

Why do we Meet III?

What's *worship*? Last Sunday evening we looked at the Greek word *proskunew* – a word that's often translated *worship* in our Bibles. We looked at how that word was used in the New Testament. I concluded three things:

- First, its basic meaning has to do with submission – in relation to God, it's an acknowledgement of His rule in a person's life.
- Secondly, the idea of singing isn't part of the basic meaning of the word.
- Thirdly, the word's conspicuous by its absence in relation to describing what happens in church meetings in the New Testament.

I also indicated there were a couple of other Greek words that could be translated *worship*. One is the *leitourgew* word group. This word has the idea of ministering or serving. In a religious context, it's often used to describe the service priests do within the temple. Four words in this word group appear in the New Testament – one's a verb, two are nouns and one an adjective. Altogether, they appear 15 times in the New Testament – and they're listed on your outlines.

The other is the *latreuw* word group. It also conveys the idea of ministering or serving in a ritual situation. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, it was particularly used for the temple service of priests and Levites.¹ It occurs 26 times in the New Testament – 21 times in its verb form and 5 times as a noun.

¹ H.Balz, *leitourgia*, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Vol.2, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 348.

Tonight, instead of going through all those references one by one, I want to start by looking at one particular passage where both words occur several times – Hebrews 8-10. This passage explains something of the change that happened between the New Testament and the Old Testament – as to why we can't just take Old Testament verses that use the word *worship* and apply them straight to the church meeting.

To start with, let's read Hebrews 8:1-7

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. 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 shown you on the mountain." But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.

The writer contrasts two systems:

- the old system God instituted through Moses and described to us in the Old Testament law; and
- the new system which came in Jesus and which is

described in the New Testament – although it's based on promises God made in the Old Testament.

What can be said about the old system?

- First, it had priests that served/ministered in the sanctuary.
- Secondly, their service/ministry involved the bringing of gifts and sacrifices into the sanctuary.
- Thirdly, the sanctuary in which they served/ministered was a copy of something in heaven.
- Fourthly, that system was inadequate – it couldn't effectively deal with the real problem.

That system's described in more detail in Hebrews 9:1-7

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.

It's an impressive system. There's an impressive place set up in which the system's to operate – and that's some-

thing of an exclusive place. There are impressive rituals that are part of that place. Everything's done according to the proper plan given by God. Yet, the writer of Hebrews says, it was inadequate.

Why? Because it was incomplete. It was only ever intended as a shadow – as a picture of what God would do in the future. Hebrews 9:8

The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing.

The reason it was only a shadow was it couldn't adequately deal with the real problem – human sin. How could there be genuine relationship between God and humans while the issue of our rebellion was unresolved? How could humans approach God while the matter of their sin stood between them and God? Hebrews 9:9

This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

This old system of worship and ministry and service was never intended as the real thing. It had a certain value for the people of that era. It wasn't totally worthless.

- It reminded them of their sin.
- It reminded them they sinned again and again.
- It reminded them that, in themselves, they were unable to enter God's presence.
- It pointed them to the need for God's grace.
- It pointed them to something God would do in the future – to the new system.

In Jesus, that new system has come. The writer says the new system parallels the old one in many respects.

- In the old system, there were priests. In the new system, Jesus serves as the priest.
- In the old system, there's a sanctuary that's a copy. In the new system, Jesus enters the real sanctuary.
- In the old system, the priests brought sacrifices. In the new system, Jesus brings a sacrifice.

So, some things are similar between the two systems.

And yet, says the writer of Hebrews, the new system's much better than the old one. Hebrews 9:11-14

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

And then down to Hebrews 9:24-26

For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ

would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

In other words, Jesus performs the real ministry required by God.

- He doesn't enter a mere copy of the sanctuary – He enters the real heavenly sanctuary.
- He doesn't enter that sanctuary with gifts and sacrifices that are ineffective – He enters it with a sacrifice that's perfectly acceptable to God.
- He doesn't enter that sanctuary again and again with new sacrifices – He enters it once for all time because His sacrifice is sufficient to cover all sin.

