samaritans apparently had a unique status in the New Testament as a semi-Israelitish people. Although they had a number of things in common with the Jews, their religious differences were so great they were considered ignorant, apostate and outside the bounds of the covenant.

It is the religious differences between the Jews and the Samaritans that shed the most light on the Savior's very harsh assessment of the Samaritan's religion in verse 22. As noted, the Samaritans people had established their own temple on Mount Gerizim. Scholars date the building of this temple anywhere from the time of Nehemiah to the time of Alexander the Great. Lenski gives a concise history of events common to the early date. He writes, "Zerubbabel had refused the Samaritans permission to join in building the Temple at Jerusalem, and Nehemiah had driven out a son of Joiada who had married a daughter of Sanballat (a Moabite of Hozonaim and a constant opponent of Nehemiah), Neh. 13:28. This man with others instituted the worship on Gerizim in Samaria, built a temple there, and established the high priesthood."⁵ Matthew Poole gives a fuller account of these events. He writes,

⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961[1943]) 318.

Sanballat was governor of Samaria, constituted by Darius; of this Sanballat we read in Nehemiah, who tells us that *one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son-in-law to this Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I chased him from me*, Neh. xiii. 28. This son-in-law's name (as Josephus tells us) was Manasses. He was driven out of Jerusalem upon the account of the covenant made, Ezra x. 3, that those who had married strange wives would turn them away. The sacred story here leaving us, we must supply it out of Josephus, who (Antiq. 1.11.cap. 8.) tells us, that he being thus driven from the sacrifice, applied himself to Sanballat, and would have put his wife away, who was Sanballat's daughter; but Sanballat promised him, that if he would keep his daughter as his wife, he would not only continue him in the priesthood, but make him a high priest, and build him a temple like that at Jerusalem, upon this Manasses staid with Sanballat, and there also resorted many to him whom Nehemiah had turned out of the priesthood at Jerusalem for marrying strange wives. Sanballat was very near losing his opportunity through the favor of Darius, by the conquest of Darius by Alexander the Great. But it was regained by his brother Jaddus's stubbornness, who was high priest in Jerusalem, and refused to own the new conqueror; which advantage Sanballat took, and offered Alexander the surrender of all places in his trust to him; and being by that means ingratiated with Alexander the Great, he thereby obtained leave of him to build a temple in Mount Gerizim, where his son-in-law Manasses should be the high priest, promising Alexander that by this means the force of the Jews would be broken, so as there would be no danger of their conspiring. Accordingly he presently built this temple, and soon after died, leaving his son-in-law Manasses, brother to Jaddus the high priest in Jerusalem, high priest in this new temple, which afterwards proved an asylum or sanctuary for any who were accused amongst the Jews at Jerusalem. Thus these two temples stood for about two hundred and twenty years; then Hircanus, a high priest of the Jews at Jerusalem, destroyed it; but still they looked upon the ground as holy, and came thither to perform their devotions.⁶

The Samaritan temple was destroyed in 129 B. C. by the Jewish high priest John Hyrcanus an event that increased the enmity between the two peoples. Although the Samaritan temple was never rebuilt the area remained the center of Samaritan religious life. Sacrifices were offered on Gerizim at Passover, Pentecost (i.e., the Feast of Weeks) and the Feast of Tabernacles.⁷

The false worship of the Samaritans had a direct effect on their theology, corrupting it in a number of ways. As all worship practices rest upon some source of authority whether human, divine (or a combination of the two, the Samaritans with their human traditions abandoned the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. They did this first by corrupting the text of Scripture to support their choice of Gerizim as the sacred site. The all important text on this matter in the Torah is found in Deuteronomy 12:5 which instructs the Israelites to seek out the place that God would choose among the tribes to place His name. This would be the place of sacrifice of the nation (Deut. 12:6; cf. vv. 13-14). This section of Scripture does not specify the location of this special place of sacrifice and worship but rather assumes that the details will be taken care of by further revelation. The Jews who accepted the full canon of Scripture knew that Jerusalem was this one and only place (see, e.g., 2 Chron, 6:6; 7:12; Ps. 78:68; etc.). The Samaritans corrupted the text of Scripture to make it appear that God's choice had already been made and thus did not need further revelation. F. F. Bruce writes,

⁶ Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1685]) 3:297.

