

A Case Study of True versus False Worship Based on Jesus' Encounter with the Samaritan Woman

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Vol. I, trans. Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 154-164, emphasis added, some updated English.

From the Gospel of John, chapter 4, verses 1-31.

John 4:19 The woman saith to him, Sir, I see that thou art a Prophet. **20.** Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and you say that Jerusalem is the place where we ought to worship. **21.** Jesus saith to her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh when you shall not worship the Father either in this mountain or in Jerusalem.

God reveals how He chooses to be worshipped. Nothing is more wicked than to contrive various forms of worship without the authority of the Word of God.

The Samaritan woman, also known as the woman of Sychar, passes from what is particular to what is general, and, having been informed of her sin, wishes to be generally instructed concerning the pure *worship* of God. She takes a proper and regular course, when she consults *a Prophet*, that she may not fall into a mistake in the *worship* of God. It is as if she inquired at God Himself in what manner He chooses to be *worshipped*; for nothing is more wicked than to contrive various modes of *worship* without the authority of the word of God. . . .

It is well known that there was a constant dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans about the true rule of worshipping God. Although the Cutheans and other foreigners, who had been brought into Samaria, when the ten tribes were led into captivity, were constrained by the plagues and punishments of God to adopt the ceremonies of the Law, and to profess the worship of the God of Israel (as we read, 2 Kings 17:27); yet the religion which they had was imperfect and corrupted in many ways; which the Jews could not all endure. But the dispute was still more inflamed after that Manasseh, son of the high priest John, and brother of Jaddus, had built the temple on mount Gerizzim, when Darius, the last king of the Persians, held the government of Judea by the hand of Sanballat, whom he had placed there as his lieutenant. For Manasseh, having married a daughter of the governor, that he might not be inferior to his brother, made himself a priest there, and procured for himself by bribes as many apostles as he could, as Josephus relates (Antiquities 11:7:2, and 8:2).

Religious rebels and hypocrites defend their worship practices by appealing to the examples of their ancestors, tradition, church history, and “the fathers” of the Church.

Our fathers worshipped in this mountain. The Samaritans at that time did, as we learn from the words of the woman, what is customary with those who have revolted from true godliness, to seek to shield themselves by the examples of

the Fathers. It is certain that this was not the reason which induced them to offer sacrifices there, but after they had framed a false and perverse worship, obstinacy followed, which was ingenious in contriving excuses. I acknowledge, indeed, that unsteady and thoughtless men are sometimes excited by foolish zeal, as if they had been bitten by a gad-fly, so that when they learn that anything has been done by the Saints, they instantly seize on the example without any exercise of judgment.

A second fault is still more common, that they borrow the deeds of the Fathers as a cloak to their errors, — and this may be easily seen in Popery. But as this passage is a remarkable proof how absurdly they act who, disregarding the command of God, conform to the examples of *the Fathers*, we ought to observe in how many ways the world commonly sins in this respect. For it frequently happens that the majority, without discrimination, follow those persons as *Fathers* who are least of all entitled to be accounted *Fathers*. Thus in the present day we perceive that the Papists, while with open mouth they declaim about *the Fathers*, allow no place for Prophets and Apostles, but, when they have mentioned a few persons who deserve to be honored, collect a vast group of men like themselves, or at least come down to more corrupt ages in which, though there did not yet prevail so gross a barbarism as now exists, yet religion and the purity of doctrine had greatly declined. We ought, therefore, carefully to attend to the distinction, that none may be reckoned *Fathers* but those who were manifestly the sons of God; and who also, by the eminence of their piety, were entitled to this honorable rank. 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 imitation of *the Fathers*, the world thinks that there can be no danger in sinning after their example.

A third fault is — a false, and ill-regulated, or thoughtless imitation; that is, when we, though not endued with the same spirit, or authorized by the same command, plead as our example what any of *the Fathers* did; as for instance, if any private individual resolved to revenge the injuries done to brethren, because Moses did this (Exodus 2:12); or if any one were to put fornicators to death, because this was done by Phinehas (Numbers 25:7). That savage fury in slaying their own children originated, as many think, in the wish of the Jews to be like their father Abraham, as if the command, *Offer up thy son Isaac* (Genesis 22:2), were a general command and not rather a remarkable trial of a single man. Such a false imitation is generally produced by pride and excessive confidence, when men claim more for themselves more than they have a right to do; and when each person does not measure himself by his own standard. Yet none of these are true imitators of *the Fathers*; most of them are apes. That a considerable portion of ancient monachism flowed from the same source will be acknowledged by those who shall carefully examine the writings of the ancients. And, therefore, unless we choose to err of our own accord, we ought always to see what spirit each person has

received, what his calling requires, what is suitable to his condition, and what he is commanded to do.

