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Worship: An Analysis of the Various Greek Words

Part 1 of 3

Most of us assume that if we wish to know what a word means, a look in the dictionary will answer our question. Obviously, this is true as far as definitions are concerned. But as to what is communicated by that word, we need to look at more than the dictionary. Words do not stand alone. They are spoken by one person and addressed to another. The social relationship, the dynamic of power that exists between speaker and hearer in the wider society, makes an enormous difference as to exactly what is communicated.¹

This study is concerned about the meaning of the various Greek words employed by the writers of the New Testament books. Even though this study explores the different Greek words translated “worship,” nevertheless, we must always be conscious that definitions do not always, in and of themselves, convey the intent of the author’s original meaning. One such word today is the English word *worship*. Worship, among many Christians, is one of the most misunderstood words within God’s family. I was a part of a movement within the Stone/Campbell Movement that was and is still fractured into numerous splinter groups, which cannot agree on how worship is to be executed when Christians assemble on Sundays.²

This in-depth analysis seeks to explore the wide range of words translated as worship in the Greek New Testament. One objective of this examination is to investigate the most prevalent concept of worship as it is currently understood by many believers and to explore how the Holy Spirit utilizes various words to convey what worship is. Churches of Christ today are

¹Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 94.

²For an excellent and unbiased study of the Stone/Campbell Movement, see Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An Anecdotal History of Three Churches* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1981).

divided over the so-called “**pattern**” of worship. On the other hand, some Presbyterians are divided over what they call the “**regulative**” principle of worship.

Some Churches of Christ consider worship as consisting of five acts engaged in on Sunday morning between the hours of 9 am and 10 am (Some fellowship have one or two worship services). God, according to some believers, has ordained five rituals with specific details concerning how each act is to be carried out in the Sunday gathering for a so-called worship service. Any deviation from this so-called “**divine pattern**” warrants expulsion from the “loyal” church. On the other hand, many Christians do not believe that God has designed a worship service with any prescribed rituals to be performed in an established way. For many believers, worship is one’s way of life twenty-four hours a day—not just one hour on Sunday morning.³

ANALYSIS OF THE VARIOUS GREEK WORDS TRANSLATED AS WORSHIP

A study of the Greek nouns and verbs translated worship in the New Testament should assist us in our search to understand the biblical concept of worship. We, as Believers, must learn to reevaluate and reinterpret what has been handed down to us concerning the subject of worship. Nevertheless, the traditions of the church often make it difficult, if not almost impossible, for us to read the Bible correctly on this subject. In fact, a high percentage of our theology has been passed on to us by teachers who learned their views about worship many years earlier. A consideration of the Greek verbs and nouns in the teachings of Jesus and His chosen envoys will assist us in our understanding of worship.

Today, for many Christians, worship is generally identified as liturgy or ritual.⁴ In other words, worship is what we participate in on Sunday morning or Sunday evening. If we do not engage in a prearranged set of acts—singing, praying, preaching, communing, and giving—then we have not worshipped, according to numerous sincere and devoted Christians. Such things as love, service, outreach, and fellowship are seldom associated with spiritual worship.

Since the Holy Spirit employs a number of words to convey what worship is, then an analysis of each word should help to shed the extra baggage attached to the English word *worship*.⁵ In the New Testament, five verbs and three nouns radiate some light concerning worship. The verbs are: **σέβομαι** (*sebomai*), **σεβάζομαι** (*sebazomai*), **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*), **εὐσεβέω** (*eusebeō*), and **προσκυνέω** (*proskyneō*). The nouns are: **σέβασμα** (*sebasma*), **ἔθελοθησκεία** (*ethelothrēskeia*), and **θησκεία** (*thrēskeia*). The objective of this study is to identify the various Greek words in their Classical Greek background (from Homer [8th century

³See Al Maxey, “Hallowed Halls of Worship: Are Our Church Buildings Holy” [ONLINE]. Available from www.zianet.com/maxey/reflect2.htm. [Accessed 28 May 2009] located under Issue 398, May 13, 2009.

⁴For a detailed account of “patterns” within the Churches of Christ, see Dallas Burdette, “Oddities in Pattern Theology,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2008), 55-86.

⁵ See Given O. Blakely, “Worship, What Is It?,” *The Word of Truth* 30, no. 4 (April 1987): 5-7; idem., “Thoughts Concerning ‘Worship’,” *The Word of Truth* 32, no. 3 (April 1989): 11-12; idem., “Ordinances and Will Worship,” *The Word of Truth* 32, no. 1 (September 1988): 1-5.

BC] through Plato [4th century BC]), their Septuagint Greek usage, and their New Testament application.⁶

Classical Greek: Sebomai (σέβομαι)

In Classical Greek, the root **σέβ** (*seb*) meant originally “to step back from someone or something, to maintain a distance.”⁷ The ideas associated with words built from this root convey the following definitions: “trepidation raging from shame, through wonder, to something approaching fear.”⁸ Günther summarizes the various definitions in his article:

σέβομαι-σέβω G4936 (*sebomai-sebō*), to reverence, shrink back in fear, worship; **σεβάζομαι** G4933 (*sebazomai*), show religious reverence, worship; **σέβασμα** G4934 (*sebasma*), object of religious reverence, holy thing, sanctuary; **εὐσεβέω** G2355 (*eusebeō*), reverence, be devout; **εὐσεβία** G2354 (*eusebeia*), devoutness, piety, fear of God, religion; **εὐσεβής** G2356 (*eusebēs*), God-fearing, devout, pious; **θεοσεβία** G2537 (*theosebeia*), fear of God, reverence for God, devoutness; **θεοσεβής** G2538 (*theosebēs*), devout, God-fearing; **ἀσεβία** G813 (*asebeia*), impiety, godlessness; **ἀσεβής** G815 (*asebēs*), godless, impious; **σεμνός** G4948 (*semnos*), honourable, worthy of reverence, venerable, holy; **σεμνότης** G4949 (*semnotēs*), honourableness, dignity, holiness.⁹

Words from the stem seb are frequent in classical Greek and carry the idea of devoutness and religiousness. This devoutness does not carry the same connotation as in the Bible; that is, a committed obedience to a single, personally conceived God. With the Greeks, it was simply a holy anxiety, awe, or veneration called forth by the grandeur in things, men, or deities. In the Classical age, *sebomai* applied to objects as well as to men or to the gods. Further, it could also apply to one’s country, a landscape, dreams, parents, heroes, the dead, and so on.¹⁰ For the Greeks those worthy of reverence were not only members of one’s own household but also their gods and laws.

Since the word *sebomai* conveys ethical behavior, a comparison between the positive form *sebomai* and the negative form *asebomai* enhances our appreciation and perception of this word. The purpose of this correlation is to enhance the ethical ideas associated with *sebomai*. Whenever we consider the negative aspect of a word, the negative often brings out the positive more forcefully. For instance, if a man was a misfit in the community or was antisocial, he received the name **ἀσεβής** (*asebēs*, “godless, impious”). Paul, too, employed this word in his letter to the Romans. He writes: “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked (**ἀσεβῆ**, *asebē*), his faith is credited as righteousness” (Romans 4:5).

⁶For a study of these three periods, see William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993, 2003), 1-2.

⁷Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v. “**σέβομαι**” by W. Günther, 2:91.

⁸ *Ibid.* I transliterated the Greek characters in brackets [].

⁹ W. Günther, “**Σέβομαι**,” ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 2:91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:92.