⁷ Lenski, 319.

The Jews located it “in Jerusalem”, the Samaritans ““on this mountain””--i.e., Gerizim, overlooking Shechem--to which they could look up as they talked by the well. And whereas the Jews’ edition of the Hebrew Bible spoke of “the place which the Lord your God will choose”, the Samaritan edition read: “the place which the Lord your God has chosen” (the difference hanging on the presence or absence of a *yod*, the smallest letter in the alphabet). The Samaritan reading implies that the divine choice had already been made known. Not only was Shechem the first place where Abraham built an altar on his entry into the promised land (Gen. 12:6 f.); in the Samaritan Bible the Decalogue (both in Exod. 20:17 and in Deut. 5:21) is followed by a further direction (anticipating Deut. 27:2-7 and 11:30), which indeed ranks as the tenth commandment: “And when the Lord your God brings you into the land of the Canaanites, which you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster; and you shall write upon them all the words of this law. And when you have passed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you this day, on Mount Gerizim. And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall lift up no iron tool upon them. You shall build an altar to the Lord your God of unhewn stones, and you shall offer burnt-offerings on it to the Lord your God; and you shall sacrifice peace-offerings, and shall eat there; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God.”⁸

In the Masoretic Text (which is the received text by Jews and Christians) Deuteronomy 27:4 says that the first altar of sacrifice in the promise land is to be built on Mount Ebal (not Mount Gerizim as the corrupt Samaritan text reads). The lesson of this corruption in the text (which will be explicated further under applications) is that when human traditions are added to the worship of God, there must eventually be (by logical necessity) an alteration in the theology of worship. The authority must be shifted away from Scripture by some manner to man’s authority. In other words the philosophical foundation must be altered to fit practice. It is not an accident that those most opposed to the application of *sola scriptura* to worship (i.e., the regulative principle of worship) are the very same people who are vehemently attempting to justify some human tradition in worship.

The Samaritans were not only guilty of adding to the text of Scripture to justify their corrupt worship practices, they also were guilty of detracting from the Word of God. They did not recognize the canon of post-Mosaic prophecy (i.e., the prophetic books) or the writings (i.e., the historical books, etc.) as Scripture. “In their belief, the statement of Deut. 34:10, ‘there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses’, remained absolute and valid until the rise of the second Moses, the Taheb or great prophet of the new age to whom they looked forward. Between the first and second Moses no prophet could be expected.”⁹ This rejection of all the Scriptures outside the Pentateuch conveniently eliminated all the sections of God’s Word that explicitly placed the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Hour Is Coming

Our Lord’s answer to the woman’s question is noteworthy in many ways. (1) The Savior precedes His teaching with an expression (“believe Me”) found no other place in the gospels.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (England: Pickering & Inglis, 1983) 108-109.

⁹ *Ibid*, 108.

The statement "believe Me" (present active imperative) which is a similar introduction to the more common "truly, truly I say to you" is likely given "because the truth He was about to impart was so new and strange, that the woman would be apt to think it incredible."¹⁰ When Jesus says "believe Me" He is summoning the woman to follow her confession "You are a prophet." He takes her by the hand and leads her from a simple word of knowledge regarding her sinful lifestyle to sublime realities of the new covenant.