False worship has been present since the early days of the Church (e.g., the Judaizer heresy in Galatians). Thus, it is foolish to appeal to church history, tradition, or “the early church fathers” to defend our practices. Scripture alone must be the only unfailing rule of faith and practice. We must neither practice old covenant ceremony that has been abolished nor manmade tradition that was later invented by the professing Christian church.

Closely allied to this third fault is another, namely, the confounding of times, when men, devoting their whole attention to the examples of *the Fathers*, do not consider that the Lord has since enjoined a different rule of conduct, which they ought to follow. To this ignorance ought to be ascribed that huge mass of ceremonies by which the Church has been buried under Popery. Immediately after the commencement of the Christian Church, it began to err in this respect, because a foolish affectation of copying Jewish ceremonies had an undue influence. The Jews had their sacrifices; and that Christians might not be inferior to them in splendor, the ceremony of sacrificing Christ [i.e., the mass] was invented: as if the condition of the Christian Church would be worse when there would be an end of all those shadows by which the brightness of Christ might be obscured. But afterwards this fury broke out more forcibly, and spread beyond all bounds.

It would be a shocking sacrilege if Christians today were to burn incense, light candles, wear holy garments, or use altars, vessels, and ceremonies of this nature for religious purposes.

That we may not fall into this error, we ought always to be attentive to the present rule. Formerly incense, candles, holy garments, an altar, vessels, and ceremonies of this nature, pleased God; and the reason was, that nothing is more precious or acceptable to Him than obedience. Now, since the coming of Christ, matters are entirely changed. We ought, therefore, to consider what He enjoins on us under the Gospel, that we may not follow at random what *the Fathers* observed under the Law; for what was at that time a holy observation of the worship of God would now be a shocking sacrilege.

Ever since the days of Moses, God’s people have been warned to do only what God commands us to do in worship.

The Samaritans were led astray by not considering, in the example of Jacob, how widely it differed from the condition of their own time. The Patriarchs were permitted to erect altars everywhere, because the place had not yet been fixed which the Lord afterwards selected; but from the time that God ordered the temple to be built on mount Zion, the freedom which they formerly enjoyed ceased. For this reason Moses said, Hereafter you shall not do every one what appears right in his own eyes, but only what I command you, (Deuteronomy 12:8, 14); for from the time that the Lord gave the Law, He restricted the true worship of Himself to the requirements of that Law, though

formerly a greater degree of liberty was enjoyed. A similar pretense was offered by those who worshipped in Bethel; for there Jacob had offered a solemn sacrifice to God, but after the Lord had fixed the place of sacrifice at Jerusalem, it was no longer Bethel, *the house of God*, but Bethaven, *the house of wickedness*.

We now see what was the state of the question. The Samaritans had the example of *the Fathers* for their rule: the Jews rested on the commandment of God. This woman, though she had up until now followed the custom of her nation, she was not altogether satisfied with it. By *worship* we are to understand here not any kind of *worship* (for daily prayers might be offered in any place) but that which was joined with sacrifices, and which constituted a public and solemn profession of religion.

Jesus abolished the holy land, the temple in Jerusalem, and all sacred places. Under the new covenant, God's worship recognizes no distinction of place or nation.

21. *Woman, believe me.* In the first part of this reply, Christ briefly sets aside the ceremonial worship which had been appointed under the Law; for when He says that *the hour is at hand* when there shall be no peculiar and fixed place for *worship*, He means that what Moses delivered was only for a time, and that the time was now approaching when *the partition-wall* (Ephesians 2:14) should be thrown down. In this manner He extends the worship of God far beyond its former narrow limits, that the Samaritans might become partakers of it.

The hour cometh. He uses the present tense instead of the future; but the meaning is, that the repeal of the Law is already at hand, so far as relates to the Temple, and Priesthood, and other outward ceremonies. By calling God *Father*, He seems indirectly to contrast Him with *the Fathers* whom the woman had mentioned, and to convey this instruction, that God will be a common *Father* to all, so that He will be generally worshipped without distinction of places or nations.