The writer of Hebrews continues to elaborate on those things in chapter 10:

- the old system couldn't effectively cleanse people of their sin and thus couldn't effectively deal with the ongoing barrier between people and God; but
- the new system has achieved that once for all.

Hebrews 10:12-14

But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Thus, the writer concludes in verse 20:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,

That is, we now have perfect access to God in Jesus. All the rituals associated with the earthly sanctuary are obsolete. The earthly copy of the holy place is obsolete because, in Jesus, we have complete access to the heavenly reality. Thus, for Christians, there are no longer any sacred places on earth – for we have access to the heavenly holy place at all times and in all places.

This revolutionises several things:

- first, it revolutionises how Christians approach God;
- secondly, it revolutionises the Christian concept of worship and service and ministry; and
- thirdly, it revolutionises what Christians do when they gather together.

In the Old Testament, the sacrificial system taught the people it's a dangerous thing to have a holy God dwelling in the midst of a sinful people. The tabernacle, and later the temple, symbolised God's presence dwelling among them. Yet, there's restricted access to that presence.

- You couldn't simply waltz into God's presence empty handed. You had to bring a sacrifice to atone for your sins – otherwise you faced the danger of being consumed by God's holiness.
- Even with the sacrifice, you couldn't actually get into the most holy place. Only the high priest was permitted in there once a year. Only priests were permitted in the area around the most holy place. The ordinary person couldn't actually get into God's presence.

The system reminded them of their sin. The system reminded them that all was not right between them and God. The system reminded them of the separateness of

God – and the danger of claiming to be the people of a holy God.

Our approach to God is different. It's not that God's any less holy. It's not that our sin's any less wrong. It's not that we ourselves can do anything to atone for our sin. It's simply that Jesus has opened the way for us to have full access to God by making the one true, acceptable sacrifice. Because He did that, we have full access into God's presence anywhere, anytime. Thus, our meetings aren't taken up with somehow trying to gain access into God's presence.

- It's not if we sing louder or more enthusiastically or with greater body movement that we'll somehow get further into God's presence.
- It's not if we pray longer or with more dedication or with greater fervency that we'll somehow get further into God's presence.
- It's not that putting more money in the plate will buy us further access into God's presence.

We're fully in God's presence because Jesus opened the way for us in His death.

The New Testament church didn't model its meetings on the temple ritual. That'd be pointless. Jesus had already completed the temple ritual on their behalf. We can't serve God or worship God by trying to bring gifts and sacrifices that will allow us into His presence. That'd be to dishonour Jesus' sacrifice – and thus to dishonour God.

Thus, we find the New Testament uses these two word groups in a different way. The way they're used reflects the fact that Christians already have access to God's presence. Thus, they're used as an expression of life in

that presence. Have a look at Philippians 2:29-30 – I'm going to read this from the English Standard Version because it brings out the use of the word better than the NIV:

So receive him [Epaphroditus] in the Lord with all joy, and honour such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

What's the service of the Philippian Christians? In the context of the whole letter, their service – or priestly service – was through their financial contribution to Paul's physical situation. In other words, giving money to help God's apostle was considered service of God – or worship of God.

Yet, there's more. I think if you read the paragraph leading up to the end of the chapter, you'll get the impression that their priestly service was also given by means of Epaphroditus ministering to Paul. This wasn't something done in the midst of a church meeting in terms of singing or praying or celebrating the Lord's Supper – but something done in the midst of a prison in a far-off city and ministering to the needs of one of God's family on a one-to-one basis. We're not talking about some liturgical gathering and the pomp and ceremony of a temple ritual – we're talking about buying food for a prisoner and washing the wounds that were most likely part of the prison experience.

