

Does Worship Matter?

Introduction. Does doctrine matter in regard to how we worship? A spirit of pluralism would say that the forms of worship matter little, that one should practice what seems most satisfactory. Such thinking seems unconcerned that there are biblical warnings against vain worship and unaware that a doctrinal standard for acceptable worship is emphasized in the Bible. The benchmark text on the principles of acceptable worship is in the conversation Jesus had with a Samaritan woman in John 4.

I. A Pertinent Question

- A. Starting with a request for a drink of water in v. 7, the Master guided the conversation to spiritual issues. Then, by His plain declaration about her marital history and current immoral lifestyle, she became convinced that He was no ordinary Jew and wanted His response on a longstanding worship dispute.
 - 1. Before considering the question that followed, it will be helpful to emphasize that only a prophet (a legitimate spokesman for God) can give correct answers to spiritual questions. Jesus Christ, God's Son, is the final spokesman to mankind (Hebrews 1:1-2).
 - 2. We may regard this woman as naive, but her approach reminds us that there is no way to know what is acceptable in worship except by divine revelation. It is not by philosophers, councils, traditions, or popular opinion, but according to the words of the Prophet.
- B. At issue between the Jews and Samaritans was the proper location of the temple. Samaritan tradition held that the authorized temple was supposed to be at Mount Gerizim. They had even altered texts in the Pentateuch in support of this tradition. On the other hand, the Jews insisted that the proper location of the temple was Mount Moriah in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 12:5-11; 2 Chronicles 7:12-16). Many modernists doubtless would have dismissed the whole point as trivial, supposing that specifics could not possibly matter.
- C. Jesus treated it as a pertinent question, even being so frank as to say that they worship what they do not know (v. 22). They knew who they were supposed to worship, but they did not know Him (1 John 2:4). The Jewish religion came from God, though later greatly corrupted by its adherents; the Samaritan religion was of man and involved grave error. The Jewish religion was vastly superior to the Samaritan religion to which the woman at least nominally adhered.
- D. It was not out of bigotry or malice, but Jesus did not hesitate to condemn the unscriptural worship in Samaria. On another occasion He was no less blunt toward the Pharisees when their worship violated the Law (Matthew 15:8-9). Matthew 15:8-9 provides negative parallels to what He said in John 4:24. Worship without the heart is the opposite of worship in spirit; worship after the commandments of men is opposite of worship according to truth.

II. A Change Of Covenants

- A. The time was near when the old system, which included a specified place of worship, would be set aside (v. 21). This would be in the inauguration of the New Testament system. Under that new system the rules of the former covenant

would no longer apply. This assurance to this woman anticipated what was later emphasized by the apostles (Colossians 2:16-17; Hebrews 9:15-17).

- B. While the different covenants have different requirements, the requirements of each covenant are bound on those to whom the covenant is given (Galatians 3:15). It is no less sin to disregard the specifics of the New Testament as it was for the Samaritans to disregard the specifics of the Old (Hebrews 2:1-4).
- C. Jesus did not say the hour was coming when it would not matter how people worship. It is expected that righteous people follow the rules, whatever rules are in place. He does not say, as some seem to have imagined, that worship is something so inward that there are no prescribed actions. Neither does He mean that the worship assembly is not a vital part of the new system.

III. An Eternal Principle

- A. When Jesus said the hour is coming in v. 21, He was pointing to something that had not yet occurred, but in v. 23 He adds, "... and now is." This added clause is usually interpreted to mean that it was so imminent as to be spoken of as already present. The Old Law would stay in place until it would be nailed to the cross and replaced by the gospel (Galatians 3:24-25). There was, however, an underlying principle of worship that applied under either covenant, and, regardless of which covenant, the true worshipers that the Father seeks are those who worship "in spirit and in truth." Covenants change; principles do not.
- B. This point is significant because of the misuse some have made of the text. It is wrongfully assumed that worship in spirit and truth was not a requirement under the Law of Moses.
 - 1. This goes to the mistaken notion that any doctrine of worship which strictly required certain rituals could not be "in spirit and in truth." It is thought to be legalism when there is law and insistence on rules.
 - 2. This totally misses the purpose of God in the Jewish system. Though often ignored by the people, it was always God's purpose that their worship be spiritual and that it be according to truth (Joshua 24:14; 1 Samuel 12:24). One who assumes that the Old Testament system was a mere system of legalism should remember that God is the Author of that system.

IV. "In Spirit And In Truth"

- A. The spirit of man is the inward man. External rituals alone do not suffice. The inward man must actively participate in every act of worship. Worship to the God who is Spirit must be from the heart (Romans 6:17).
- B. Worship is an inward reverence, the bowing down of the soul in the presence of God, an awesome sense of our dependence on Him, and the blending of our finite spirits in faith and love with His infinite spirit (Psalm 95:1-6; Revelation 4:10; 5:14). It is to be done with grace (Colossians 3:16) and without hypocrisy (Mark 7:6).
- C. "Truth" is the revelation from God, and it must be understood in its usual meaning in John (3:21; 8:32; 16:13; 17:17).
 - 1. Truth did not authorize the temple in Samaria. Truth does not authorize innovations in Christian worship such as instrumental music, observing the

Lord's Supper on days other than Sunday, and the observance of Christmas and Easter. Truth involves the ordinances which are by apostolic instructions (1 Corinthians 11:1-2). To worship by other standards is to worship in vain (Colossians 2:20-23).

2. Under the Mosaic system the truth regarding worship involved the observance of the temple rites. Under the Christian system worship has a different structure. There are actions to be performed, and they are to be performed according to the revealed truth.
- D. Some have argued that to worship "in truth" simply means to be genuine in what is done, not that Jesus is referring to any ritual requirements. This would assume that as long as one is sincere it matters little whether there is book, chapter, and verse for what is being performed. But this would have been redundant to have Jesus say that genuine worshipers must worship in a genuine way. The essential subjective feature of genuine worship is fully covered by "in spirit." To this the objective counterpart must be added: "in truth".
- E. Only one preposition joins the two nouns "spirit" and "truth." This emphasizes the fact that true worship is impossible without both elements.
1. There can be no acceptable worship by the inward man without regard for the instructions of God's truth. Neither can there be acceptable worship when the truth's instructions are followed without the participation of the spirit within.
 2. Omit the spirit and though you have truth, the worship becomes only ritual observance. Omit the truth, and though the whole soul is thrown into the worship, it becomes an abomination. Thus "spirit and truth" form a unit, two halves that belong together in every act of worship.

Conclusion. The woman had challenged Jesus with an issue that was sensitive to the Samaritans, but He did not retreat from the controversy. Instead He plainly stated the failure of Samaritan worship, upheld the correctness of the system then in place for the Jews, and declared clearly the eternal principle of worship that must be followed by Jews and Samaritans — and all others. His double affirmation of the essentials of acceptable worship made it clear that she was wrong if she continued in the traditions of her fathers. She would have to change her religion to be right with God.

It is the will of God that all people be His children and that they worship Him in spirit and truth: "the Father seeketh such to worship him" (v. 23). This woman, though having lived in sin and under a false system of religion, would be acceptable to God if she would repent and accept the plan of God.

Some want to promote unity by minimizing the importance of doctrine, especially the biblical doctrine regarding acceptable worship. It is thought that rather than insisting on the biblical pattern it would be better to overlook differences and unite on the basis of compromise. We are seeing this in multiple concessions among brethren. This was not our Lord's method. The way for unity and acceptance with God for everyone requires that false worship be rejected and that in worship and everything else we abide in the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9-11). Only in so doing can we worship "in spirit and in truth."