JOHN 4:22-26

22. You worship what you know not, we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. **23.** But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship him. **24.** God is a Spirit, and they who worship him ought to worship in spirit and in truth. **25.** The woman saith to him, I know that the Messiah will come, who is called Christ; therefore, when he shall come, he will tell you all things. **26.** Jesus saith to her, It is I who talk with thee.

True worship is based on the Word of God alone. Any worship not based on Scripture is marked by superstition and error.

He now explains more largely what he had briefly glanced at about the abolition of the Law; but He divides the substance of His discourse into two parts. In the former, He charges with superstition and error the form of worshipping God which had been used by the Samaritans, but testifies that the true and lawful form was observed by the

Jews. And He assigns the cause of the difference, that from the word of God the Jews obtained certainty as to His worship, while the Samaritans received nothing certain from the mouth of God. In the second part, He declares that the ceremonies hitherto observed by the Jews would soon be at an end.

Unless our religion, unless our worship is based on the Scriptures alone, we are not worshipping the true God but rather an idol or false god. If we are guided by our own opinions, desires, or “good intentions,” our worship and religion are in vain. We must only obey the commands of God and follow what the Lord has prescribed for us to do in His Word.

22. *You worship what you know not, we worship what we know.* This is a sentence worthy of being remembered, and teaches us that we ought not to attempt any thing in religion rashly or at random; because, unless there be knowledge, it is not God that we worship, but a phantom or idol. All good intentions, as they are called, are struck by this sentence, as by a thunderbolt; for we learn from it, that men can do nothing but err, when they are guided by their own opinion without the word or command of God. For Christ, defending the person and cause of His nation, shows that the Jews are widely different from the Samaritans. And why?

Because salvation is from the Jews. By these words he means that they have the superiority in this respect, that God had made with them a covenant of eternal salvation. Some restrict it to Christ, who was descended from the Jews; and, indeed, since all the promises of God were confirmed and ratified in Him (2 Corinthians 1:20), there is no salvation but in Him. But as there can be no doubt that Christ gives the preference to the Jews on this ground, that they do not worship some unknown deity, but God alone, who revealed Himself to them, and by whom they were adopted as His people; by the word *salvation* we ought to understand that saving manifestation which had been made to them concerning the heavenly doctrine.

But why does He say that it was *from the Jews*, when it was rather deposited with them, that they alone might enjoy it? He alludes, in my opinion, to what had been predicted by the Prophets, *that the Law would go forth from Zion* (Isaiah 2:3; Micah 4:2), for they were separated for a time from the rest of the nations on the express condition that the pure knowledge of God should flow out from them to the whole world. It amounts to this, that God is not properly worshipped but by the certainty of faith, which cannot be produced in any other way than by the word of God. Hence it follows that all who forsake the word fall into idolatry; for Christ plainly testifies that an idol, or an imagination of their own brain, is substituted for God, when men are ignorant of the true God; and He charges with ignorance all to whom God has not revealed Himself, for as soon as we are deprived of the light of His word, darkness and blindness reign.

False worshippers turn aside from the pure faith of the Gospel to follow their own inventions and the traditions of men. They worship according to their own judgment or human traditions, and they flatter and applaud themselves in their

obstinate rebellion. The god they worship is neither holy nor divine, for he is a mere figment of their imagination—an idol.

It ought to be observed that the Jews, when they had treacherously set aside the covenant of eternal life which God had made with their fathers, were deprived of the treasure which they had until that time enjoyed; for they had not yet been driven out of the Church of God. Now that they deny the Son, they have nothing in common with the Father; for whosoever denies the Son has not the Father (1 John 2:23.) 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.

The true God may be properly worshipped in all places; we do not need to go to temples, cathedrals, or holy places.

23. *But the hour cometh.* Now follows the latter clause, about repealing the worship, or ceremonies, prescribed by the Law. When He says that *the hour cometh, or will come*, He shows that the order laid down by Moses will not be perpetual. When He says that *the hour is now come*, He puts an end to the ceremonies, and declares that *the time of reformation*, of which the Apostle speaks (Hebrews 9:10) has thus been fulfilled. Yet He approves of the Temple, the Priesthood, and all the ceremonies connected with them, so far as relates to the past time. Again, to show that God does not choose to be worshipped either in Jerusalem or in Mount Gerizzim, He takes a higher principle, that the true worship of Him consists *in the spirit*; for hence it follows that in all places He may be properly worshipped.