The Greek word is from **ἀ** (*a*) plus **σέβομαι** (*sebomai*), which means, impious, ungodly, wicked, and sinful. Again, we observe Paul's use of this word in Romans 5:6: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly (**ἀσεβῶν**, *asebōn*)." Thus, the word **ἀσεβομαι**, (*asebomai*) has "an ethical and religious content."¹¹ In other words, an individual that was **ἀσεβής** (*asebēs*) was placed side by side with **ἄδικος** (*adikos*, "unjust"); *adikos* is employed to describe the individual that is doing contrary to what is right. *Adikos* was that point of one's behavior that was against the ordinances of the state, while, on the other hand, *asebēs* describes conduct against the gods.

The *Complete Biblical Library* summarizes the Classical Greek usage of **σέβομαι** (*sebomai*) with the following succinct definition:

In both the active and middle forms,¹² this verb denotes the act of "worshiping, revering," or "the sense of awe, fear," usually in a religious sense. Nonetheless, it is also applied to esteemed persons such as parents (Liddell-Scott). Essentially, though, the middle form means "to worship, fear" when directed to an individual. The religious connotations tend to dominate.¹³

Septuagint Greek: *Sebomai* (σέβομαι)

In the Septuagint (LXX),¹⁴ **σέβομαι** usually translates the Hebrew word **יָרֵא** (*yā·rē'*, "to fear, worship, and revere"). In the Old Testament, God is the one who is to be revered, or worshipped, instead of idols. Joshua¹⁵ (1406 BC) uses this word in his comments about the twelve stones removed from the river Jordan as reminders of what God had accomplished for the children of Israel; but this was not all. This memorial would remind the Israelites that they were to fear the Lord. Listen to Joshua's explanation: "He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear (σέβησθε, *sebēsthe*, from *sebomai* [σέβω]) the LORD your God" (Joshua 4:24). We should keep in mind that the word *sebomai* means, "to feel awe or fear before God, and to worship."

Also, Jonah¹⁶ (782 BC), in response to questions by sailors, uses the word **σέβομαι**: "I am a Hebrew and I worship (**σέβομαι** (*sebomai*) the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (Jonah 1:9). God also employs this word in His conversation with Satan concerning Job. Satan, too, utilizes this word in his conversation with God. Both God and Satan

¹¹Brown, *The New International Dictionary*, 92.

¹²In Greek there are three voices: active, middle, and passive. The active and passive voices are used as in English. The middle voice represents the subject as acting in some way that concerns itself, or as acting upon something that belongs to itself. For a detailed study of the various voices in Greek, see J. Gresham Machen, *New Testament Greek for Beginners* (Canada: The Macmillan Company, (1923), 1951), 57-58.

¹³Thoralf Gilbrant, *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary*, The Complete Biblical Library, vol., 16 (Springfield, Missouri: World Library Press, 1986). S. v. "4431, **σέβομαι** (*sebomai*) verb," author not listed.

¹⁴The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, begun some two hundred years before Christ. It is often abbreviated as LXX.

¹⁵The Book of Joshua covers a period of time from 1406-1385 BC, twenty-one years of history

¹⁶The prophet Jonah prophesied during the reigns of Jeroboam II (786-727 BC), Tiglath-Pileser (745-727 BC), and Sennacherib (705-681 BC). See 2 Kings 14:25 and Matthew 12:39-41.

make use of the word *sebomai* to describe Job's (ca. 2000 BC) attitude toward God: "Then the LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears (θεοσεβής, *theosebēs*¹⁷) God and shuns evil.' 'Does Job fear (σέβεται, *sebetai*¹⁸) God for nothing?' Satan replied" (Job 1:8-9).

If Job had "cursed" God, he would have been guilty of not "worshipping God" in truth. For us also to worship God correctly, then there must be this kind of fear that stands in awe, which is true worship. Without this kind of awe toward God, our worship (fear) would be rejected by God. Another example of how this word is employed is found in Isaiah's rebuke of the people of Israel. Through Isaiah (739 BC), God forcefully sets forth the truth that false "reverence" is despised:

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship (σέβονται, *sebontai*¹⁹) of me is made up only of rules taught by men." (Isaiah 29:13)

A true reverential fear (worship) of God includes the following:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

For us to fail to put into practice this "kind of fasting" would be for us to worship in vain.

New Testament Greek: σέβομαι (*sebomai*)

In the New Testament, this word **σέβομαι** (*sebomai*) is generally understood to mean worship, that is, the showing of respect and reverence to a deity. Jesus responds to the Pharisees and to the teachers of the Law concerning genuine worship:

Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ They worship (σέβονται, *sebontai*) me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." (Mark 7:6-7)

We cannot show disrespect to others and, at the same time, worship God in truth. Reverence for God involves respect for others. Thus, John writes:

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him^d to make him stumble. ¹¹ But whoever

¹⁷Adjective: masculine, singular, nominative—"fearing God, religious."

¹⁸Verb: third person, singular, present, middle, indicative; from *sebomai*: "to feel awe or fear before God, to worship."

¹⁹Verb: third person, singular, present, middle, indicative.

^dOr *it*

hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him. (1 John 2:9-11)

Sebomai occurs ten times in the New Testament.²⁰ It occurs once in the present passage (Mark 7:6-7), which is a citation from Isaiah 29:13; Jesus also employs this word in His confrontation with the religious leaders (Matthew 15:9), which is a parallel passage to Mark 7:6-7. *Sebomai* also occurs eight times in the Book of Acts. Paul also utilizes this word in his Roman letter to characterize pagans in their relationship to other human beings: “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped (ἔσεβάσθησαν, *esebathēsan*²¹) and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen” (Romans 1:25). In other words, the pagans demonstrated respect and reverence for humans rather than to the Creator.

As stated above, Jesus draws attention to the callousness of many in Israel. He calls attention to their display of outward reverence for God, but, on the other hand, they failed to love one another as God commands. Thus, as a result of their actions toward their parents, their worship was in vain because their hearts were far from God. They did not care two-cents about their parents. They sought to by-pass their responsibilities toward their parents through a vow to God. Jesus says: “They worship (σέβονται, *sebontai*) me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Matthew 15:9).

The Jewish leaders actually created legal (illegal in God’s sight) traditions to side-step a positive statement of God. Thus, their worship was in vain. We cannot reverence, or worship, God and, at the same time, **not** respect others. **Our service, our outreach, our fellowship, and our activities toward other humans flow out of our worship for God.** This devotion, or worship, involves love for God and love for men and women. This kind of love is best illustrated with the parable of judgment against the religious leaders in Matthew 25:31-46. In this parable, Jesus castigates the religious leaders for their persecution of His people. This parable deals with hunger, nakedness, visitation, and so on. When we render service to others, that service is worship, or reverence, toward God.

Sebomai is also employed by Luke in narrating the story of Lydia and her household: “One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper (σεβομένη, *sebomenē*²²) of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message” (Acts 16:14). **Because of her worship, she met with others who also honored God. She did not go to worship, but rather, she praised God because of her reverence, or respect, for God. In order for us to see at a glance all of the occurrences of this word *sebomai* in the New Testament, the following citations are cited in full for our observation:**

²⁰See Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7; Acts 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7, 13; 19:27.

²¹Verb: third person, plural, passive, indicative, “to fear,” specifically “to have referential awe,” from *sebavzomai*, *sebazomai*.

²²Verb: present, middle, participle, feminine, singular, nominative; from **σέβομαι** (*sebomai*, “worship; show reverence or respect for”).

They worship **σέβονται**, (*sebontai*)²³ me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men (Matthew 15:9).