(2) Christ begins His teaching on worship with a word of hope to both Samaritans and Gentiles: "the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father." In the new covenant era there will be no more sacred or special sites like Jerusalem. With the death of the Messiah, the supernatural rending of the veil covering the holiest of holies and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple complex, all places will soon be the same. Therefore, the debate between Samaritans and Jews will soon be a waste of time. Indeed, everyone who looks with faith to the Savior will become part of the spiritual temple, the church, the heavenly Jerusalem (Eph. 2:19-22). The expression "the hour is coming" stresses imminence; it is even now on its way. "That which is so near its end, need not now hinder her from following the impulse of her heart, need not now stand as a dividing wall between her and Him who will give her living water."¹¹

Jesus' words "in every place" form a contrast to Moses words in Deuteronomy 12:5,6. The one and only place will soon be set aside so the whole world can worship the Father "in every place". The teaching of our Lord is anticipated and supported by the Old Testament prophets. "For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; *in every place* incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations" (Ma. 1:11, emphasis added). "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You" (Ps. 22:27). "All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and shall glorify Your Name" (Ps. 86:9). "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, and His enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles will bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba will offer gifts. Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him, all nations shall serve Him" (Ps. 72:8-11).

(3) Note that our Lord speaks of God as "the Father." Although Jehovah is revealed as Father in the Old Testament (e.g., Ex. 4:22; Deut. 14:1; Isa. 9:6), it is in the New Testament that we learn in much more detail the doctrine of the trinity. In the new covenant era it is very clear that we are worshipping the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The term Father also indicates the close personal covenant relationship that exists between God and His people. It is vanity and foolishness to worship some concept of a god in isolation from Scripture. God can only be worshipped in relation to Christ and through Him. This point is elucidated in the next sentence of our Lord when He discusses ignorant worship.

Ignorant Worship Verses the True Worship of God

It is in verses 22 to 24 that Jesus discusses the essential nature of biblical worship. In this section of Scripture the Lord teaches a number of things that are of utmost importance for every

¹⁰ Jansenius as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels; St. John*, 1:222.

¹¹ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 1:232.

believer. First, the Savior condemns the worship of the Samaritans in a direct and blunt manner. "You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews" (vs. 22). This statement not only condemns the worship of the Samaritans but their whole religious system as well. The Samaritans were guilty of adding their own human traditions to the worship of God. This practice led (as noted) to a denial of *sola scriptura*. The Samaritans perverted the Pentateuch in order to support their worship practices and even rejected the prophets, the psalms and the historical books of the Old Testament that contradicted their human traditions. The result was that the Samaritans were worshiping an "unknown God." Hengstenberg's analysis of the Samaritan's situation is illuminating. He writes,

Among the Jews, there was also much ignorance of God; but among them this was the fault of the individual. At all periods, even those of deepest degradation, there was among them a nucleus, a chosen few, who, on the ground of the Divine revelation, possessed an essential knowledge of God while on the other hand, among the Samaritans, the ignorance of God was one of first principles, radical and universal. -- But why did not the true God make Himself know to the Samaritans? Why were they condemned to worship they knew not what? The answer is: *Because they did not seek access to the true God in the manner prescribed by Him.* During the continuance of the Old Covenant, the kingdom of God was bound to the sanctuary in Jerusalem, and to fellowship with the Israelitish nation. Instead of causing themselves as individuals to be receive by circumcision into the Church of God, they desired to be an independent division of the people of God, with equal rights to the Jews, and, as such, to take part in the erection of the temple at Jerusalem. When this pretension was rejected, they threw themselves in the face of the Divine appointment by the erection of their own sanctuary. By such practices they shut themselves out from God and His revelation.-- The reproach, "Ye worship ye know not what," now applies to the Jews not less than it then did to the Samaritans; for, since their rejection of Christ, God no longer knows them, and consequently they no longer know God. There is no Divine revelation in their midst, from which might be developed a true knowledge of God.¹²