But the first inquiry which presents itself here is, **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.

Hence arises another question, **Did not the Fathers worship Him *spiritually* under the Law?** I reply, as God is always like Himself, He did not from the beginning of the world approve of any other worship than that which is spiritual, and which agrees with His own nature. This is abundantly attested by Moses himself, who declares in many passages that the Law has no other object than that the people may cleave to God with faith and a pure conscience. But it is still more plainly declared by the Prophets when they attack with severity the hypocrisy of the people, because they thought that they had satisfied God, when they had performed the sacrifices and made an outward display. It is unnecessary to quote here many proofs which are to be found everywhere,

but the most remarkable passages are the following: — Psalm 50; Isaiah 1,58,66; Micah 5; Amos 7. 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* (Galatians 4:9). In like manner, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says that the ancient *sanctuary*, with its appendages, was *earthly* (Hebrews 9:1). 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.

We now see what the Jews had in common with us, and in what respect they differed from us. In all ages God wished to be worshipped by faith, prayer, thanksgiving, purity of heart, and innocence of life; and at no time did He delight in any other sacrifices. But 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* (Matthew 27:51) nothing is hidden or obscure. There are indeed among ourselves, in the present day, some outward exercises of godliness, which our weakness renders necessary, but such is the moderation and sobriety of them, that they do not obscure the plain truth of Christ. In short, what was exhibited to the fathers under figures and shadows is now openly displayed.

New covenant worship differs sharply from old covenant (Jewish) worship and from much that is considered worship in churches today.

Now in Popery this distinction is not only confounded, but altogether overturned; for there the shadows are not less thick than they formerly were under the Jewish religion. It cannot be denied that Christ here lays down an obvious distinction between us and the Jews. Whatever may be the subterfuges by which the Papists attempt to escape, it is evident that we differ from the fathers in nothing more than outward form, because while they worshipped God spiritually, they were bound to perform ceremonies, which were abolished by the coming of Christ. Thus all who oppress the Church with an excessive multitude of ceremonies, do what is in their power to deprive the Church of the presence of Christ. I do not stop to examine the vain excuses which they plead, that many persons in the present day have as much need of those aids as the Jews had in ancient times. It is always our duty to inquire by what order the Lord wished His Church to be governed, for He alone knows thoroughly what is expedient for us. Now it is certain that nothing is more at variance with the order appointed by God than the gross and singularly carnal pomp which prevails in Popery. The *spirit* was indeed concealed by the shadows of the Law, but the masks of Popery disfigure it altogether; and, therefore, we must not wink at such gross and shameful corruptions. Whatever arguments may be employed by ingenious men, or by those who have not sufficient courage to correct vices — that they are doubtful matters, and ought to be held as indifferent — certainly it cannot be endured that the rule laid down by Christ shall be violated.

Christ abolished the old covenant ceremonial Jewish worship. God is pleased with the plain, simple worship of true worshippers.

The true worshippers. Christ appears indirectly to reprove the obstinacy of many, which was afterwards displayed; for we know how obstinate and contentious the Jews were, when the Gospel was revealed, in defending the ceremonies to which they had been accustomed. But this statement has a still more extensive meaning; for, knowing that the world would never be entirely free from superstitions, He thus separates the devout and upright worshippers from those who were false and hypocritical.

Armed with this testimony, let us not hesitate to condemn the Papists in all their inventions, and boldly to despise their reproaches. For what reason have we to fear, when we learn that God is pleased with this plain and simple worship, which is disdained by the Papists, because it is not attended by a cumbrous mass of ceremonies? And of what use to them is the idle splendor of the flesh, by which Christ declares that the Spirit is quenched?

What it is *to worship God in spirit and truth* appears clearly from what has been already said. It is to lay aside the entanglements of ancient ceremonies, and to retain merely what is spiritual in the worship of God; for the *truth* of the worship of God consists in *the spirit*, and ceremonies are but a sort of appendage. And here again it must be observed, that *truth* is not compared with *falsehood*, but with the outward addition of the figures of the Law; so that — to use a common expression — it is the pure and simple substance of spiritual worship.

