

Sermon Series: Creation Care



#3 Worship & Creation Care?

Psalm 104; Rom. 12:1-21

Sometimes we hear Christians use the word “worship” as that part of Sunday church when uplifting music moves the heart to give praise and thanks to God.



They’ll say something like, “wasn’t that great ‘worship’ today”.

That should be no surprise to us, should it? After all, many of the great Psalms of praise in the bible were the original worship songs of the people of God. They were the pop songs of their time.

Such liturgical hymns were often filled with emotions of joy and gratitude offered as praise and worship to God, the progenitor of our songs of praise today.

But as we know, the New Testament expands the horizon of our idea of worshipping God. It explodes the idea that “worship” is merely related to liturgy or ceremony. It’s not only something suited to a temple, but instead is a way of living in the very Tabernacle that is the earth itself.



In the New Testament we find at least **six different Greek words*** translated into English as “worship”, each quite distinctive. For example, in Romans chapter 12 the Apostle Paul sums up after his great explanation of the Gospel of Jesus by exhorting his readers to **worship God**, saying:

“...by the mercies of God... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your **spiritual worship**” (Romans 12:1)

In this translation (NRSV), Paul’s exhortation could seem quite **ceremonial**, even religious or cultic. Yet, the opposite is intended. Using cultic language, Paul doesn’t have in mind praise with psalms on the Sabbath, nor songs in church on a Sunday. Instead, as the rest of chapter 12 shows clearly, this “worship” of God in response to the Gospel is a **whole-of-life** activity:

- in Christian community (verses 3-6),
- in daily relationships with other Christians (verses 7-13) and
- daily in the marketplaces (verses 14-21).

This “worship” we should give to God takes its form from day to day in loving sacrificial service towards other Christians and in the marketplace. That’s exactly how the old King James Version of the Bible translates the ancient Greek of verse 1, as “your **reasonable service**” (KJV). We could paraphrase *logikos latraein* at the end of verse 1 as “your rational sacrificial service”.¹

We see this expanded and whole-of-life worship in the life and ministry of Jesus himself. He challenged the idea that worship was something merely ceremonial or **Temple-centred**. His was a life in which **heaven and earth came together** at all points of the journey. In his footsteps, the Apostles of Christ interpreted “worship” as a **whole-of-life** expression of praise and thanks to God.

Neither Jesus nor Paul directly addresses the ethical questions about climate action we face in our generation. Neither do they include creation care explicitly in their instructions. Yet, along with many ethical matters of our time, the broad scope of the hope we have in Christ, and the teaching and example of being a good neighbour giving honour to God by way of sacrificial living surely leads us to connect the dots about connecting with and caring for creation as Christians.

As we’ve learned in this series, creation care is a **Gospel matter**. It is an outcome of living out our **true identity** as the **bearers of God’s image**, as “priests” and “kings”, what we might today call **carers and stewards**. Our first vocation as “keepers” of creation is renewed in those being fashioned by God into Christ’s image today.

This has huge implications for the way we then live our lives, including:

- Standing against the powers of destruction unleashed by human sin (including our own),

¹ The ancient Greek *logikos* can mean reasonable or rational or intelligent, and *latreian*, often translated “worship”, means sacrificial service.

- Rejecting the lie that we are gods parading around the earth with free licence to exploit the earth’s resources and creatures (including our own delusion), and
- Finding our true life in sacrificial service to God, which includes caring for the environment God has placed us in.

Some Christians may need to overcome **serious obstacles** to engage in this expression of “worship” that leads to caring for creation. For example, some will be **overwhelmed by the data about the degradation** of the planet. They may argue, “What’s the use, the future looks bleak.” But in Christ, **despair and inaction** can be transformed by faith and hope. If we believe Jesus came to transform hearts and lives, we also believe the Gospel promises a transformation of all creation. Yet, as environmental activist **Wendell Berry** points out,

“We must stop, or **start stopping**, our habit of wasting and poisoning the good and beautiful things of the world, which once were called ‘divine gifts’ and are now called ‘natural resources.’”

We should be encouraged by Aldo Leopold long ago, who said...

“...the important thing is not to achieve, **but to strive.**”

We will need to lean **on God’s mercy** along the journey due to our failings and shortcomings, and draw upon **hope from God** as we align our actions with God’s divine purposes.

Douglas Moo says **two urgent changes** are needed among Christians for creation care to be on the agenda in daily life and for the “greening” of our churches. He says, Christians must...