A primary lesson here is that one's knowledge of God and one's manner of worship must be derived from the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible. By setting aside so much of divine revelation and by corrupting what they did have the Samaritans did not even know God. They had a false object of faith and worship. They were apostates who were not God's people. Calvin writes, "The same judgment must be formed concerning all who have turned aside from the pure faith of the Gospel to their own inventions and the traditions of men. Although they who worship God according to their own judgment or human traditions flatter and applaud themselves in their obstinacy, this single word, thundering from heaven, lays prostrate all that they imagine to be divine and holy, *You worship what you do not know.* It follows from this that, if we wish our religion to be approved by God, it must rest on knowledge obtained from His word."¹³ Our Lord's statement is shocking and out of touch with the modern economical climate that places vital issues of worship and doctrine on the back burner in the name of love and cooperation. Christ says "your worship is false and you don't even know the true God. You are not even saved." He said this to a woman who had a professed belief in the Messiah to come

¹² *Ibid*, 1:235.

¹³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 160-161.

(Jn. 4:25); whose creed included the Five Books of Moses. Jesus statement is very similar to Paul's assessment of the Athenian idolaters: "The one whom you worship without knowing" (Ac. 17:23). Those who detract from and add to the worship of God, who become mired in human corruption make the true God into an idol--a god of their own imagination. They do so by creating a god who will accept false worship.

There is such a great danger in tampering with the worship that God has instituted. Our Lord's words presuppose an organic relationship between the various aspects of true religion. If the sphere of worship is corrupted there eventually will be a corresponding perversion of the doctrine of God. Human autonomy in worship logically goes hand in hand with synergistic concepts of God and salvation. Hutcheson writes, "Not only is worship devised by men not warrantable but it is not the way to heaven, seeing there can be no salvation but in God's institute way; and the case of those who follow devised worship is so much the more dangerous if they want also the doctrine of salvation in matters of faith and manners"¹⁴

The Savior further makes His point when He says, "we know what we worship for salvation is of the Jews." Or, literally salvation is *from* (*ek*) the Jews. "Not therefore belongs to, but proceeds from. See Gen. XII; Isa. II. 3; Mic. IV. 2."¹⁵ Paul speaks to this point in Romans 9:4-5: "Israelites to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen." Unlike the Samaritans (who perverted the Pentateuch, denied the majority of the Old Testament Scriptures and had a system of worship invented by man) the Jews had the oracles of God, the properly instituted system of worship and the sacraments. Further, it is from the Jews that the Messiah would come and salvation would come to the whole world. "In contrast to the Samaritan religious system, our Lord declares that the Jews at any rate could show divine warrant and scriptural authority for all they did in their religion. They could render a reason of their hope. They knew whom they approached in their religious services"¹⁶ Our Lord even identifies Himself with the biblical creed, the chosen race and the true church by using the personal pronoun "we." When it comes to worship and salvation the truth is what counts. Faith must be directed to that which is revealed by God. Practice in the sphere of worship must be derived directly from God's word.

Second, the Savior describes the essence of true worship. "But the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (v. 23). The phrase "the hour is coming and now is" likely points to the fact that although the new covenant economy did not fully come into being until our Lord's death and resurrection, Jesus was already on earth preaching the gospel with many followers. "'The hour is coming and now is' brackets future and present without eliminating either. The saving sovereignty of the future is in process of being established through Christ and it is moving to its ordained climax in his death and resurrection...."¹⁷ Those who adhere to this interpretation believe that our Lord is once again stressing some differences in emphasis between the old and new economy, the old containing much more that was external and typical. Another distinct possibility, however, is that "the hour is coming and now is" simply points to the fact that the principles under-girding biblical worship in both dispensations are the same. He must always be approached on His terms, according to His rules not ours.

¹⁴ George Hutcheson, *Exposition of The Gospel of John* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1972 [1657]) 64.

¹⁵ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946 [1887]) 2:120.

¹⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John*, 223.

¹⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999) 62.