When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout (**σεβομένων**, *sebomenōn*)²⁴ converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. (Acts 13:43)

But the Jews incited the God-fearing (**σεβομένας**, *sebomenas*)²⁵ women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. (Acts 13:50)

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper (**σεβομένη**, *sebomenē*)²⁶ of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. (Acts 16:14)

Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing (**σεβομένων**, *sebomenōn*)²⁷ Greeks and not a few prominent women. (Acts 17:4)

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing (**σεβομένους**, *sebomenois*)²⁸ Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. (Acts 17:17)

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper (**σεβομένου**, *sebomenou*)²⁹ of God. (Acts 18:7)

“This man,” they charged, “is persuading the people to worship (**σέβεισθαι**, *sebesthai*)³⁰ God in ways contrary to the law.” (Acts 18:13)

There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped (**σέβεται**, *sebetai*)³¹ throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty. (Acts 19:27)

Not one of the above Scriptures relate to a “worship service.” One was a worshiper of God whether in a synagogue or in a home or in a marketplace. This worship had to do with choice—serving God or others. It is significant that this word *sebomai* is never employed in reference to five acts carried out on Sunday morning.

²³Verb: third person, singular, present, middle, indicative.

²⁴Verb: present, middle, participle, masculine, plural, genitive.

²⁵Verb: present, middle, participle, feminine, plural, accusative.

²⁶Verb: present, middle, participle, feminine, singular, nominative.

²⁷Verb: present, middle, participle, masculine, plural, genitive.

²⁸Verb: present, middle, participle, masculine, plural, dative.

²⁹Verb: present, middle, participle, masculine, plural, genitive.

³⁰Verb: present, middle, infinitive.

³¹Verb: third person, singular, present, middle, indicative.

New Testament Greek: σεβάζομαι (*sebazomai*)

Another word of the **σεβ** (*seb*) family is **σεβάζομαι** (*sebazomai*, “to honor religiously, to worship, to revere”). *Sebazomai* is related to **σέβομαι** (*sebomai*, “to revere”). Paul, to the Christians at Rome, employs this word: “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped (**ἔσεβάσθησαν**, *esebathēsan*³²) and served (**ἐλάτρευσαν**, *elatreusan*³³) created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen” (Romans 1:25).

This citation is the only occurrence of this particular word in the New Testament. Paul is describing the rebellious elevation of the creature to the place of reverence that belongs only to the Creator. This worship is not simply pious reverence but an act or acts of worship. In other words, the honor issues in devotion (**σεβάζομαι** (*sebazomai*) and service (**λατρεύω**, *latreuō*, “I serve, especially God, perhaps simply I worship.”) to the creature rather than the Creator. Lawrence O. Richards (b. 1931), a contemporary biblical scholar, points out: “*sebomai* and other words in its group mean ‘to show reverence for.’”³⁴

New Testament Greek: *Sebasma* (σέβασμα)

Sebasma (σέβασμα) is a noun; this word is also of the **σεβ** (*seb*) family. In Greek the result of an action is indicated by the ending **μα** (*ma*). *Sebasma* is the abiding result of *sebomai* (*sebomai*, worship, devoutness, reverence). *Sebasma* refers to the object of worship or place of worship. In other words, it refers to idols and shrines that are granted the religious honor indicated in the verb **σεβάζομαι** (*sebazomai*). Paul uses this term **σεβάσματα** (*sebasmata*) to allude to the many idols crowding the marketplace of Athens:

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship (*sebasmata*³⁵), I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship (**εὐσεβεῖτε**, *eusebeite*³⁶) as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. (Acts 17:23)

Paul also employs this term to describe the “son of lawlessness” (2 Thessalonians 2:3) in his letter to the Thessalonians: “He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped (**σέβασμα**, *sebasma*), so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (2:4). **σεβάζομαι** (*sebazomai*, “to honor religiously, to worship, to revere”) is not utilized by the Holy Spirit to denote a “worship service” for the believer, but rather, this word signals our attitude toward Yahweh, that is to say, serving God or other gods.

³²Verb: third person, plural, aorist, passive, indicative; from **σεβάζομαι** (*sebazomai*).

³³Verb: third person, plural, aorist, active, indicative; from **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*).

³⁴Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1985), 640.

³⁵Noun: neuter, plural, accusative; from (**σέβασμα**, *sebasma*).

³⁶Verb: second person, plural, active, indicative; from **εὐσεβέω**, *eusebeō*, “to show piety towards.”

Classical Greek: Εὐσεβέω, (*eusebeō*)

Εὐσεβέω (*eusebeō*), “to act piously toward one who as the right to it”) is also related to the **σεβ** (*seb*) family. **Εὐσεβέω** is from *eu* plus **σέβομαι** (*sebomai*, “show awe, reverence”), especially to show reverence in a religious sense. In the classical and later Hellenistic writers, we could interpret this word in a broad sense to show “respect” for all the various orders of life, which includes domestic, national, and also international life. This word expressed the very heart of the Greek religion. It meant to “show piety” with the social orders that were controlled by the gods. Geoffrey Forrester explains the word this way: “In the Hell.—Rom. Period **εὐσεβεία**, [*eusebeia*] mostly stands for the worship of the gods (including inner involvement), but the broader sense of respect for the orders of life still remains.”³⁷

Septuagint Greek: Εὐσεβέω (*eusebeō*)

This word does not occur in the Septuagint until very late and only in apocryphal material.

New Testament Greek: Εὐσεβέω (*eusebeō*)

The verb form occurs only twice in the New Testament, each time in association with non-Jewish circumstances. In Acts 17:23, Paul says that the Athenians “worshiped” and unknown god. But the divine recipient of this reverence was proclaimed by Paul to be the Creator-God who established the very order to which the Athenians gave so much reverence. Even though this verse is cited above, this Scripture is given again to assist us in seeing the context of **εὐσεβέω**, *eusebeō*):

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship (**σεβάσματα**, *sebasmata*³⁸), I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship (**εὐσεβεῖτε**, *eusebeite*³⁹) as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. (Acts 17:23)

The second occurrence is in Paul’s first letter to Timothy:

But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion (**εὐσεβεῖν**, *eusebein*⁴⁰) into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. (1 Timothy 5:4)

If we are to put our religion, or worship, into practice, then we must demonstrate our worship by caring for our own family. This is true worship. Again, it is significant that the

³⁷Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), s.v. “**εὐσεβής**” [*eusebēs*], **εὐσεβεία** [*eusebeia*], **εὐσεβέω**, [*eusebeō*], 7: 177.

³⁸Noun: neuter, plural, accusative; from **σέβασμα**, *sebasma*.

³⁹Verb: second person, plural, active, indicative; from **εὐσεβέω**, *eusebeō*, “to show piety towards.”

⁴⁰Verb: present, active, infinitive; from **εὐσεβέω**, *eusebeō*, “to show piety towards.”

Greek word, εὐσεβέω (*eusebeō*) is not employed to describe a public worship service for the Christian community. This word designates our attitude of awe or reverence toward God and our concern or piety for those in need.

