

“But 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23-24 ESV)

Different bible translators have translated John 4:23 as “...worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth” and “...worship the Father in spirit and in truth.” This means *one* way of looking at this is seeing it as *the* Holy Spirit, part of the trinity/Godhead and *another* way of looking at this is seeing it as your “spirit”, meaning “the immaterial, invisible part of man.” Both of these have different implications and yet both renderings have their value in teaching us about worship!

The most common translation read in our fellowship is the “NIV 2011” which translates it as “in the Spirit.” This “in the Spirit” translation of the NIV2011 is a significant change from the NIV84 which translated John 4:23 as “in spirit.” The NIV84 was the most used translation in our former fellowship and the early days of our fellowship. The NIV84 was also used by many other denominations ranging from Catholic to Protestant to Presbyterian and Evangelical and so on. It is worth noting that *nearly all* the other *accredited translations* render this phrase as “in spirit and truth” (note, “little” “s”) and only a very *few* render this as “the Spirit and in truth” – the NIV2011 being one of them.

In Spirit And Truth

In contrast, the ESV, KJV, NKJV, NASB (both 95 and 2020), RSV, ASV, LSB, NET, WEB, NLT, NLV, ...and *many* others render this verse as “in spirit and truth.” The AMP (Amplified bible) captures the general gist of “in spirit and in truth” with it’s parenthetical:

“But a time is coming and is already here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit [from the heart, the inner self] and in truth; for the Father seeks such people to be His worshipers.” (John 4:23 AMP) When we see discrepancies between translations like this, it can affect our faith in the Word itself. It is worth noting that in the scriptures, both the Greek and Hebrew languages, often were layered in their meanings. There are some cases where the sounds of certain words were used to give a scripture “double-meaning” – for example, in Jeremiah this occurs several times.

“And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see an almond branch.” (Jeremiah 1:11 ESV) The word for “almond” here in Hebrew sounds like the word for “watching.” There are several other footnotes like this in Jeremiah and in many other places in the scriptures. So, how to teach this then? Which translation is correct? First, let’s agree that either rendering of this “thought” – “in the Spirit” and “in spirit” is plausible academically. There are compelling reasons for scholars to render it either way. There are debates where one has proof and disproof of one and so over the other and vice versa. We could spend pages, books even, covering such discourse, rhetoric, and debate likely to no satisfactory end.

Why Not BOTH In Spirit AND In The Spirit?

Why not look at both and learn to teach both in context and with clarity? If one translation comes forth as stronger in the context and cross reference, then let’s lean toward that one. The scriptures are rich, layered, and wonderful. Some will use a sword to thrust, some to parry, some will even grab the blade (see “half-sword”) and unscrew the pommel as a missile weapon! What is the point? The Word of God is the Sword of the Spirit, and we need to learn to work every angle! *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”* (2 Timothy 2:15 ESV)

You can do a great study if someone is “hung-up” on this with regards to the signs of the Holy Spirit being a necessary part of those the Father seeks or of worship. The idea behind this is that “speaking in tongues” and other “miraculous signs” that accompany the manifestation of the Holy Spirit are indicative of what the Father wants to see in his worshippers. Therefore, if you don’t have “tongue-speakers” and “miraculous gifts” of the Holy Spirit you are not worshiping God properly. This kind of mindset is a cornerstone of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement(s).

SIDE Note, this is typically not what I bring up in a seeking God study. This is merely for those who have a pentecostal background, like myself, should it come up or need to be addressed. We cannot predict how people will respond to the scriptures and must be “prepared to answer” to the best of our ability.

Dig Into The Context (Who, What, Why) AND Teach The Scripture

"God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." (John 4:24)

Who is Jesus addressing? A Samaritan woman who is "religious" and yet immoral. Who are Samaritans? These are Jews who intermarried with the Assyrians and then made changes to the way the Law (of Moses) was practiced and how worship was conducted. What is Jesus addressing here in John 4:24? When Jesus confronts this woman on her immoral lifestyle, she gets religious and contests that the "Jews" insist that "we worship in Jerusalem." The Samaritan woman says: *"Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."* (John 4:20 NIV) The thing here is that it is not the "Jews" who make this "claim," but the Torah, the scriptures, that make this demand.

Next, Jesus brings up "worship" because this woman, in her defensiveness, focused on it to deflect and redirect the conversation. Jesus' response is telling: *"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews."* (John 4:21-22 NIV) Jesus boldly teaches this Samaritan Woman about worship, correcting her, directing her, and then teaching her that the Father seeks worshippers who will worship him in [the] Spirit and in truth. *"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks."* (John 4:23 NIV)

Does This Mean Speaking In Tongues / Miraculous Gifts?

Because the miraculous gifts had not been dispensed yet (cf Acts 2), neither this woman nor her fellow Samaritan villagers could ever hope to worship the Father properly if miraculous gifts and their manifestations were the signal for proper worship that the Father seeks. How cruel of Jesus, if this is indeed what this means, for him to call her to worship in "the Spirit" and in truth only for her and her villagers to be inadequate! None of these Samaritans received the Holy Spirit from Jesus, nor were there any "tongues" spoken nor miraculous signs done by them. Certainly, it's not only because the Holy Spirit had yet to come at

Pentecost, and so there are neither “tongues” nor miraculous gifts about...but if it is *not* about speaking in tongues and having miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit – then what could “in the Spirit” mean?

One of the most vital tools any of us have in understanding scripture is to cross-reference things. In essence, we ask “where else in the scriptures is this subject/thing/issue taught or spoken about?” There are no shortages of scriptures about “the Spirit!” Let’s look at a few of them and see if we can get a better grip on what is meant by “*in the Spirit and in truth.*” Think of this Samaritan woman’s life – she’s had five husbands and is currently in an immoral relationship, and yet she’s talking religiously about worship! Jesus is calling her to *repent* of her immoral life!

Keep In Step With The Spirit

The Spirit has a powerful part to play in our repentance – consider “*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*” (Galatians 5:25 NIV) Here we learn that keeping in step with the Spirit means repentance, righteous living, and living with God’s purpose – as called by the Spirit would imply. In this section of scripture, Paul contrasts living by the flesh with living by the Spirit.

Living by the flesh: “*The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” (Galatians 5:19-21 NIV)

...versus...

Living by the Spirit:

“*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*”(Galatians 5:22-25 NIV)

The Holy Spirit through the scriptural writings of Paul makes another comparison like this in

Romans 8: *"...in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ."* (Romans 8:4-9 NIV)

In The Spirit, Not In The Flesh

There are not-a-few other similar contrasts between living by the Spirit versus living by the flesh. If we are going to worship in "the Spirit" and in truth, the bible says we will be righteous, seeking to please God even in our *mindset*, not just our *lifestyle* and personal purity. If we are thinking that we are worshiping God while we are in sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, and any other of these sins of the flesh, we are deceived just like this Samaritan woman, who was living an immoral life. *"I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."* (John 4:17-18 NIV) The scriptures teach us *"If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination."* (Proverbs 28:9 ESV)

In Conclusion

You can teach this scripture easily either way. Both translations have their merits. Certainly, Jesus' call was for those who worship him to be in step with the Spirit, in the Spirit, with our minds set on what the Spirit desires, submitting to God's law, obeying and pleasing him instead of our flesh.