

# TRUE WORSHIPERS

John 4:23-26

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The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. (Jn. 4:23).

**T**he word “seeker” has come to play a large role in Christianity today. Increasing numbers of churches identify themselves as “seeker-friendly” or “seeker-sensitive”. Their conviction is that people are seeking after God, but the church has erected barriers of tradition and culture that keep them away. Their remedy is to remove these barriers by presenting a contemporary image to these seekers and offer them a style of worship that appeals to their tastes.

Although we want to remove all false barriers to worship, there are problems with this approach. Most importantly, its main premise flies in the face of the Bible’s teaching. Romans 3:11 says, “No one seeks for God.” People may be seeking the benefits of a relationship with God – peace, harmony, joy, and freedom from fear – but they are not seeking God himself. Yet God really is what they need, and they will never possess God’s blessings without a saving relationship with him. The main problem with “seeker-friendly” worship, therefore, is that however popular it may be it often involves a disastrously effective marriage: people come to church not looking for God and when they arrive God is not there to be found.

If people really are not seeking after God, then what hope is there that people will be saved? The answer is that while sinners do not seek God, God is seeking sinners. Jesus explained, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Lk. 19:10). Jesus is still in the world today seeking sinners, through the powerful working of his Holy

Spirit. Moreover, God the Father is seeking. Jesus said, “The Father is seeking people to worship him” (Jn. 4:23). This is why there is a great hope for people today, and why the church must not abandon biblical ministry and worship for their secular replacements. God is seeking worshipers through Jesus Christ. God is drawing people and, in consequence, those people are looking for God when they come to church. Therefore, our goal is not to present an appealing worldliness or even to package God in secular garb, but to present God biblically in his saving glory so that those whom God is seeking will find him in his church.

## WORSHIP IN SPIRIT

**H**ow should we worship God? That was the question the Samaritan woman asked Jesus, either to avoid more personal matters or out of a sincere interest. Her question had mainly to do with the right place for worship. Should it be on Mount Gerezim, where the Samaritans worshiped, or on Mount Zion in Jerusalem? Jesus answered that “the important question is not *where* people worship God but *how* they worship him.”<sup>1</sup> His coming as the world’s Savior made this all the more true. Jesus’ next statement to the woman is one of the most important on worship in the New Testament: “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23-24).

The key statement is “in spirit and truth.” First, let us consider *worship in spirit*. It is clear that Jesus does not refer to the Holy Spirit, since he uses no definite article, but to the human spirit. Our worship of God must not be merely external but spiritual and inward; true worship is a matter of the heart and not of mere actions. James Boice explains, “[Jesus] is teaching that in the age he was inaugurating by his death and resurrection the place of worship would not matter, for a man or woman would not worship merely by being in the right place and doing certain right things. He would worship in his spirit, which could be anywhere.”<sup>2</sup> Boice elaborates:

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<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 109.

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1:296.

Many people worship with the body... In our day this would refer to people who think they have worshiped God simply because they have occupied a seat in a church on Sunday morning, sung a hymn, or lit a candle, or crossed themselves, or knelt in the aisle. Jesus says this is not worship. These customs may be vehicles for worship... But they are not worship in themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Rightly understanding worship “in spirit” will help us sort through some of the heated debates regarding worship today. Some people think a contemporary worship style is more spiritual, because it is more likely to include bodily involvement or emotional displays. By “spiritual” they mean “spirited.” But we may be physically and emotionally excited without engaging our spirit towards God. On the other side, people think that preserving time-worn practices and church traditions is more spiritual. But one may engage in the most reverent acts yet not offer himself spiritually to God. What, then, is spiritual worship? Boice answers: “True worship occurs only when that part of man, his spirit, which is akin to the divine nature (for God is spirit), actually meets with God and finds itself praising him for his love, wisdom, beauty, truth, holiness, compassion, mercy, grace, power and all his other attributes.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the greatest examples of worship in spirit took place not in a great cathedral, but in a jail in the Roman city of Philippi. The congregation had only two members, the apostle Paul and his helper Silas. Their preaching had caused a riot, so they were beaten with rods and placed in stocks. We can imagine their conversation, having been exposed to such suffering as a result of faithful ministry. Whatever they said, they decided the best thing to do was to worship God. Luke tells us, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25). I do not know what kind of singing voices they had, but their hearts made sweet music in heaven. As a result, “there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken” (Acts 16:26). If we want to shake our world, an important step is for us to worship God in spirit, with hearts that sincerely praise him with great rejoicing.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 297.