1. Put **creation** back in “new creation,” and
2. Put **ourselves** back in creation.

Put **creation** back in “new creation”

Paul’s bold statement about a new work of God in us through Christ in 2 Corinthians 5:17 goes on to speak of God reconciling the world to Himself. Yet, we often narrowly apply this **only to humanity** as that which God is reconciling and re-making. In Colossians 1:20, the same apostle, with the same language

of God as “reconciler” applies Christ’s work on the cross to “**all things in heaven and on earth.**”

We must **connect the dots** to include God’s plans for **all of creation.**² Is not the whole cosmos in the scope of God’s redeeming love for us in Christ? Is God, in our estimation, **abandoning** the cosmos that was made and was called good, or is God bring it all **to wholeness** one day?

If **we live with regard for the planet’s welfare** as well as seeking to share God’s love with all people, we will **better represent** the Gospel and more truly live a life that is truly **worshipful**.

Put ourselves back in creation

Moo’s second point is that we should **put ourselves back in creation**. In other words, we should take seriously the fact that true “spiritual” life is **lived in the body**, thoroughly **embedded** in creation.

This emphasis found both in the life of Jesus and the teaching of Paul originally **bemused many ancient Greek and Roman** recipients of the Gospel. The ancient Roman world knew no bounds with regard to the **pursuit of escapism**. To many in Paul’s day, the **body** and the **earth** were utilities, instruments for pleasure and profit, which one day would be jettisoned for a “spirit” world to come. Sadly, this is an belief and ethos often found among Christians today!

Yet, far from wanting to **dematerialize spirituality**, and not wanting to further **desacralizing of the environment** in which we live, Christians should celebrate the wonders of **corporeal existence**. Worship of God with our bodies, including care for creation, is completely consistent with the future God has in view for us – we believe in the “resurrection of the body”!³

Connecting Music and Sacrificial Service

Can we connect our love for “worship” in our Sunday church services with the kind of worship that Paul exhorted Christians to live out daily? Can we even connect creation care to our chorus singing?

² E.g. Isa. 65:17; Rom. 8:19; Rev. 21:1,2

³ See this emphasis in the great creeds of the Church, and in Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 15

In many churches today the saying or singing of the Psalms of the Bible has diminished greatly or altogether disappeared.

Look at Psalm 104, for example, and notice the **connectedness** between **celebration** of God and gratitude for God's creation. At the beginning of this message, it was never my intention to denigrate the idea that songs of praise as worship to God. Instead, my point is that when **we connect our praise** to God in church with **praise to God in our lives** that's worship is at its best.

Psalm 104 was once made into a great hymn, "O worship the king, all glorious above". Both the Psalm and the Hymn form their lyrics upon the foundation of Genesis chapter 1. Both the hymn and the psalm work their way through all the verses of Genesis 1 that affirm God as our Maker, and the earth and its creatures as God's good creation.

I found it interesting recently that David Attenborough's new TV documentary is titled: "Perfect Planet." Despite all its dangers and in light of all its beauties Attenborough says he is convinced this planet is the **best environment** for producing and sustaining this amazing diversity of living creatures. He celebrates it; almost worships it!



Psalm 104 praises, not the planet, but the God who stands behind, and is always active within the world's wonders and provisions. The Psalm doesn't just acknowledge that there was once a work of creation, it recognises the Creator in all activities of life right now! Such a song should be sung regularly today. Such divine lyrics help to shape and renew the minds of Christians and help them **see the world through biblical "eyes"** and **act out their faith** in daily living.

I love how this psalm, for instance, pictures human beings as "farmers", stewards and carers of the planet, not mere hunter-gatherers (vs. 14). It celebrates the God who gifts us with essential provisions for life such as **wine, oil, and bread** (vs. 15). But more than this, it implies that God gives the vine, the olive tree, grain, and creative ability; we too are capable of being makers.

Let our songs of praise remind us that God is our Creator and of the wideness of God's mercy. Let our praise *and* our actions show that God is truly worthy of worship and to demonstrate to the world the **scope of our hope** in Christ.