The crucial words for understanding the nature of biblical worship are found in the prepositional phrase "in spirit and truth" (vs. 23-24). These words define the essence of true worship. Thus, it is important that we understand what they mean. Unfortunately, the exact meaning is not easy to ascertain and therefore commentators hold to a variety of interpretations. Many argue that the term "spirit" refers to the human spirit (e.g., Leon Morris, J. C. Ryle, Vincent, A. T. Robertson Marcus Dodo Lange, Boice, G. H. C. MacGregor, Godet, Westcott, and Lenski). Those who adhere to this position will make comments such as "full communion with God takes place in the spirit of man"; or "the mental part of man must be engaged in true worship, not a mere outward performance of rituals"; or "there must be a sincere heart worship of God as opposed to formal or hypocritical worship."

Other interpreters argue that the term "spirit" indicates that the worship of God must be spiritual. These commentators teach that the words "spirit and truth" are set forth in contrast to the ceremonial-typical worship of the old covenant. This view is preferred by the older Reformed commentators. For example, Calvin writes, "Why and in what sense, is the worship of God called *spiritual*? To understand this, we must attend to the contrast between the spirit and outward emblems, as between the shadows and the truth. The worship of God is said to consist *in the spirit* because it is nothing else than that inward faith of the heart which produces prayer, and, next, purity of conscience and self-denial, that we may be dedicated to obedience to God as holy sacrifices."¹⁸ Calvin does acknowledge that worship under the old dispensation was spiritual. But under the new covenant the ceremonial ordinances which are "entanglements" are laid aside leaving only that which is spiritual in the worship of God behind. "Spirit and truth," then, has the sense of "that which is spiritual, the reality." He writes, "But while the worship of God under the Law was spiritual, it was enveloped in so many outward ceremonies, that it resembled something carnal and earthly. For this reason Paul calls the ceremonies *flesh* and *the beggarly elements of the world*, (Gal. iv. 9.). In like manner, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says that the ancient *sanctuary*, with its appendages, was *earthly*, (Heb. ix. 1.). Thus we may justly say that the worship of the Law was spiritual in its substance, but, in respect of its form, it was somewhat earthly and carnal; for the whole of that economy, the reality of which is now fully manifested, consisted of shadows...under the Law there were various additions, so that the *spirit* and *truth* were concealed under forms and shadows, whereas, now that *the veil* of the *temple has been rent*, (Matth. xxvii. 51,) nothing is hidden or obscure."¹⁹

Matthew Poole writes, "That time of reformation I now come, when the true worshipers of God shall offer up to him a more spiritual worship, not that carnal worship; and a more true, and real, and solid worship."²⁰ George Hutcheson writes, "As for these two properties of worship—'in spirit and in truth,' they must be taken in opposition to the properties of the former worship, and so they come to one in substance, that instead of external ceremonies, which are called carnal, Hebrews, vii. 16; ix. 10; and shadows, Heb. x.1; the Lord would have a spiritual worship, and the truth of what was represented by these shadows, as Rom. xii. 1; Heb. xiii. 15, 16."²¹ Matthew Henry writes, "*In the nature* of the worship. Christians shall worship God, not in the ceremonial observances of the Mosaic institution, but in *spiritual* ordinances, consisting less in *bodily exercise*, and animated and invigorated more with divine power and energy. The way of worship which Christ has instituted is rational and intellectual, and refined from those external

¹⁸ John Calvin, 161.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 162.

²⁰ Matthew Poole, 3:298.

²¹ George Hutcheson, 64.

rites and ceremonies with which the Old Testament worship was both clouded and clogged. This is called true worship, in opposition to that which was typical."²² This interpretation sees verses 22 and 23 as a further commentary on the subject of verse 21 (i.e., the soon to come transition from the old to new covenant.)