Worship in spirit must be sincere and God-directed. Perhaps our greatest problem today is that we come to church worshipping ourselves – wanting mainly to get something out of it for ourselves – instead of worshipping God. An example of this took place in the time of the prophet Zechariah. In an earlier generation, Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people had gone into captivity, all as God’s chastening judgment for their sins. But God had been faithful to his promise to restore a remnant and rebuild the temple on Mount Zion. As this project neared completion, a delegation arrived from nearby Bethel, asking if they could stop fasting and weeping. A series of fasts had developed during the exile, to mark the occasion of various catastrophes: the start of the siege, the breaching of the city’s walls, the burning of the temple, and the murder of their governor. Now that God had restored them to blessing they wanted to stop fasting. God answered them, “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?” (Zech. 7:5). In other words, all along their worship had been for their own benefit. It was not done unto God, for his pleasure and for his glory, out of love for God and trust in him. This is what God cares about. Unless our worship is offered in sincerity to him, God rejects it, saying, “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies” (Am. 5:21). Despite all the elaborate show of these Jewish fasts, all the loud laments and showy tears, God simply asks, “Was it for me, even me?” He asks that of our worship today.

Worship in spirit must be sincerely offered in praise and thanksgiving to God. A. W. Pink says, “Worship is a redeemed heart occupied with God, expressing itself in adoration and thanksgiving.”<sup>5</sup> This principle not only condemns all self-centered worship, but it also ennoble everything we do that is truly unto God. It means that the mother who toils in the weary labor of raising children, unnoticed and unlauded by the world, if she does it for Christ, with gratitude to God and a desire for his pleasure, has her ministry accepted with God’s highest commendation. The same is true for the man who labors in obscurity, treating people with dignity and working above the call of duty simply unto the Lord. Whenever and wherever God can say, “it was for me,” this is the spiritual worship that he seeks.

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 209.

Worship in spirit is necessary because only it accords with God's spiritual nature. "God is spirit," Jesus said. Therefore, Leon Morris explains, "The worship brought to him must be essentially of a spiritual kind."<sup>6</sup> Jesus said we "must" worship in spirit and truth. This is not merely an option, but a requirement for worshipping God. This is the fourth "must" we have encountered in John's Gospel. Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (Jn. 3:7), and "the Son of Man must be lifted up" (Jn. 3:14). Spiritual worship can only be offered by those cleansed by Christ's blood and born again by his Spirit. John the Baptist added, "I must decrease," reminding us that worshipers must be humble in serving God. Now, Jesus adds, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

## WORSHIP IN TRUTH

**W**hat does it mean, then, to *worship in truth*? The first thing it must require is a right conception of God. This is implicit in the first of God's Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). This requires us to know who God is: to know what is and is not true about him. If we have false or ignoble thoughts about God, we cannot worship him in truth. Some people think of God as distant and unloving: they cannot worship him in truth. Others think of God as their chummy friend or a "cosmic bellhop" who awaits their summons. They, too, cannot worship God in truth. One of the great problems in worship today is a lack of awareness of God's holiness. Hebrews 12:28-29 says, "Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." Kent Hughes says, "A wrong conception of God is the root of idolatry,"<sup>7</sup> and it is also a cause of all false worship.

Worship in truth requires a right conception of *who* we worship, but also of *how* we are to worship him. It requires right methods that are taught by God's Word. All through the Bible, we find people worshipping God sincerely but according to their own ideas of worship – and they are rejected by God. The first was Cain, who failed to bring a blood sacrifice for his sins and thus was turned away. Nadab

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 240.

<sup>7</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 116.

and Abihu brought “unauthorized fire” into the Lord’s house and they “died before the LORD” (Num. 3:4). Perhaps the most significant example of false worship is the golden calf made by Aaron at the peoples’ request, while Moses was away on the mountain with God. It is important to know that the name “Yahweh” was inscribed on the golden calf: this idolatrous feast was offered to “the LORD” (Ex. 32:5). They sought to worship the true God in a false way, according to their own designs, and God was angered with great fury.

In forbidding idols, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment attacks all unbiblical methods for worship. John Calvin explains: “This then is the rule, as to the right worship of God, that men... are only to give ear to God, and to follow what he commands. But when men's presumption intrudes, so that they devise a new mode of worship, they then depart from the true God, and worship mere idols... In religion nothing is to be attempted by us, but we are to follow this one law in worshipping God - simply to obey his word.”<sup>8</sup> In Reformed theology, we refer to this as the “regulative principle,” which states that Scripture is to regulate our worship. Ligon Duncan explains, “There must be scriptural warrant for all we do. That warrant may come in the form of explicit directives, implicit requirements, the general principles of Scripture, positive commands, examples, and things derived from good and necessary consequences.”<sup>9</sup> This principle stems from a humility before God that admits that we are not wise enough or holy enough to safely invent new methods of worship. Realizing this, we worship God only in the way he has taught us; we offer the true God true worship by obeying his Word.

We have an epidemic of golden calves in the church today. People want to worship God according to their own desires and wisdom. This is seen in an increasing reliance on drama and even comedy routines in the place of teaching God’s Word. One way to chart the explosive growth of secular methods in church is to observe the rapidly increasing use of video clips. According to one study, the number of churches using video grew 625% between 1999 and 2004, with 29% percent of churches in the United States now showing

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *The Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), I:452.

