

# WORSHIPPING IN “SPIRIT” AND IN “TRUTH”

(An examination of the traditional view)  
(by George Battey)

In John 4:24 the Lord said, “*God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship **in spirit and truth.***” Traditionally brethren have taken this to mean that true worship is composed of two vital elements: (1) worship that is performed in the proper “spirit” – i.e. the proper attitude, and (2) worship that is performed according to the word of “truth” – according to the instructions of the NT scriptures.

There is no doubt that both of the above mentioned ingredients are necessary for our worship to be acceptable to God. Joshua came very close to describing the traditional view of John 4:24 when he said, “*Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him **in sincerity and in truth,** and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD!*” (Joshua 24:14). The “sincerity” mentioned by Joshua seems to correspond well with the word “spirit” mentioned by Jesus. In both passages the word “truth” occurs and both seem to point to the idea of following the instructions given in the Lord’s word. Again, “*Only fear the LORD, and serve Him **in truth with all your heart***” (1 Samuel 12:24). Here the “truth” seems to correspond well with the “truth” of John 4:24 and “with all your heart” seems to go well with “spirit.” Paul spoke of keeping the “feast” of the Lord’s supper in “sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:8). The point is, even if John 4:24 is not teaching “sincerity” when it uses the word “spirit,” sincerity is certainly a necessary ingredient for our worship to be acceptable to God. He never has and never will accept insincere worship. Hypocrisy is abominable (Luke 12:1) to Him who knows the thoughts and intents of our hearts (John 2:25; Hebrews 4:12).

However, the question before us is this: Is the traditional view the only possible interpretation of John 4:24 and is it the best interpretation? A look at the context points to another plausible interpretation, but as to whether the alternative explanation is “best” must be judged by the reader.

## **JESUS PASSES THROUGH SAMARIA**

As the fourth chapter of John opens, we find Jesus has been in Judea. We see Him leaving Judea and traveling to Galilee. There were two reasons for this trip. First, the Lord must leave Judea because He is gaining too much popularity in Judea. “*They came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you*

*have testified; behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!’”* (John 3:26). This was making the Pharisees jealous and envious (John 4:1-3). The Pharisees had already had a “run-in” with John and were rebuked by him (Matthew 3). Naturally they hated him for this (Proverbs 9:8) and were envious that many were following after John rather than themselves. Since the Pharisees had a lot of influence in Judea and because they were growing jealous, they would obviously try to interfere with the preaching of Jesus Himself. We see this actually occurring later (John 7:1; 10:39). To avoid interference Jesus needed to go to Galilee where He was less popular. *“Now after the two days He departed from there and went to Galilee. For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country”* (John 4:43–44). This does not mean the Galileans would not listen, but that the leaders up in Galilee would not pay so much attention to Him. Jesus was no threat because, to them, He was just a “local boy” that posed no threat to them. However, the common people heard Him gladly: *“So when He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him, having seen all the things He did in Jerusalem at the feast; for they also had gone to the feast”* (John 4:45).

The second reason for the trip to Galilee is seen in John 4:45 (just quoted above). This was about the time John was put into prison (Matthew 4:12). John had been having great success among the common people of Galilee, but now he was in prison. Jesus needed to go where people were “primed and ready” to hear the gospel. McGarvey aptly observed, *“The absence of John called for the presence of Jesus”* (Fourfold Gospel, 140).

It is noteworthy to see the scriptures saying Jesus *“needed to go through Samaria”* (John 4:4). Jesus did not need to go through Samaria because that was the only way to travel. Most Jews would cross over the Jordan and walk to Galilee on the east side of the river in order to avoid Samaria. By thus crossing the river, the Jews turned what would have been a three day walk into a seven day walk! In other words, Jews hated Samaritans so badly they were willing to afflict themselves with an additional four days of walking just to avoid them and their country! What powerful hate! No more accurate statement could be made when the scriptures record, *“Jews have no dealings with Samaritans”* (John 4:9). The “necessity” of passing through Samaria refers to a “moral necessity” or “moral obligation.” They too needed to meet the Messiah.

At the Samaritan city of Sychar, the Lord stopped to rest. It was about noon. He was weary from traveling. As He sat by Jacob’s well, His disciples went into the city to buy food. A Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well and Jesus asked her for a drink. She appears startled and somewhat sarcastic at first, *“How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?”* (John 4:9). It’s as though she was saying, “You Jews will not even speak to us unless you need something and then, only if you can profit from us will you start speaking.” Jesus responded very gracefully to such a hostile remark, *“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.”* The woman said to Him, *“Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water?”* (John 4:10–11). The woman took His words literally. *“Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?”* (John 4:12). Two things are noteworthy here.

**First, she claims descent from Jacob** (much like the Pharisees and Sadducees claimed (Matthew 3:9). The idea is, “We came from Jacob. He was our father. He was saved. That means we are saved too.” But this was a false claim, at least as far as Jesus was concerned. He classified Samaritans with Gentiles (Matthew 10:5). He called them “strangers” and “aliens” (Luke 17:18). **Second, the woman speaks of the well as “given” by Jacob** as though Jacob showed his personal approval of her people by bestowing this gift.