Another view is that the term "spirit" is a reference to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the source of true worship. This interpretation is to be preferred above the other common views for a number of reasons. (1) The immediate and broader context decidedly favors such an interpretation. In the discussion of worship with the Samaritan woman our Lord does mention that in the immediate future the place of worship would no longer be significant. That reality, however, is not Christ's main point. The Savior tells the woman that her religion and worship is ignorant and false while the true knowledge of God and true (i.e., authorized) worship resides with the Jews (v. 22). Therefore, Jesus' primary comments are not directed at the deficiencies of the autonomous and thus ignorant Samaritan worship (i.e., all will worship as opposed to worship authorized by divine revelation). True worship must have as its source the Holy Scriptures, which are breathed out by the Holy Spirit--the Spirit of truth (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16; Jn. 16:13, 17:17). Further, earlier in the same discourse our Lord contrasted true and false water. The Savior gives the true water (the Holy Spirit), which is the source of eternal life. This same Spirit is the source of true worship (i.e., worships rooted in truth--the Bible).

The Holy Spirit interpretation is supported by the apostle John's repeated pattern of conjoining the terms Spirit or Holy Spirit with truth in His gospel and Epistles (e.g., 14:17; 15:16; 16:13; 1 Jn. 4:6; 5:7). Further, "[o]ne preposition joins the two nouns and thus makes the two one idea"²³ While the joining of the Holy Spirit with truth makes perfect sense exegetically and theologically, the joining of the human spirit with truth doesn't comport nearly as well with the context. The Samaritans' problem was not that they were insincere or that their worship was merely external. Their problem was that they did not follow the Holy Spirit's revealed will in Scripture. They had perverted the Torah and set aside most of the Old Testament to prop up a man made religious system of worship.

(2) The "Holy Spirit" interpretation is also taught in the epistles. For example, Paul identifies true worshipers as "the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice the Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). The Holy Spirit not only enables Christians to serve and glorify God through regeneration (heart circumcision), but also causes us to look away from our own pride, desires and inventions in humble submission to the truth. The apostle contrasts worship in the Spirit to confidence in the flesh. Confidence in the flesh refers to reliance on human rules, regulations and achievements. Worship in the Spirit is the very opposite of will worship. One is guided solely by faith in the Spirit's revelation while the other is guided by faith in man's wisdom. One boasts in Christ Jesus and the loving direction He has provided, while the other boasts in human attainments (see also Rom. 8:1, 4-5, 13 and 1 Cor. 14:2 where [in the Greek text] "Spirit" without the article explicitly refers to the Holy Spirit).

(3) The Holy Spirit interpretation also comports better with the reason given for "spirit and truth" worship in verse 24: "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." The Samaritans had abandoned divine revelation in order to support human traditions. Their corrupt worship is connected by our Lord to complete ignorance of the true God. A scriptural definition of Jehovah and the true way of approaching Him are inexorably connected. Worship must conform itself to the divine nature. This great truth warns us that we are always

²² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:906.

²³ Lenski, 322.

dependent upon the truth that God has revealed unto us. Note that the Savior's statement is emphatic. "Notice the 'must'. Jesus is not speaking merely of a desirable element in worship. He is speaking of something that is absolutely necessary."²⁴ Calvin's comments on this passage are very instructive. He writes,

God is a Spirit. This is a confirmation drawn from the very nature of God. Since men are flesh, we ought not to wonder, if they take delight in those things which correspond to their own disposition. Hence it arises, that they contrive many things in the worship of God which are full of display, but have no solidity. But they ought first of all to consider that they have to do with God, who can no more agree with the flesh than fire with water. This single consideration, when the inquiry relates to the worship of God, ought to be sufficient for restraining the wantonness of our mind, that God is so far from being like us, that God is so far from being like us, that those things which please us most are the objects of his loathing and abhorrence. And if hypocrites are so blinded by their own pride, that they are not afraid to subject God to their opinion, or rather to their unlawful desires, let us know that this modesty does not hold the lowest place in the true worship of God, to regard with suspicion whatever is gratifying according to the flesh. Besides, as we cannot ascend to the height of God, let us remember that we ought to seek from His word the rule by which we are governed.²⁵