Classical Greek: θρησκεία (*thrēskeia*)

During the time of Herodotus (ca. Fifth Century BC), θρησκεία (*thrēskeia*, “religion, worship”) is a noun denoting “religious worship” or “religion.”⁴¹ At a later date, papyri and nonliterary documents indicate that θρησκεία can mean either the “ritual” of religious service or the “worship” or “reverence” of the gods. Moulton-Milligan make the following succinct observation:

As against the common idea that θρησκεία [*thrēskeia*] means only ritual, Hort (on Jas 1.28) has shown that the underlying idea is simply “reverence of the gods or worship of the gods, two sides of the same feeling”—a feeling which, however, frequently finds expression in *thrēskeia* or ritual acts.⁴²

Septuagint Greek: θρησκεία (*thrēskeia*)

The noun as well as the verb occurs only in the apocryphal material of the Septuagint: “For the worshipping (θρησκεία (*thrēskeia*), of idols not to be named is the beginning, the cause, and the end, of all evil” (Wisdom of Solomon 15:27).⁴³ Again, in the apocryphal writings: “For, bear in mind, that if there be any power which watches over this religion (θρησκεία (*thrēskeia*) of yours, it will pardon you for all transgressions of the law which you commit through compulsion” (4 Maccabees 5:13).⁴⁴ It appears that both ideas of “ritual” and “religion” intersect within these two citations.

New Testament Greek: θρησκεία (*thrēskeia*)

θρησκεία occurs only four times in the New Testament. The first occurrence is in the Book of Acts: “They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion (θρησκεία, (*thrēskeia*), I lived as a Pharisee” (Acts 16:25). This admission prevented Paul from being misunderstood as some criminal revolutionary. Paul informs King Agrippa that Christianity is the fulfillment of the Old Testament religion rather than being its competitor. The second and third occurrences are in James:

⁴¹Thoralf Gilbrant, ed., The Complete Biblical Library, *The new Testament Greek-English Dictionary* (Springfield, Missouri, 1990), s.v. “2332, θρησκεία, *thrēskeia*,” 13: 121.

⁴²James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 293.

⁴³See Samuel Bagster & Sons (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1851); reprint, Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 68.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 232.

If anyone considers himself religious (**θησκός**, *thrēskos*⁴⁵) and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion (**θησκειά**, *thrēskeia*⁴⁶) is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:26-27)

With James, religion, or worship, is more than ceremony; it is godly behavior before God. A contemporary biblical scholar points out: “... when as Reformed theologians we ask what worship is. Worship must above all serve the glory of God.”⁴⁷ The fourth occurrence of this word is found in Paul’s reference to the worship of angels in his letter to the Colossians:

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship (**θησκειά**, *thrēskeia*) of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. (Colossians 2:18)

Paul and James both utilize the same word (**θησκειά**, *thrēskeia*) to describe pure religion and the worship of angels. James uses this word to describe one’s relationship to orphans, widows, and the world that is in antagonism against God. Again, it is significant that of the four occurrences of this word in the New Testament, not one time is it employed for a public worship service with five rituals to be performed in a prescribed manner.

New Testament Greek: ἑθελοθησκειά, (*ethelothrēskeia*)

ἑθελοθησκειά, (*ethelothrēskeia*, “self-made religion or voluntary worship”) is not present in Classical Greek or in the Septuagint (LXX). This word is used only once in the New Testament. Paul uses this word in Colossians: “Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship (**ἑθελοθησκειά**, *ethelothrēskeia*⁴⁸), their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (Colossians 2:23). This word is a compound of **ἑθέλω** (*ethelō*, “to will”) and **θησκειά** (*thrēskeia*, “worship”).

ἑθελοθησκειά is not utilized in the Scriptures to refer to what Christians do in their assemblies on Sunday morning as such. In other words, the above sin could be committed whether Christians are assembled for a corporate gathering or not assembled for a public worship service. In this context, Paul is dealing with one’s devotion to angels rather than to God. This passage has nothing to do with five acts performed on Sunday morning.

⁴⁵Adjective: Masculine, singular, nominative.

⁴⁶Noun: Feminine, singular, nominative.

⁴⁷Hughes Oliphant Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition: Worship* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984),

2.

⁴⁸Noun: feminine, singular, dative—“self-willed (arbitrary and unwarranted) piety.”

Classical Greek: λατρεύω (*latreuō*)

In non-biblical Greek, the verb **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*, “serve”) is related to the noun *latron* (“reward, wages”); thus, the first meaning of **λατρεύειν** (*latreuein*, “to work or serve for reward, then to render services, to serve”). This word is used of bodily services and of workers on the land; also, in some cases, it is used of the service of the gods.⁴⁹ Non-biblical Greek employed *latreuō* with secular as well as with worship of the gods. Generally this period of Classical Greek preferred another word for cultic worship.

Septuagint Greek: λατρεύω (*latreuō*)

Λατρεύω (*latreuō*) in almost every case in the Septuagint, translates the Hebrew verb **לָבַדַּ** (*‘ā-bāḏ*, serve). This word occurs around ninety times in the Septuagint (LXX). Of the ninety occurrences of this word in the LXX, seventy of these occurrences are found in the following books: Exodus (17 times), Deuteronomy (25 times), Joshua (19 times), and Judges (9 times). The LXX chiefly employs **λατρεύω** [*latreuō*] when the Hebrew reads **לָבַדַּ** for the religious or cultic service. This understanding is significant for an understanding of its use in the New Testament. This Hebrew word **לָבַדַּ**, is frequently rendered **δουλεύειν** (*douleuein*, “to serve”) in the LXX. Perhaps, Strathmann expresses the distinction between **λατρεύειν** (*latreuein*, “to serve”) and **δουλεύειν** (*douleuein*, “to serve”) best:

It is to be noted that the books which frequently have **λατρεύειν** [*latreuein*, to serve] use it mostly when **לָבַדַּ** [*‘ā-bāḏ*, “serve”] has a religious reference.... *latreuein* is always used in these writings in the religious sense. The translators of these book (sic) thus attempted to show even by their choice of words that the relation of service in religion is something apart from other relations of service. In other writings, where the term *latreuein* hardly occurs at all, there is no such concern. Here **δουλεύειν** [*douleuein*] is used almost uniformly for **לָבַדַּ** no matter whether the relation is religious or secular. Nevertheless, **λατρεύειν** [*latreuein*] is distinctively religious not only in the books where it is chiefly found but wherever it appears in the LXX.⁵⁰

Latreuein is not to be taken only in a purely spiritual or ethical sense. In the LXX, it is not adequate to say that *latreuein* only has religious implication, that is to say, ethical overtones. In other words, one must surmise that it also has sacral significance. Strathmann says, “**λατρεύειν** (*latreuein*) means more precisely to serve or worship cultically, especially by sacrifice.”⁵¹ For example, when God gave Moses the assignment of leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, Moses says, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I

⁴⁹Gerhard Kittle, ed., and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, translator and ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967, reprint 1968), s.v. “**λατρεύω, λατρεία**” by Strathmann, 58-59 (page references are to reprint edition).

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 60.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship (**λατρεύσετε**, *latreusetē*⁵²) God on this mountain” (Exodus 3:12).

Also, God repeatedly told the ruler of Egypt to “Let my son go, so he may worship (**λατρεύση**, *latreusē*⁵³) me” (Exodus 4:23). The conflict between God and Pharaoh existed in whether Israel would be allowed to perform cultic/sacral worship and offerings. Thus, **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*) parallels the idea of offering sacrifice to God. This concept also appears to be the thinking of Paul in his letter to Christians in Rome: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship (*latreivan, latreian*⁵⁴)” [Romans 12:1].