<sup>9</sup> J. Ligon Duncan, III, “Does God Care How We Worship?” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip G. Ryken, et al (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 23.

video at least once a month.<sup>10</sup> The problem with drama, comedy, and video is not merely that they are new and innovative, but that they are in opposition to the Bible's teaching about worship. Since the medium always dictates to the message, this shift has led an emphasis on emotionally appealing stories in the place of proclaimed sacred truth. The fact that the Bible tells us, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17), seems not to have slowed this secularizing trend.

Why is this? The answer is found in the explanation Aaron gave when Moses berated him for the golden calf. Aaron said, "You know the people, that they are set on evil" (Ex. 32:23). In other words, "The people don't like a biblical approach to worship – they don't enjoy prayer and Bible reading and serious preaching – they want something more lively, so I gave it to them." The question, therefore, for churches and pastors today is whether we will worship popularity or whether we will worship God. We will either explain our worship practices by saying, with Aaron, "You know how people are," or by saying, "We know how God is and what he desires."

Worship in truth requires a right conception of God and a biblical approach to worship. Lastly, we should note that it requires thought. Kent Hughes argues, "Worship is not a mindless activity. It includes mental interaction with the truth about God."<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that worship is merely an intellectual experience, with no effect on the emotions, will and affections. Far from it! But the trajectory of biblical worship is light shining through the mind to warm the heart. It is truth and not sentiment that sets us free (Jn. 8:32). Jesus prayed, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn. 17:3). Paul appealed to us to offer God "spiritual worship," and he explained this by saying, "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). In Hebrews 8:10, God says, "I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts." It is true that God wants his law written on our hearts, but in order to do this he first puts it into our minds.

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<sup>10</sup> Sally Morgenthaller, "Film and Worship: Windows in Caves and Other Things We Do with Perfectly Good Prisms," in *Theology News and Notes*, Spring 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, 117.

## WORSHIP IN CHRIST

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman concludes with a dramatic exchange that has everything to do with worship: “The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things’” (Jn. 4:25). Jesus responded with words that changed her life and that thunder at the heart of all true worship: “Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he’” (Jn. 4:26).

The Greek text makes clear what is obscured in most English versions: Jesus did not say “I am he,” but simply, “I am.” We might better render this, “I who speak to you, I am.” This was, of course, the answer given to Moses at the burning bush when he asked God to give his name: “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex. 3:14). This is where we get the name “Jehovah” or “Yahweh” – it means “I AM” and signifies God’s eternal, self-existent being. The voice Moses heard from the bush this Samaritan woman now heard from Jesus, and with it came an unveiling of his divine majesty. Leaving her water jar, she ran to tell others, “Can this be the Christ?” (Jn. 4:28-29).

This says to us that just as Moses came to the burning bush, so also we must come to God in Jesus Christ. Our worship must be *in spirit*, *in truth*, and it must be *in Christ*. Jesus is the true revealer of God, so we must come to him to find God. It is “through him” that we have “access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18).

This is why Jesus told the woman that true, spiritual worship was being made possible by his coming. Prior to Jesus, a Samaritan could not know or worship God without going to Jerusalem and the temple. Even there, only the priests could go inside, and even they could not see God. The priests served before the golden lampstand, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense – all of which were symbols of Christ. The only person who really met with God was the high priest, and only on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement.

The high priest came before the ark of the covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments. The law condemned him and the nation, so God provided what was called the “mercy seat.” This was a tray

where the blood of the sacrifice could be spread, so that God's wrath was turned aside and the people were restored to his favor. In one of the more important verses in the whole Old Testament, God told Moses, "There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you" (Ex. 25:22). The Greek word for mercy seat is *hilasterion*; Paul uses this very word for Christ's atoning work on the cross. He writes, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, who God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23-25) The word for *propitiation* is *hilasterion*. "God set forth Christ Jesus to be the mercy seat, where the blood is offered and where sinners may come to meet with God."

Because of this, a new answer is given to the Samaritan woman's question about where to worship. "On this hill or in Jerusalem?" She asked. Jesus answered, "I AM." As Moses was called to the burning bush, Jesus now calls us to himself as the true place of worship. Wherever we are, we may come directly to God through faith in Christ. Have you put your faith in Jesus? Have you admitted your sin, as the high priest did each year on the Day of Atonement, and come to Jesus to be forgiven by his blood, shed for you? Until you do that, until you come to Jesus as a sinner seeking forgiveness, a rebel offering surrender, and God's creature come to worship by the one way he has made for us – the blood of Christ – you never can and never will worship in spirit and in truth. You can never know God truly and never experience his spiritual blessings. But if you come to Christ in faith, and come to God through the mercy seat that is his cross, you are free to worship God and be filled with his presence. William Cowper put it this way:

Jesus, where e'er your people meet, there they behold your mercy seat;  
Where e'er they seek you, you are found, and every place is hallowed ground.

God is seeking worshipers, through Jesus Christ, who come in spirit and truth. And when we do he will be our chief delight. He says, "I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they will be my people... I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:10, 12).