(4) Worship in the new covenant era is not purely internal (i.e., it does not take place solely in man's spirit). Therefore, the idea that our Lord is making a great contrast between external rituals and internal worship is unwarranted. Unlike God who is pure Spirit, man consists of both body and soul. Every aspect of man is to be engaged in the worship of God (e.g., the ears, the tongue, the eyes, the hands, etc.). Further, although new covenant worship contains far less external ceremonies than old covenant worship, one cannot say that worship in the new dispensation is totally devoid of external ceremonies (e.g., baptism and the Lord's supper) or even physical gestures (e.g., standing during prayer). Once again, we need to point out that the great issue regarding Samaritan worship was not over sincerity but over truth as revealed by the Spirit of God. "It is the Lord's will and appointment alone that can give a being to true worship, and to this must all our reasons about this matter be subject."²⁶ If men and women are to offer worship that is agreeable to God's nature then they must submit themselves to the teaching of the Holy Spirit found only in the Holy Scriptures; that is, everything done in the worship of God (excepting incidentals or circumstances) must have divine warrant in order to please the Father.

Third, the Savior says that God is seeking true worshippers. "But the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (Jn. 4:23). There are a number of things to note regarding this remarkable statement.

(1) The expression "is seeking" (literally translated "seeks such as those worshipping Him") does not mean that the Father is waiting to see who will worship Him biblically and then gives such worship His approval. Rather, it points to God's activity in reaching out to save souls in order to make them into biblical worshippers. Note how the word "seek" is used of Christ in Luke 19:10: "the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost." "He seeks them,

²⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 272.

²⁵ John Calvin, 164.

²⁶ George Hutcheson, 65.

not as though they have already become such by efforts of their own, but as longing to make them such by His Word and His Spirit."²⁷ The Father's gift of the Holy Spirit through His exalted, enthroned Son is necessary for true spiritual worship to be established in every nation.

(2) The statement that the Father seeks such worshipers is intended to give hope and encouragement to the Samaritan woman. "Let her not trouble herself with difficulties about the comparative claims of the Samaritan and Jewish systems. Was she willing to be a spiritual worshiper? That was the one question which deserved her attention."²⁸ Jesus takes her question regarding the proper place of worship and uses it as an opportunity to shake her whole worldview, to point her to Himself so that she could be one of those true worshipers.

(3) These words of the Savior perhaps more than any other in Scripture set forth the importance that God places on worship. While it is a great truth that the Father loves and saves man through Jesus Christ, we must never forget that He saves them "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever" (Westminster Shorter Catechism answer to question number one). Many Christians have failed to recognize that their most important activity in life is to worship the triune God who loved them and saved them by Christ's precious blood. Sadly, most believers today are unaware that the acceptable worship of God can only be founded upon the Scriptures alone. (That is, there must be divine warrant for every element of worship.) If believers understood that the true spiritual worship of God is of primary importance in the Christian life, then perhaps worship would not be treated as merely a time for entertainment or an emotional booster shot by so many churches.

Applicatory Principles

There are a number principles regarding worship that can be derived from our Lord's teaching.

(1) If Christians are going to keep the worship of God pure from generation to generation they must never use the traditions of the elders as an authoritative standard for worship practices. The word of God alone must be the sole foundation and guide for the worship of God. The Samaritans (and many other who pervert true religion such as Romanists) base their doctrine on the opinions of men. Generally the more ancient the opinions the more respect and honor they receive as if time had the ability to turn human fantasies and errors into profound truths. Once human traditions become entrenched the opinions of the fathers are used as a sword and shield against the truth. The fathers are used to attack true worship and defend time honored declension and apostasy. After men frame a false and perverse worship, obstinacy follows. So-called church leaders become ingenious at making excuses for unauthorized practices. Calvin warns us regarding the tendency to place the fathers or great churchmen on a pedestal as if they were some how beyond error in all respects. He writes, "Frequently, too, we err in this respect, that by the actions of *the Fathers* we rashly lay down a common law; for the multitude do not imagine that they confer sufficient honor on *the Fathers*, if they do not exclude them from the ordinary rank of men. Thus, when we do not remember that they were fallible men, we indiscriminately mingle their vices with their virtues. Hence arises the worst confusion in the conduct of life; for while all the actions of men ought to be tried by the rule of the Law, we subject the balance to those things which ought to be weighed by it; and, in short, where so much importance is attached to the