The Holy Spirit chose *latreuein* to describe cultic worship, not **δουλεύειν**. **Δουλεύειν** (*douleuein*, “to serve”) is not considered a term for cultic worship. Whenever the translators of the LXX desired to isolate a word for the purpose of cultic worship, the authors employed *latreuein*. Again, Strathmann says that the word *latreuein* “never refers to human relations, let alone to secular services.”⁵⁵ Comparison of Classical Greek usage and Septuagint (LXX) usage of **λατρεύειν** (*latreuein*) sheds light on its possible meaning in the New Testament. In non-biblical Greek, the words **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*) and **λατρεία** (*latreia*) were employed in secular as well as cultic settings. But in the LXX, these words were more or less restricted to cultic worship in general.

To express a cultic setting, the non-biblical Greek prefers **θεραπεύειν** (*therapeuein*, “to heal”) and **θεραπεία** (*therapeia*, serving, serve, care). But the LXX does not adopt this phenomenon. Yet, the LXX does use *therapeia* at least once in a religious sense in the Book of Isaiah:

No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants (**θεραπεύουσιν**, *therapeuousin*⁵⁶) of the LORD, and this is their vindication from me,” declares the LORD. (Isaiah 54:17)

As we pursue a study of these words, we detect that these words are employed in the LXX in the sense of healing or cherishing.

⁵²From **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*); verb: second person, plural, future active indicative, singular—“to work for hire, to serve; to be bound or enslaved to; to serve gods.”

⁵³From **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*); verb: third person, singular, aorist, active, subjunctive.

⁵³Gerhard Kittle, ed., and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, translator and ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967, reprint 1968), s.v. “*latreuvw, latreiva*,” by Strathmann, 58-59 (page references are to reprint edition).

⁵³*Ibid.*, 60.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵³From **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*); verb: second person, plural, future active indicative, singular—“to work for hire, to serve; to be bound or enslaved to; to serve gods.”

⁵³From **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*); verb: third person, singular, aorist, active, subjunctive.

⁵⁴From **λατρεία** (*latreia*); noun: feminine, singular, accusative—“service.”

⁵⁵Strathmann, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 62.

⁵⁶From **θεραπεύω** (*therapeuō*); Verb: third person, plural, present, active, indicative, singular (“to be an attendant, to serve”).

New Testament Greek: λατρεύω (*latreuō*)

Is there any basis for translators translating λογικὴν λατρείαν (*logikēn latreian*) as “**spiritual act of worship**” in Romans 12:1? The New International Version (NIV) translates this phrase as “spiritual act of worship.” In responding to this question, the words of Milton S. Terry (1840-1914), American Methodist minister and educator, are helpful in answering this question. He writes:

It is the *usus loquendi* [common use of words] of their inspired authors which forms the subject of the grammatical principles recognized and followed by the expositor.... Now we attain to a knowledge of the peculiar *usus loquendi* in the way of historical investigation.⁵⁷ (Emphasis mine—bold)

Examples of the “common use of words” are found in the above study of non-biblical Greek usage and LXX usage, which sheds light upon the troublesome phrase (“spiritual act of worship”), at least troublesome to some. Many Christians object to the NIV’s translation of the Greek phrase. The above comments by Terry should be kept in mind as we pursue an investigation of the verb λατρεύω. For example, the verb λατρεύω (*latreuō*) is employed in the Old Testament in a setting of Temple worship. There are many Scriptures in the New Testament that are influenced by this cultic setting of the Old Testament. For instance, Luke writes:

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.^d She never left the temple but worshiped (λατρεύουσα, *latreuousin*⁵⁸) night and day, fasting and praying. (Luke 2:36-37)

Again, in this same vein, Luke writes to Theophilus:

‘But I will punish the nation they serve (δουλεύουσιν, *douleuousin*⁵⁹) as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship (λατρεύουσιν, *latreuousin*) me in this place.’ (Acts 7:7)

But God turned away and gave them over to the worship (λατρεύειν, *latreuein*⁶⁰) of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? (Acts 7:42)

⁵⁷Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, nd), 294.

^dOr *widow for eighty-four years*

⁵⁸From λατρεύω (*latreuō*); verb: present, active, participle, feminine, singular, nominative (to serve).

⁵⁹From δουλεύω (*douleuō*); verb: third person, plural, active, indicative, singular (to be a slave, to serve).

⁶⁰From λατρεύω (*latreuō*); verb: present, active, infinitive (to serve).

Once more, we cannot help but observe that the ministry denoted by **λατρεύειν** (*latreuein*) is always offered to God or to a heathen god. Also, in the New Testament, we are cognizant that the verb form is employed in the sense of adoration or service. For instance, Jesus uses *latreuein* in His conversation with Satan: Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship (**προσκυνήσεις**, *proskynēseis*⁶¹) the Lord your God, and serve (**λατρεύσεις**, *latreuseis*⁶²) him only’” [Matthew 4:10]. This word (*latreuein*) is also used of martyrs in the Book of Revelation: “Therefore, ‘they are before the throne of God and serve (**λατρεύουσιν**, *latreuousin*) him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them’” [Revelation 7:15].

Again, we should compare Revelation 22:3 with the above citations: “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve (**λατρεύουσιν**, *latreuousin*) him.” As noted above, Luke also uses this same word in describing the unwearied prayer of Anna in the Temple (Luke 2:36-37).

Paul, too, employs this word in the sense of hope or prayer in his defense before king Agrippa: “This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve (**λατρεῖον**, *latreuon*⁶³) God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me” [Acts 26:7]. Even though the New Testament incorporates the religious use of *latreuein* from the LXX (Septuagint), the New Testament carries a more developed and extended meaning than the LXX, that is to say, one’s walk or devotion. For example, Paul, in his defense, told governor Felix: “However, I admit that I worship (**λατρεύω**, *latreuō*) the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets” [Acts 24:15]. Paul also utilizes this same word in the beginning of his letter to the Christians at Rome:

God, whom I serve (**λατρεύω** (*latreuō*) with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you. (Romans 1:9-10)

In the Philippian letter, Paul also uses this word: “For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship (**λατρεύοντες**, *latreuontes*) by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus” [Philippians 3:3]. In the above citations, we quickly discover that *latreuō* is used almost exclusively for “serving” God, which is one’s worship or adoration. The Philippian passage is quite revealing as to Paul’s concept of worship. **Paul in writing this Epistle dealt with certain individuals who demanded that Christians be circumcised and go back to the Jewish Temple with their ceremonials and ritual worship.** But Paul tells the Philippian believers that one cannot worship God by doing those things now. **This short Epistle also reveals that certain ones relied upon their own righteousness through Law keeping,** but Paul countered this belief with:

⁶¹From **προσκυνέω** (*proskyneō*); verb: second person, singular, future, active, indicative (to do reverence to).

⁶²From **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*); verb: second person, singular, feminine, active, indicative (to serve).

⁶³From **λατρεύω** (*latreuō*); verb: present, active, participle, neuter, singular, nominative (to serve).