Jesus began to explain more fully what He meant, “*Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again*” (John 4:13). The Lord was explaining, “The living water that I’m talking about is not the water in this well.” He was speaking, instead, about Himself and the gospel system. In other words, the Lord and His gospel system are being called “living water” in this passage. Later in this same book the Lord would say again, “*I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst*” (John 6:35). He was referring to the gospel system here also.

The explanation Jesus gave was still not enough. It had not soaked into her drought-stricken heart. She was still thinking literally, “*Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw*” (John 4:15). Inasmuch as “she asked for it” the Lord begins to give her what she asked for. She was to get more than she bargained for. “*Go call your husband,*” the Lord said, “*and come here.*” The woman answered and said, “*I have no husband.*” Jesus said to her, “*You have well said, ‘I have no husband, for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly’*” (John 4:17-18). The Lord was demonstrating He knew all about her sordid past. He helps her see her need for the “living water.” To her credit, she got the point and stayed to drink the water being offered, “*The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet’*” (John 4:19).

Since Jesus is obviously a prophet, the woman poses an age old question to Jesus to see what a “real prophet” will answer, “*Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship*” (John 4:20). This question was a relevant question. God had warned the people in the law, “*Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see; but in the place which the LORD chooses, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you*” (Deuteronomy 12:13–14). Jews were arguing that Jerusalem was the place chosen by God to worship and Samaritans were claiming that their mountain (Mount Gerizim) was the place God chose.

## **SAMARITANS & MT. GERIZIM**

The belief of the Samaritans that Mount Gerizim was the correct place for worship was founded upon several reasons:

- This was the mountain which God appeared to Abraham when he first entered Canaan (Genesis 12:6–7 – note that “Shechem” was a city near Mount Gerizim).
- Jacob had first lived here (Genesis 33:18).
- Joseph came here looking for his brothers (Genesis 37:12–13).
- It was a “city of refuge” (Joshua 20:7–9).
- On this mountain were read the “blessings” and “curses” (Joshua 8:33).
- Joshua gave his last speech here (Joshua 24:1).
- The bones of Joseph were laid to rest here (Joshua 24:32).

In addition to these facts, the Samaritans had several “traditions” or unsupported beliefs about Mount Gerizim which further caused them to think “this is the place where men ought to worship God.” For example:

- They had been taught this was the “Paradise” of Genesis 2 and 3. Of course it was not, but that was what they had been taught by their ancestors.
- They believed Adam was formed by the dust of Mount Gerizim.
- Adam supposedly built his first altar here.
- Seth built his first altar here (supposedly).
- Gerizim was the Ararat on which Noah’s ark landed (supposedly).
- Noah built his altar here (supposedly).
- Abraham offered Isaac here (supposedly).
- Abraham met Melchizedek here (supposedly).
- This was the “real” Bethel where Jacob dreamed about the ladder and promised God that “here” he would build a house and worship the Lord (supposedly).

For all these reasons and because of all these oral traditions, the Samaritans could not imagine the Jews were right about Jerusalem being the accepted location of worship.

## **A NEW ERA**

*“Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father” (John 4:21). A time, then, is soon coming when location will not matter when it comes to worship. Soon men could pray “everywhere lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). While*

Moslems would make holy pilgrimages to Mecca and Hindus would travel to the Ganges River in India, Jesus is saying that pilgrimages of any sort are not necessary.

Jesus reminds the woman at the well that the Samaritans had left God for idols, “*You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews*” (John 4:22). The Samaritans did not have all the writings of all the prophets. They were wrong about their beliefs and traditions. The Jews, in contrast, had been entrusted with God’s revelation (Romans 3:1–2).

“*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*” (John 4:23). Three things should be noticed here:

First, the important thing in worship is not where it is done, but who is worshiped. This is not to say that men may simply “stay home” and not assemble with brethren for worship. What it does mean is that neither Jerusalem, nor Mount Gerizim, nor Rome, nor any other place is a “holy place” which men must make pilgrimages to in order for their worship to be acceptable.

Second, we are told that “true worshippers” will worship the Father. By specifying the Father, Jesus excluded icons, idols, the worship of Mary, the worship of angels, the worship of saints, and in fact, the worship of anything or anyone besides the Father.

Third, we are reminded that God is spirit (John 4:24). He is not limited to any certain location. “*The Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands*” (Acts 7:48). He is not an icon or idol. He is not some “abstract force” as some would imagine. He is not worshipped with men’s hands (burning candles and incense, offering sacrifices on an altar, etc.). “*God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands*” (Acts 17:24–25). In times past when men did worship God “with men’s hands” (candles, incense, animal sacrifice), this was for man’s benefit, not God’s. Such things were pointing to spiritual things under the gospel system.

## **OT VS. NT WORSHIP**

“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). What does this mean? Jesus is speaking of a new era when things would be different. He is making a contrast between the way things were under the Old Testament and how things would be under the New Testament system. If “spirit and truth” means “sincerity and according to the truth of God’s word” then there is no contrast at all for both the Old and New Testaments required this (remember Joshua 24:14). We must interpret John 4:24 so the contrast, which Jesus is obviously making, remains intact.