*Six ancient Greek words for “worship” found in the New Testament:

1. Out of the fifty-nine appearances of **proskuneo** (to bow down, to pay homage) in the New Testament Scriptures, is only mentioned once in reference to an assembly in 1 Corinthians 14:25 where God’s Word convicts an outsider who worships God. Notice that this word never refers to a meeting or the acts thereof with exception of 1 Corinthians 14:25.
2. **latreuo** means precisely to serve in a priestly and, or sacrificial manner. The noun form **latreia** is also sacrificial and priestly in sacrificial service to God. Notice that this word is never used in reference to any New Testament Christian meeting. Many resist the idea that this word even comes close to the concept of worship, so not to support the doctrine that “all of life is worship”, which is a doctrine derived from an inconsistent understanding of this worship by offering oneself as a living sacrifice to God in Romans 12:1. Translators of the most popular English translations of the Scriptures translate **latreuo** as “worship” at least three times or more instead of as “sacrificial service” e.g. NRSV – Luke 2:37; John 16:2; Acts 7:7, 42, 24:14, 26:7, 27:23; Rom 9:4, 12:1; Phil 3:3; 2 Tim 1:3; Heb 8:5, 9:1, 6, 9, 14, 10:2, 12:28; Rev 7:15, 22:3
3. **leitourgeo** in the verb form and in noun form **leitourgia** means specifically to minister in an official manner. In the Scriptures, this word refers to **public civil acts of service** that can include priestly and religious services in a theocratic nation like that of Israel. In the New Testament, the term also refers to the **ministry of Christians** as they act in their office of being spiritual priests thus relating to the new spiritual sacrifices according to the New Testament. This term also works well in supporting the theocratic kingdom of the New Testament, the Church, where one may officially minister on behalf of the kingdom under the divine kingship of Christ.

Everett Ferguson’s statement is that,

The English word “liturgy” is derived from the Greek leitourgia (verb leitourgeo), a word referring to public service (cf. Rom. 13:6), but used in Jewish and Christian literature of the early Christian

era predominantly for religious service (see p.224 on Rom. 15:16). The broader sense of non-cultic service may be illustrated by 2 Corinthians 9:12 and Romans 15:27, the contribution for the needs of the saints, but even here there may be a metaphorical use of the sacrificial meaning (as in Phil. 2:17, cf. 2:30). The common use of the word in the New Testament, reflecting the Greek Old Testament, is for the Jewish temple service (Luke 1:23; Heb. 9:21; 10:11), and thus it is used also for Jesus' priestly ministry (Heb. 8:2, 6). Paul uses this family of words for his preaching ministry (Rom. 15:16), and this fact along with usage in early extra-canonical Christian literature, may give the meaning of "preaching" or specifically "prophesying," for the only usage of the word in the New Testament in the context of a Christian meeting, Acts 13:2.

leitourgeo is a term that is broader in definition than *proskuneo*, *latreuo*, and the English definition of worship. This word refers to public civil acts of service, and more particularly, it can refer to **sacrificial service**. *Leitourgeo* contrasts the English definition of worship that does not consist of such public and civic services. Clearly, the services of this type can include or exclude all together the actions of *proskuneo* and *latreuo*. This word would better be translated "to minister" and not "to worship."

Maggi Dawn comments in her blog:

"... there is a current trend to define liturgy as "the work of the people". I think this little phrase has gone viral partly because even among traditions that have never embraced the idea of "liturgy", the rediscovery of ancient liturgy by the alternative, emerging and non-liturgical traditions has made everyone want to buy into the idea, and in addition, to stress that worship isn't something put on by the clergy, the worship band or the local elders while everyone else looks on. For this much, who can complain? It's brilliant if people want to get knee-deep in the creative, theatrical, devotional, theological treasure chest of liturgy, and it's absolutely true that liturgy/worship should be participatory, not observatory. The Greek word leitourgia derives from two root words – laos, the people, and ergas, a work. But the popular definition is highly

misleading. Leitourgia was never actually used to mean “the work of the people”. It was, rather, a word that described acts of public service, usually initiated by a private benefactor. So, for instance, some wealthy person might build a temple or a town hall, foot the bill, but the work itself was for the community. Likewise, any public work done in service to the gods, but that would also benefit the community, would qualify as leitourgia. It’s work. And it’s about people. But it’s not the people’s work, it’s work that is for the people, and transformative of the wider world. So liturgy might legitimately be said to be work for God, that transforms our world, and benefits people. But liturgy isn’t mine or yours. In short, it’s not about me.”

4. ***threiskeia*** means religion.
5. ***Sebomai*** means to venerate.
6. ***Eusebeo*** means to show respect. According to 1 Timothy 2:2, 2 Timothy 3:12, and Titus 2:12, this term is often used to command reverent and pious living.

Each of these Greek words are distinct from one another. All the prominent translations of the Scriptures translate these Greek words as “worship” sometimes and not as worship at other times. Note that both literal and dynamic translations of the Scriptures give no indication to readers that translators represent different words by “worship.” It would be more helpful if translators could note that these words are separate and distinct, so that there is greater clarity concerning the meaning of worship in each case. These words can easily be accurately translated into separate and distinctive words and phrases.