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, **not** having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—**the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.** (Philippians 3:8-9)

In the Old Testament, worship for the Jews centered on the Temple. Why? Their worship foreshadowed the coming of the Messianic Age. The Jews had a place to worship (Jerusalem), but Christians do not have a specific geographical location. Also, the Jews had an exact pattern for the construction of the Tabernacle and the Temple. God gave to Moses a blueprint for building the Tabernacle and the furniture; but, for the Christian, God has **not** given a pattern for a so-called worship service. The author of the Book of Hebrews calls attention to the pattern for the Tabernacle:

They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern (**τύπον**, *typon*⁶⁴) shown you on the mountain.” (Hebrews 8:5)

In the Christian dispensation, we, as believers, are the temple of God. For every disciple, Jesus is the pattern. In the Jewish Temple, they had a Court of the Gentiles, a Court of the Women, a Court of Israel, a Court of the Priests, and the Holy of Holies (Hebrews 9:3). The Holy of Holies was too sacred even for the regular priests to enter. **Since the sanctuary was a copy and shadow of reality, it had to be exact, no exceptions. But today, there are no structures with a pattern—such as a worship service—but for us, the only pattern is Jesus.**

In contrast to the ritual worship of the Old Testament, Paul writes: “For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship ((**λατρεύοντες**, *latreuontes*)) by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” [Philippians 3:3]. In spite of Paul’s words, there is still a tendency to exalt buildings and an inclination to go back to mechanical forms. In the Messianic Age, the true worshiper is not one who goes devotedly to early morning celebration and then claims the rest of the day or week to live anyway he or she pleases. **God’s claim on the believer is on every part of one’s life—twenty-fours a day, not just Sunday morning.**

This passage in Philippians, so it seems, may refer to the eschatological significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Philippians 3:3 appears to be an allusion to John 4:24 where Jesus speaks of one worshiping “in Spirit and in truth.” **The coming of Christ has ushered in the new age of salvation; the Holy Spirit is the sign of this redemption in Jesus.** Christians have the Spirit and are able to offer worship that is pleasing to God. It is in this vein that Paul says:

Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. ⁹ You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but **by the Spirit**, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. (Romans 8:8-9)

⁶⁴From **τύπος** (*typos*); noun: masculine, singular, accusative.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. (12:1)

As we pay particular attention to John 4:24 and Philippians 3:3, we cannot help but monitor the similarities between the two passages. If John 4:24 does not refer to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the coming of Jesus, then the phrase “in spirit and in truth” may be contrasting ritualism versus the outpouring of one’s soul in confession to God. But Jesus’ conversation with the woman of Samaria appears to be more than just a reference to the inward versus liturgical worship. It is true that God commanded ritualism in the Old Testament, but even their ritual worship still had to come from the heart. Thus the phrase “in spirit and in truth” must mean something different. **All worship, whether Old Testament or New Testament, must be genuine.** Nevertheless, the new age of worship would no longer employ a mechanical form of worship, but rather a worship that flows out of a grateful heart for salvation made available through Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. **Even though our specific acts of devotion may be mechanical in form, nevertheless, this is not the same as saying that God has ordained a mechanical form of worship with five ritualistic acts.**

It appears to me that worship “in spirit and in truth” is speaking of **Jesus** and the **Holy Spirit**. In other words, all worship is through Jesus and within the sphere of the Spirit. Paul seems to capture this concept, as stated above, when he writes:

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the **Spirit of God** lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. ¹⁰ But if **Christ is in you**, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. ¹¹ And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to you. (Romans 8:9-11)

As stated above, the Jews had to have both ritual and correct inward disposition. For example, even though the Israelites expressed their worship in ceremonial forms through sacrifices and festivals, nevertheless, their worship still required upright behavior, a submissive spirit, and acknowledgement of sin in their lives. The rituals themselves were of no use if the person did not worship God with his or her heart and life. For instance, David poses the following questions: “LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?” (Psalms 15:1). In reaction to these questions, David goes right to the heart of the matter:

He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart ³ and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman, ⁴ who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the LORD, who keeps his oath even when it hurts, ⁵ who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. (15:2-5)

For the psalmist David, the heart is crucial. God, through Isaiah (739 BC), also calls attention to the role that the heart plays in our relationship to Him: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men” (Isaiah 29:13). An examination of the

Book of Isaiah reveals that God is very much concerned about ethical behavior. The Israelites could not separate their ethical conduct from their required rituals. Again, Micah (735 BC), too, calls for response to certain questions concerning right performance and ritual:

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ⁸He has showed you, **O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.** (Micah 6:6-8)

Gary Workman, writer and missionary within the Churches of Christ, correctly says that “in spirit and truth” is not a new concept:

To look at worship under the former dispensation as just a set of perfunctory rituals does those people a great injustice. Jesus’ statement about “in spirit and truth” is not a new concept at all. It was always God’s expectation that man should “serve him in sincerity and truth.” ⁶⁵

In other words, all worship, in any age, whether with or without ritual, must be in sincerity and truth to be acceptable to God. **We cannot divorce the heart from our actions.** But is this the concept that Jesus is presenting to the woman of Samaria? Has there ever been a time in which one could worship God acceptably without a right attitude? There is definitely a contrast between worship in the Old Testament and worship in the Messianic Age. In the “now” age, true worship will **not** consist in rituals, but rather in service that is by the Holy Spirit “in and through Jesus.”

What does “truth” (*ἀληθεία, alētheia*) mean in John 4:24. Does this “truth” refer to Jesus? Jesus in speaking to His disciples says: “I am the way and the truth and the life (*ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωή, egō eimi hē hodos kai hē alētheia kai hē zōē* ⁶⁶). No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Christ’s sacrifice made God’s grace operative once and for all, and He is the high priest of God’s people. The Christian community is a “spiritual house” and a “holy priesthood” to “offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5; see also verse 9). For Peter, the offering up of spiritual sacrifices is worship. The “spiritual sacrifices” (*πνευματικὰς θυσίας, pneumatikas thysias*) is equivalent to Paul’s spiritual worship in Romans 12:1: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship (*λογικὴν λατρείαν, logikēn latreian*).

What is our spiritual sacrifice? For Paul and Peter, it is the presenting of our lives to God as living (*ζῶντες, zōntes*) sacrifices (*θυσίας, thysias*). As we read the words of Peter and Paul, it is significant that neither apostle identifies worship as five acts, or rituals, performed in a prescribed manner. How do we present our bodies as “living sacrifices,” which is our spiritual

⁶⁵Gary Workman, “What Is Worship?”, *The Spiritual Sword* 24, no. 2 (January 1993): 7.

⁶⁶Matthew Black et al., *The Greek New Testament* (Federal Republic of Germany: United Bible Societies, 1997), Jn 14:6.

act of worship? James, the brother of Jesus, says: “Religion (**θρησκεία**, *thrēskeia*) that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” [James 1:27]. As we reflect upon the nature of true sacrifice, we conclude that worship consists of praise offered to God by confessing His name and doing good and sharing our possessions with others. It is in this same vein that the author of the Book of Hebrews writes:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice (**θυσίαν**, *thysian*) of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:15-16)

Paul, James, and the author of the Book of Hebrews address themselves to true worship, that is, the presenting of our bodies as living sacrifices, not five acts performed on Sunday morning. The worship that God is seeking is to look after orphans and widows, keeping oneself from the pollutions of the world, and confessing the name of Jesus. God addresses the true concept of worship through Isaiah. Listen to the Holy Spirit as He moves Isaiah to write the following penetrating and searching words:

For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ³‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:2-7)

How does God define biblical fasting? Just as the offering up of animal sacrifices occurred in the Tabernacle or Temple, **so we offer up our bodies as living sacrifices**. Today, we, as Christians, need no cultic building! Why? Well, in the present day, God’s New Community constitutes His temple. Listen to Paul as he calls attention to this new concept:

Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple (**ναός**, *naos*⁶⁷) and that God’s Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God’s temple (**ναόν**, *naon*⁶⁸), God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and **you** (**ἑστέ**, *este*, second person plural) **are that temple**. (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

Paul continues this idea about the body being the temple of God in the Chapter 6:

⁶⁷From **ναός**, *naos*; noun: masculine, singular, nominative—“a temple.”

⁶⁸**ναόν**, *naon*; noun: masculine, singular, accusative.