²⁷ Lenski, 324.

²⁸ J. C. Ryle, 1:225.

imitation of *the Fathers*, the world things that there can be no danger in sinning after their example."²⁹ Men of the past should be honored only when they honor the word of God by teaching and submitting to its precepts. If any one is to be regarded as a father it must only be those men who submit themselves to the true fathers of the church the prophets and apostles who wrote the infallible sufficient Holy Scriptures.

(2) When men allow themselves to be dominated by human traditions they become the enemies of the truth and the persecutors of God's people. The Samaritan's false worship drove a wedge between them and the true people of God. Instead of submitting to Scripture and placing themselves under the authority of the Jews the Samaritans hindered the Jews and repeatedly sided with their mortal enemies. This pattern has been repeated throughout church history. The Romanists are perhaps the most obvious example who by torture, sword and fire attempted to exterminate the true Reformed religion.

A much more subtle form of persecution exists among professing Christians themselves over worship. Men and women who refuse to participate in man-made rituals are often shunned and dis-fellowshipped simply for refusing to worship God in a manner that is not authorized by the Bible. In other words, Christians are treated badly and disliked because they are unwilling to pollute themselves with man-made ordinances that Paul says are of no value for sanctification (Col. 1).

Worship must be kept under the constant, close scrutiny of Scripture. If it is not and people keep adding their own traditions to the worship of God generation after generation then they may find themselves persecuting the true people of God.

(3) The true worship of God is central to the Great Commission. The modern Christian reconstruction movement (generally speaking) ignores the importance of a restoration of biblical worship in the progressive sanctification of cultures and nations under the dominion mandate. People are saved not merely to apply the second table of the law to themselves, their families and society. God also is calling out a people to worship Him in the manner that He has appointed. Unfortunately, the same reconstructionists who condemn human autonomy in ethics, who call upon the state to restrain itself to its divinely appointed task are champions of human autonomy in worship. Most reconstructionist leaders (because of their love of human traditions in worship and their unbiblical pragmatism) do not build upon and advocate the Reformed creeds and confessions but rather go back to the early ecumenical creeds only. This policy is an explicit rejection of the corporate sanctification of the church in history. If there is to be godly dominion in society there first must be a love and respect for the first table of the law. Interestingly, when we read God's perspective on history in the books of the Kings and Chronicles, we see not only an obsession on the Holy Spirit's part for the purity of worship in the nation of Israel; but also a direct correlation between the national corruption of worship and the abandonment of the whole law of God. Worship must receive top priority in the discipleship of the nations.

(4) Once we understand the importance of worship in Spirit and in truth, a top priority in choosing a church to attend should be biblical worship. When many people decide to choose a church today they often choose a church for the wrong reason. (For example, my friends and business contacts go there; it's the closest to my house; they have a good youth program; the worship service is fun and exciting; the pastor tells great jokes.) If God is seeking people to worship Him only as He has commanded in His word, then it is our moral duty to reject the syncretism in worship that is so common in churches today. Biblical worship and scriptural preaching take priority over social, entertainment and business concerns. The local church is not

²⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 156.

a social club. It is a place where God's people worship and fellowship with Christ in a special manner. Public worship is the closest thing to heaven itself.

May God enable us to worship Him in a manner that glorifies His name.

ⁱ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 160-161.

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