Keep in mind a contrast is being made. Jesus is contrasting what is currently happening with things that will soon change (John 4:21). Currently “salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22). That is, the Jews were doing things correctly. But if the contrast of John 4:24 is “sincerity” versus “insincerity” and “truth” versus “falsehood,” this would make Jesus guilty of saying, “Salvation is of the Jews. They are worshipping insincerely and in falsehood right now, but the time is soon coming when this will change. Men will have to start being sincere and they will have to begin worshipping according to the truth of God’s word.” This is why the traditional view of John 4:24 seems to be wanting. It does not fit the contrast Jesus is trying to make. The Jews were not insincere. Paul wrote “*I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God*” (Romans 10:2). They performed their worship sincerely. The worship which they conducted in the temple seems to have been scriptural and according to the truth of God’s word. Remember, Jesus did say, “*Salvation is of the Jews*” and He said this in a conversation about worshipping God. Jesus Himself went to the temple for worship (Luke 2:46; 20:1; John 2:23; 4:45; 5:1; 7:14; 8:2; 10:22–23; 12:12). It is true Jesus drove out those who bought and sold in the temple (John 2:13ff), but His presence at the feasts and around the temple indicates that the religious services being conducted in the temple were scriptural. The contrast of John 4:24 does not seem to be a contrast of “insincere” versus “sincere” nor a contrast between “falsehood” versus “truth.”

## **“FLESHLY” & “TYPICAL” WORSHIP**

It seems more appropriate to view the contrast of John 4:24 as “spiritual worship” versus “fleshly worship” and “truth” versus “typical” worship. Remember that the Old Testament system involved “carnal ordinances” or “fleshly ordinances.” It was a system composed of types and symbols. The temple was not the “real thing.” The “real thing” was the “*true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man*” (Hebrews 8:2) – i.e. the church of Christ. The animal sacrifices of Old Testament worship were not the “real things” which took away sin and which pleased God. “*In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure*” (Hebrews 10:6). Instead, it was the blood of Christ which “truly” took away sin (Hebrews 10:10). The candlestick within the temple was only symbolic of the perfected word of God which would be a “*lamp unto our feet and a light unto our pathway*” (Psalm 119:105). The incense offered inside the temple was only symbolic of the “true” thing – the prayers of the saints (cf. Revelation 5:8). The showbread within the temple was a symbol or type of the Lord’s supper. The laver between the altar and the temple was a type of baptism. The point of all this is simply to point out that the Old Testament system was composed of symbolic and fleshly ordinances – not the “real” or “true” or “spiritual” things. “*It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience; concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and **fleshly ordinances** imposed until the time of reformation*” (Hebrews 9:10). The New Testament system is spiritual without “fleshly ordinances.” The New Testament system has no elaborate ceremonies, no physical temple, no rituals. The Old Testament was not “truth” in the sense of being the “reality.” It was, instead, a system of

shadows, types, and symbols. The New Testament presents us with a system that is “spirit” versus “carnal” and “truth” versus “symbol.” *“Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of **the true**, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;”* (Hebrews 9:23–24). *“For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not **the very image of the things**, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect”* (Hebrews 10:1).

## **CONCLUSION**

To worship in “spirit and in truth,” then, is to offer up spiritual worship rather than using carnal ordinances and rituals of the Old Testament. It means to offer up “real” worship rather than symbolic worship. In essence, this is a call to worship according to the New Testament pattern rather than continuing in Old Testament symbolic worship. This is why ritualistic worship of denominations is unacceptable. This is why we reject special priests who wear vestments (i.e. special clothing). We reject incense and censers, candles and candlesticks, mechanical instruments of music, icons, images, special temples and special religious sites.

On the other hand, the worship of the church must be the “real” thing that corresponds to the types and symbols of the Old Testament system. Any tampering with the worship that results in a destruction to the types of the Old Testament is wrong. This is why, for example, more than one loaf in the communion is wrong. The Old Testament symbolic worship called for one loaf per tribe of Israel (Leviticus 24:5–6). This was a picture that one day the “real” Lord’s supper would have one loaf per congregation to remember the Lord’s body given in sacrifice (1 Corinthians 10:16–17). This is why, for another example, that men must be baptized before being allowed to enter into the services of the church to partake of the Lord’s supper. The reason being, every person entering the tabernacle for worship (a type of the church) had to be a priest who washed himself in the laver (a type of baptism). No “outsider” was allowed to partake (Numbers 3:38). Other examples might be given, but the point should be clear. We are not at liberty to change the worship of the New Testament in any fashion which would result in the destruction of the Old Testament types.

While it is certainly true that men should be sincere in their worship and should follow closely the truth of God’s word in their religious services, this does not seem to be the main thrust of John 4:24. We must interpret John 4:24 so as to retain the contrast being made – a contrast between the Old Testament and New Testament systems. This passage calls for God’s people today to accept and adopt the true worship of which the Old Testament system was only a symbol of. The Lord is no longer “*worshiped with men’s hands*” (Acts 17:25).