God is so far from being like us, that those things which please us most are the objects of His loathing and abhorrence. By nature, we are drawn to a carnal, showy, frivolous worship. How foolish therefore it is to do what is right in our own eyes, instead of simply obeying what God has prescribed in His Word. We ought to regard with suspicion whatever is gratifying according to the flesh. We ought to seek from His Word alone the rule by which we are governed.

24. *God is a Spirit.* This is a confirmation drawn from the very nature of God. Christ simply declares here that His Father is of a spiritual nature, and, therefore, is not moved by frivolous matters, as men, through the lightness and unsteadiness of their character, tend to be.

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 deal 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 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.

Christ is the supreme and preeminent One. Christ alone and His Word alone ought to be heard in the Church. The leaders of all cults and false religions seek to add their own inventions, instead of being reformed by and conformed to Scripture alone.

Professing Christians who do not find God's word sufficient for faith and practice are aligning themselves with false religion, not the true Church of Jesus Christ. They are building their house on shifting sand, instead of the Rock, who is the only sure foundation (Matt. 7:24-26; 16:18; 1 Cor. 10:4).

25. *The Messiah is about to come.* Although religion among the Samaritans was corrupted and mixed up with many errors, yet some principles taken from the Law were impressed on their minds, such as that which related to the Messiah. Now it is probable that, when the woman ascertained from Christ's discourse that a very extraordinary change was about to take place in the Church of God, her mind instantly recurred to the recollection of Christ, under whom she hoped that all things would be fully restored. When she says that *the Messiah is about to come*, she seems to speak of the time as near at hand; and, indeed, it is sufficiently evident from many arguments, that the minds of men were everywhere aroused by the expectation of the Messiah, who would restore the affairs which were wretchedly decayed, or rather, which were utterly ruined. This, at least, is beyond all controversy, that the woman prefers Christ to Moses and to all the Prophets in the office of teaching; for she comprehends three things in a few words.

First, that the doctrine of the Law was not absolutely perfect, and that nothing more than first principles was delivered in it; for if there had not been some farther progress to be made, she would not have said that *the Messiah will tell us all things*. There is an implied contrast between Him and the Prophets, that it is His peculiar office to conduct His disciples to the goal, while the Prophets had only given them the earliest instructions, and, as it were, led them into the course. Secondly, the woman declares that she expects such a *Christ* as will be the interpreter of His Father, and the teacher and instructor of all the godly. Lastly, she expresses her belief that we ought not to desire any thing better or more perfect than His doctrine, but that, on the contrary, this is the farthest object of wisdom, beyond which it is unlawful to proceed.

I wish that those who now boast of being the pillars of the Christian Church, would at least imitate this poor woman, so as to be satisfied with the simple doctrine of Christ, rather than claim I know not what power of superintendence for putting forth their inventions. For from where was the religion of the Pope and Mohammed collected but from the wicked additions, by which they imagined that they brought the doctrine of the Gospel to a state of perfection? As if it would have been incomplete without such

fooleries. But whoever shall be well taught in the school of Christ will ask no other instructors, and indeed will not receive them.

26. *It is I who talk with thee.* When He acknowledges to the woman that He is the Messiah, He unquestionably presents Himself as her Teacher, in compliance with the expectation which she had formed; and, therefore, I think it probable, that He proceeded to give more full instruction, in order to satisfy her thirst. Such a proof of His grace He intended to give in the case of this poor woman, that He might testify to all that He never fails to discharge His office, when we desire to have Him for our Teacher. There is, therefore, no danger that He will disappoint one of those whom He finds ready to become His disciples. But they who refuse to submit to Him, as we see done by many haughty and irreligious men, or who hope to find elsewhere a wisdom more perfect — as the Mahometans and Papists do — deserve to be driven about by innumerable enchantments, and at length to be plunged in an abyss of errors. Again, by these words, “*I who talk with thee am the Messiah, the Son of God,*” He employs the name *Messiah* as a seal to ratify the doctrine of His Gospel; for we must remember that He was anointed by the Father, and that *the Spirit of God rested on Him*, that He might bring to us the message of salvation, as Isaiah declares (Isaiah 61:1).

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus said,

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.
Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations,
Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit,
Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;
And lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.

Teach them to observe all things that God has commanded, neither adding to nor taking away from God’s pure, simple, and holy religion.

Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19: "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it. For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book."