

Question: What did Jesus mean by worshipping God "in spirit"?

Jesus once told a woman that the time was coming when "the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:19-24). The meaning of the phrase "in spirit," is the question we wish to address in this article. In His discussion with the Samaritan woman, Jesus presented two contrasts:

1) Between Jewish and Samaritan worship --

- Jesus said that the Jews, not the Samaritans, were worshipping God correctly according to the Old Testament.

2) Between Old and New Testament worship --

- Old Testament worship did not meet the requirements of worshipping God "in spirit and truth," but New Testament worship would meet those requirements.

What did Jesus mean by the phrase "worship in spirit"? Some understand it to mean "sincere" worship. However, that idea does not illustrate the contrast Jesus is making, because sincerity was also required of Old Testament worshippers (Deu 6:4-7 Isa 1:10-18).

To worship "in spirit" simply means to offer "spiritual worship." That establishes a contrast between Old and New Testament worship. Here is the contrast:

1) Old Testament worship used physical items according to divine ordinances (cf. He 9:1-10).

- Tabernacle/Temple (and all its furnishings)
- Altars (for animal sacrifice and incense)
- Priesthood of Aaron

2) New Testament worship awakens the spiritual side of man.

- God's people are His spiritual temple. 1 Co 3:16 Ep 2:19-22
- Christians are His spiritual priests. 1 Pe 2:5, 9 Ro 12:1 He 13:15
- Their prayers are a sweet aroma to Him. Re 5:8
- Their hymns are played on the musical strings of the heart. Ep 5:19

3) The physical ordinances of Old Testament worship lasted until "the time of reformation" (He 9:10). When was that, you say?

- When Jesus "came as High Priest of the good things to come" (He 9:11),
- And "through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God (9:14),
- And became "the Mediator of the New Covenant, by means of death" (9:15).

God never intended the physical ordinances of Old Testament worship to be the pattern for New Testament worship. Furthermore, "spiritual" worship does not always mean "spirited" worship. People may engage in active, lively, energetic forms of worship like waving and clapping the hands, shouting, cheering, and playing musical instruments, but these forms do not depict "spiritual" worship. "Spiritual" worship is an order of worship revealed by the Holy Spirit through the apostles (Jn 16:13) in the New Testament, which excludes Old Testament forms as well as many modern-day concepts, customs and traditions of worship.

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