Do you not know that your body (σῶμα, *sōma* is a temple (ναός, *naos*) of the Holy Spirit (ἁγίου πνεύματος, *hagίου pneumatos*), who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body (ἐν τῷ σώματι ὑμῶν, *en tō sōmati hymōn*). [6:19-20]

Since the Holy Spirit dwells in us, then our ethical conduct must be kept clean. Our worship must proceed from within our shrine as priests of God.⁶⁹ All Christians are urged to right behavior. In other words, “spiritual worship” means being involved at the deepest level of our natures. **It is easy to concentrate on our customary place of worship, singing, teaching, giving, breaking bread, praying, and so on, but none of these activities is ever designated with a so-called worship service in the New Testament writings.** We can say that singing, teaching, giving, breaking bread, and prayers are expressions of our worship. We must reflect upon a worship that proceeds from our inmost beings “in and through” Jesus. As we reflect upon God’s deeds in creation, in history, and in redemption, then we quickly see causes for unceasing worship and praise. There are many citations from Scriptures that we could reflect upon to cause us to stand in awe and wonder (see Psalms 33:1-19; 99:1-15; Ephesians 3:14-21; Jude 24-25).

THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION’S TRANSLATION OF “SPIRITUAL ACT OF WORSHIP”

Even with the above data about what worship consists of, some still object to the NIV’s translation of λογικὴν λατρείαν (*logikēn latreian*) as “spiritual act of worship.”⁷⁰ The question is: Is “spiritual worship” a proper translation of Paul’s Greek as rendered in the NIV (Romans 12:1)? The KJV translates these two Greek words as “**reasonable service.**” Why do some translate these two Greek words as “**spiritual act of worship**”? Is the NIV correct in this rendering? In order for us to arrive at a correct translation, we must investigate the historical background to Paul’s terminology. But before proceeding, it is necessary to address again the traditional concept of worship in order to set the stage for a proper understanding of Paul’s admonition in Romans 12:1.

⁶⁹For a more detailed study of this philosophy, see Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, complete in one volume (New York: Scribner’s and Sons, nd), 11f., 108, 115f., 121-8, 144f., 152f., 241, 309, 338.

⁷⁰See Brad T. Bromling, “True Worship of the Church,” *The Spiritual Sword* 24, no. 3 (April 1993): 14-16. Following the original publication of this paper (December 15, 1992), Bromling shared with me that he had changed his original views as published in *The Spiritual Sword* following my analysis of his article. It is still necessary to review this article since many Christians still hold to this same outlook about worship. I decided to cite this reference since many might not have access to this journal.

As stated earlier, within some Christian circles, worship is generally identified with form, or ritual; that is to say, five acts, not service. It is the general consensus of many Christians that that is true worship.⁷¹ For example, Bromling writes:

Bible students have discovered that the New Testament worship is expressed through five actions: singing, praying, partaking of the Lord's Supper, studying the Word of God, and contributing to a common treasury.⁷²

Bromling, in his comments, is correct in speaking of these five external acts as expressions of our worship, but he is not correct in limiting worship to five acts performed on Sunday morning, if I recognize what he is saying correctly.⁷³ His earlier interpretation advocated a dichotomy between worship and service.

Another writer of this persuasion is Gary Workman. Workman, former editor of *The Restorer*, also has an observation about service and worship that is close to Bromling's understanding. He writes: "Service is broader than worship. All worship is service, but not all service is worship."⁷⁴ There is truth in his statement, but his distinction that "all service" is not worship is going too far. This statement, at first glance, may seem to be true, but only at the cost of misreading "service" passages and separating the "service" Scriptures from their context. If there is a distinction in the Scriptures, it is so keen that it is difficult for us to make this separation in light of its use in Scripture. The split is like the "joints and marrow" or the "thoughts and intents" of the heart.⁷⁵

We must be respectful of Bromling's suggestions, as mentioned above, concerning worship as centering around five acts. But this concept of worship presents certain problems for the interpreter of Scriptures. **For example, there is not one command from any Apostle for someone to "go to worship." Nor do we ever read of a "worship service" in any of the books of the New Testament that is associated with the Christian community.** We cannot find in the New Testament the expression—five acts of worship—that is commonly employed by many Churches of Christ. This idea of going to worship is totally foreign to the writers of the New Testament.

⁷¹Ibid. Please keep in mind that Bromling no longer holds to the views postulated in his article published in *The Spiritual Sword*; nevertheless, the writers for this journal still hold to the earlier views of Bromling. I, too, at one time, taught Bromling's earlier concept of worship.

⁷²Ibid., 14.

⁷³This concept of worship seems to be the thrust of his paper, unless I have misunderstood the point of his argument. If one refers to what Christians do on Sunday morning as "five acts" or "five expression" of worship, I can see no real difference. The question is: Has God ordained a worship service with five expressions of worship to be performed on Sunday morning in order for there to be true worship?

⁷⁴Workman, "worship," *The Spiritual Sword* 24, no. 2: 7

⁷⁵See Mike Root, *Spilt Grape Juice: Rethinking the Worship Tradition* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1992), 17-26 for an excellent chapter on the myth of dichotomizing worship and service.

Is it not strange that in all of the congregations that Paul established, he never wrote about or talked about five acts of worship or a set order of worship?⁷⁶ It would seem, at least to the average reader, that Paul would have addressed this subject of a worship service had there been such a pattern. The so-called five acts found in Scripture are more descriptive of their gatherings rather than prescriptive. **In other words, there is no blueprint or pattern for a worship service with five rituals to be performed in a precise manner.** What was the purpose of Christians coming together? Paul gives some insight to this gathering in his first letter to the Corinthians: “But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:40). If individuals do not adhere to proper decorum when people assemble, then there will be nothing but chaos. A lack of understanding concerning true worship can lend an air of plausibility to our interpretation.

For us to say that there is no blueprint, or set pattern, for the assembly does not negate the command of God for Christians to assemble to encourage one another (Hebrews 10:25). It is true that the Scriptures speak of Christians coming together to preach, to teach, to sing, to pray, to break bread, and to encourage one another, but there is not one Scripture that commands Christians to come together to worship—not one. Perhaps, Hugo McCord (1911-2004), preacher and biblical scholar within the Churches of Christ, explains the external acts—expressions of worship—best, when he writes:

Outward, physical expressions of respect by themselves cannot be called reverence and worship. Unless there is an external bowing down in the heart, there is not worship. The essence of worship, then, is nothing outward. This writer in other years erred in speaking of “five acts of worship.” He did not understand the word. The fruit of the lips, singing, is not worship in itself, but it accompanies what is done in the heart (Hebrews 13:15; 1 Corinthians 14:15). As long as men can honor God “with their lips,” but “their heart is far from God” (Matthew 15:8), so long is it true that worship itself is purely internal... As with singing, and as with the Lord’s Supper, so with the other three acts of worship (as I formerly call them), nothing external alone is worship: the praying, the contribution, the Bible reading, so this writer learned to speak of five expressions of worship.⁷⁷

Bromling, in his original thought pattern, refers to the above article by McCord with approval, but, on the other hand, he seems to revert to the ideas of a “pattern” to follow for a so-called worship service, namely, five acts of worship. These remarks concerning Bromling’s thoughts about worship are not to impugn his love for God. We can appreciate his remarks about worship. He, like McCord, wants to follow the teachings of God. Perhaps, this area under discussion is not the easiest subject to write about—whether by Bromling, McCord, Burdette, or anyone else for that matter because of traditions. This theme about worship is very difficult to grasp, especially because of long-held traditions inherited from our forefathers.