You can find both those ideas in other parts of the New Testament also. You find it used to refer to the idea of making financial contributions to the needs of others in Romans 15:27 – again I'll read from the ESV:

They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to

them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

This refers to Paul's collection from the Gentile churches for the Jewish Christians. We're not talking here about money being raised to support Jewish Christians going out as missionaries – nor to support pastors among the Christian Jews. It's simply giving money to support the needy among their Jewish brothers and sisters. A similar idea's expressed in 2 Corinthians 9:12.

The language is used to refer to the task of proclaiming the gospel. Romans 15:16

I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

The same sort of idea is also found in Romans 1:9

The language is used to refer to the whole of life – because the whole of the Christian's life is lived in the presence of God. 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.

How does the Christian worship God? By presenting his/her body as a living sacrifice. What's that mean? It means living every aspect of a person's life under the rule of God. It's not simply talking about what goes on in the church meeting – although that meeting may include a time when people reaffirm their commitment to serve

God completely – it's talking about actually living that commitment in day-to-day life: 24/7.

How does the Christian serve God now that Jesus has come? A significant part of the answer's in the next verse. Romans 12:2

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.

We need to learn what pleases God by having our minds renewed by God's word. It's not a matter of me deciding what I think should please God. It's a matter of finding out what God says pleases Him. That's done by reading and studying and meditating on the Bible.

Of course, it can't stop there. Serving God also involves conforming my life to what God wants – not simply during the church meeting, but during every moment of every day.

Now, to be fair, it should be noted that these word groups are used in the New Testament in some other ways. On one occasion, one of the words is used to refer to the work of governments. Romans 13:6

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

Both word groups are still used to refer to the Jewish worship system centred on the temple. And so, for example, look at Luke 1:22-23 – referring to the priest Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.

When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept

making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

The word *service* is used there to refer to the various ritual acts that were part of the priest's functions in the Jewish temples. There are several other times in the New Testament when the word's used this way.

And there's one reference where one of the words appears to be used of the Christian gathering. Acts 13:1-3

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

But that meeting may be closer to what we think of as an elders' meeting than a church service.

Now, tonight, I haven't gone through every reference where these two words are used. I have, however, given you a list of all those references on your outlines – so you can check them out later and see if I left out anything of significance.

What can we conclude? I think that the conclusions are similar to last week.

- These word groups aren't used to specifically refer to singing.
- These word groups are generally not used of the regular Christian meeting.

Tonight, though, I think we can add a further conclusion – for these word groups are used more extensively in the New Testament letters than *proskunew* – the word we looked at last week. They're used to describe a range of activities that go well beyond the Christian meeting. They're used in a way that moves our thinking towards the concept of worship being the whole of life. Worship isn't confined to special places and special times and special rituals. Every aspect of my life is part of my worship of God – the only issue is whether each of those aspects conforms to what God says is acceptable to Him.

So then, is it wrong to use the word *worship* to describe our church gatherings? Not necessarily – it all depends how you use the word. If you consistently think of church worship as being a small part of your overall worship – and if you regularly think of your shopping worship and your driving the car worship and your relating to other people worship – then that's fine. If our church gathering conforms to God's purposes for our meeting, then it's part of how we serve and worship God.

However, in our modern context, I suspect it's unhelpful to use the word *worship* to describe our church gatherings because it's so often used in a misleading way.

- Some think you can only use the word *worship* to describe what goes on in the church building during the church service (which may be another word that is used in a misleading way) – and don't think of the church gathering for a working bee or a picnic as equally being our worship of God.
- Some think of the worship that goes on inside the church building as being more important or of more value than the worship that goes on outside – as if

God's more interested in how they sing the hymns than how they drive their car.

- Some think that the so-called worship that goes on during the church service draws them closer to God than the worship that goes on outside that time – and fail to recognise the fundamental of the gospel that we can't get any closer to God than being in Christ.

Our worship and service of God don't draw us into God's presence. We're given God's presence as a gift because Jesus died for us. We're given that at all times and in all places. Our worship and service don't earn us anything – rather they flow out of the gift God's given us in Jesus.