Since the Scriptures never define a public worship service for the believer, it is incumbent upon every Christian to go back to the original sources to find an answer as to what

⁷⁶For an in-depth study of preaching in the early church, see Dallas Burdette, “Preaching in the Early Church,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2008), 344-382.

⁷⁷Hugo McCord, “Worship,” *Firm Foundation* 99, no. 22 (June 1, 1982): 10. Emphasis mine.

worship is all about. In order to do this, we must analyze the various words employed within their context to determine the various aspects of what worship is. **Every interpreter should endeavor to take himself or herself from the present and to transport himself or herself into the historical position of the author of the text, to look through his eyes, to note his surrounding, to feel with his heart, and to catch his emotions.**⁷⁸ Much of our theology has been passed on to us by teachers who also learned their theology from others. **It is not uncommon for us to bring our theological heritage, our ecclesiastical traditions, our cultural norms, or our existential concerns to the Scriptures as we read.** And this phenomenon results in all kinds of selectivity in getting around certain texts. Every Christian is confronted with the same problems of interpretation that others are confronted with.⁷⁹

As stated above, the NIV translates λογικὴν λατρείαν (*logikēn latreian*) as “spiritual act of worship.” Is the NIV correct? Bromling says no! For example, Bromling’s earlier comments on “Errors to Avoid” in order to have a proper concept of worship.⁸⁰ Under this caption, he lists three errors that Christians must be cognizant of. For instance, the first error, according to Bromling, is a mistranslation of λογικὴν λατρείαν (*logikēn latreian*) as “spiritual act of worship” in Romans 12:1. In his analysis of this passage, he objects to the phrase being translated “spiritual worship,” which is the way many translations translate the phrase. For example, consider the following translations of Romans 12:1:

So then, my brothers and sisters, because of God’s great mercy to us I appeal to you: offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer. (GNB)⁸¹

I exhort you, therefore, brothers, in view of God’s mercies, to offer yourselves as a sacrifice, living and set apart for God. This will please him; it is the logical “Temple worship” for you. (JNT)⁸²

So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. (The Message)⁸³

⁷⁸See L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Sacred Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 115.

⁷⁹For an excellent explanation of the problems that Christians experience in interpretation, see Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 58.

⁸⁰Bromling, “Worship of the Church,” *The Spiritual Sword* 24, no. 3 (April 1993): 14. Even though Bromling no longer holds to this position, nevertheless many in this religious journal still espouse the same understanding as set forth in Bromling’s article. Thus, it is necessary to deal with the philosophy in spite of Bromling’s clearer perception of this subject today. This analysis of his former thoughts is given in order to help others who are still where Bromling used to be. We need to remember that there is a difference between rebellion and an honest mistake of the heart.

⁸¹*Good News Bible: Today’s English Version*, American Bible Society, (1992: New York, NY).

⁸²*The Jewish New Testament*, (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications) 1996.

⁸³Peterson, Eugene H., *The Message*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group) 1997.

I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. (NAB)⁸⁴

THEREFORE I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (NASB, update)⁸⁵

I URGE you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (NASB).⁸⁶

So brothers and sisters, since God has shown us great mercy, I beg you to offer your lives as a living sacrifice to him. Your offering must be only for God and pleasing to him, which is the spiritual way for you to worship. (NCV)⁸⁷

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. (NIV)⁸⁸

I urge you, then, brothers, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people. (NJB)⁸⁹

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (NRSV)⁹⁰

Bromling's apprehension over this translation ("spiritual worship") appeared to be over his concern about equating everything one does as worship. In the following quote, he goes right to the heart of his concern: "It is absurd to consider every action of man (whether it be eating, sleeping, or watching television) an act of worship."⁹¹ We must agree with Bromling that it is foolish to parallel every act of man—husband and wife making love, going to the toilet, and so on—as worship. We must also agree with Workman's comments concerning that attitude which equates everything we do as worship. He labors the point quite well: "There are those who have even gone so far as to say that incidental actions in our daily lives are worship—brushing our teeth, taking a bath, tying one's shoelaces, playing a ball game, and the like."⁹²

Workman is correct in calling attention to an abuse of Romans 12:1. **Nevertheless, a misuse of a passage does not negate the import of a word. For one to make this text mean something God did not intend is to manipulate the text.** A word of caution is in order

⁸⁴*The New American Bible*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) 1997.

⁸⁵*The New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation) 1996.

⁸⁶*The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation) 1977.

⁸⁷*The New Century Version*, (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing) 1987, 1988, 1991.

⁸⁸*The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984.

⁸⁹*The New Jerusalem Bible: Reader's Edition*, (New York: Doubleday) 1990.

⁹⁰*The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

⁹¹Bromling, "Worship of the Church," *The Spiritual Sword* 24, no. 3 (April 1993): 16.

⁹²Workman, "What Is Worship?" *The Spiritual Sword* 24, no. 2 (January 1993): 7.

concerning Bromling’s statement about “watching television.” It is true that watching television is not worship. But, on the other hand, if something comes over the “tube” that a Christian ought not to watch, then he or she then presses the remote control to another channel. Is that action not as a result of one’s worship? In closing this section on the meaning of *latreuvw* (*latreuw*) and *latreiva* (*latreia*), it is significant that neither word is employed, or connected, with a so-called “worship service,” but simply represents one’s service to God, whether assembled or not.

New Testament Greek: **Εὐσεβέω**, (*eusebeō*)

The verb **εὐσεβέω** (*eusebeō*, “worship, revere, respect, show piety toward”) occurs only twice in the New Testament. It appears once with a god as its object and once with humans. This Greek word is identified with a display of devotion toward, a sense of respect, a sensation of veneration, and a feeling of honor. The first occurrence is in Acts 17:23. Paul utilizes this word in his speech before the Areopagus in Athens:

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship (**σεβάσματα**, *sebasmata*⁹³), I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship (**εὐσεβεῖτε** *eusebeite*⁹⁴) as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

The Athenians were proclaiming veneration to an unknown God, but, according to Paul, the divine recipient of this worship, or honor, should be the Creator-God who established the very order to which the people of Athens gave so much worshipful interest in the Areopagus.

The second occurrence is found in 1 Timothy 5:4: “But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion (**εὐσεβεῖν** *eusebein*⁹⁵) into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.” Paul encourages children or grandchildren to “show piety” to the widows by supporting them. In other words, when one looks after a widow, then this is, according to Paul, worship. It is also significant that this Greek word **εὐσεβέω** (*eusebeō*) is not once applied to a so-called “worship service.” This worship, or respect, is something that is applicable to one’s way of life, not a Sunday morning worship service.

Chapter 29⁹⁶ examines the Greek word **προσκυνέω** (*proskyneō*, “fall down and worship, bow down to, show reverence to, welcome respectfully”), which word should clarify the meaning we should attach to this word in our understanding of biblical worship. It is necessary to examine the Classical Greek usage, the Septuagint usage, and the New Testament usage in order to draw conclusions based upon the biblical text.

⁹³From *sevbasma* (*sebasma*); noun: neuter, plural accusative—“an object of worship.”

⁹⁴From *eujsebevew* (*eusebew*); verb: second person, plural, active, indicative—“to show piety towards.”

⁹⁵From *eujsebevew* (*eusebew*); verb: present, active, infinitive—“to show piety towards.”

⁹⁶Chapter 29 is found in *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Jesus and Our Privileges* (Maintland, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 411-426. Chapter 28 is part 1 of 2 of my exposition of what biblical worship is about.