

## *First Things First*

The first two chapters of Luke form what I have called ‘The Watershed of the Ages’,<sup>1</sup> with Zechariah’s prophetic song of praise at the birth of his son, John the Baptist, playing an important role in that watershed. As such it is key to any discussion of ‘worship’ in the new covenant. Here is the song:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might ‘serve’ him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:68-79).

Why is this a key passage? Clearly, Zechariah is signalling that the birth of his son John, leading to his ministry, marks the coming of the long-expected Messiah, the one who would render full obedience to God his Father under the law, thus fulfilling the old covenant, in order to redeem his elect, and so usher in the glorious new age prophesied long before in the days of the old covenant. Note Zechariah’s ‘God... has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David’ – surely a reference to Psalm 132:17-18: ‘I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed. His enemies I will clothe with shame, but on him his crown will shine’. The coming Messiah is the coming King, the King who would be

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<sup>1</sup> See my ‘Watershed of the Ages’ on my [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com) page.

setting up his kingdom.<sup>2</sup> ('The kingdom' would be the great topic of Christ's ministry, and dominate the ministry of the early church).<sup>3</sup> God the Father, through the work of his Son, would fulfil his covenant promise to Abraham, save his people, redeeming them from their bondage to sin, death and law, thus forming them into a people – subjects of his kingdom, children of God, slaves of Christ, citizens of heaven – to 'worship' or to 'serve' him all their days. God, says Zechariah in prophetic song, has sent John to prepare the way for Jesus to do this:

...to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might 'serve' him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

To 'serve' God is to 'worship' him; 'worship', therefore, is top of the agenda in Zechariah's song.

Let Peterson explain:

In the 'Song of Zechariah', we are told that the whole purpose of the messianic redemption is to enable God's people to 'worship' or 'serve' him (*latreuein autō*) (Luke 1:74). As in the book of Exodus, God has come to save his people in a mighty way, to fulfil the terms of the covenant he made with Abraham. This time he has used the Messiah as a 'horn of salvation' to set his people free from fear of oppression by their enemies so that they might 'serve' him. The salvation on view is experienced by means of the forgiveness of sins (Luke 1:77), recalling the promise of Jeremiah 31:34 ['I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more']. The 'service' that this makes possible is nothing less than a lifestyle of 'holiness in righteousness before him all our days' (Luke 1:75). Although such language is not much used in Luke-Acts, this passage clearly establishes a theological framework in which to understand the work of Christ and the life of the early church.

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<sup>2</sup> See the use of 'horn' in Daniel and Revelation.

<sup>3</sup> See my 'Thoughts on the Kingdom' on my [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com) page. There are over 160 references to 'kingdom' in the Gospels.

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When the messianic salvation is proclaimed, those who respond to the gospel will be empowered to ‘serve’ God as he desires.<sup>4</sup>

Peterson’s quotation of the Greek is important; the way the New Testament uses it, especially the Greek of the Septuagint, is vital. Most evangelicals who address the question of ‘worship’ politely wave a hand towards the Greek, but quickly forget the way Scripture uses it in speaking of the new covenant. Why? In order to get as quickly as possible to what they see as their real business or concern; namely, buffing up the performance of ‘public worship’!

While I have no intention of being heavy on the Greek, it is important to realise how wide a range of Greek words is used to speak of ‘worship’, and how rich the nuances such use carries.

Here are some of main Greek words used to describe ‘worship’ in the new covenant:

*proskuneō* means to make obeisance, do reverence to (from *pros*, ‘towards,’ and *kuneō*, ‘to kiss’); to fall down before someone in submission and homage; to bow before someone greater than oneself and accept their authority.

*sebō* means to revere, stressing the feeling of awe or devotion.

*leitourgeō* means to ‘serve’, and is often applied to public priestly ‘service’.<sup>5</sup>

*latreuō* means to ‘serve’, to render religious ‘service’ or homage. It is more often translated ‘serve’ than ‘worship’.

*eusebeō* means to act piously towards.

*douleuō* means to ‘serve’, whether God or man.

***Now... that’s a funny thing!***

When I say ‘funny’ I do not mean ‘amusing’; I mean ‘odd’.

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson pp149-150. For the part ‘kingdom’ plays in Acts, see my ‘Thoughts on the Kingdom’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

<sup>5</sup> Great care is needed – we are talking about ‘priest’ and ‘priestly’ in a new-covenant sense. See my *Pastor; The Priesthood*.

What is this oddity? The odd thing – the staggeringly odd thing – is that (with one possible exception – see below) the post-Pentecost Scriptures never use any of these words for ‘worship’ or ‘serve’ in the way that Christendom almost always does; and when I talk of Christendom’s use of these words, I include the overwhelming number of Reformed and evangelicals.

Hmm!

It gets worse, far worse. Christendom, taking those Greek words, in effect practically ignores the way the apostles used them, and warps them into an institutional usage that has no scriptural warrant whatsoever!

Hmm!

The upshot is that for 1800 years Christendom has been robbing believers of the full experience of what Scripture means by its use of words which we misunderstand, misapply or *ignore* when thinking about ‘worship’ or ‘service’. Moreover, it has been reinforcing that misunderstanding during all those centuries. No wonder ‘worship’ is so commonly wrongly thought about and practiced. Let me give one example of what I am talking about: Christendom has cheapened the biblical concept of ‘service’ into ‘a service’<sup>6</sup> – only an ‘a’, but what a weight that one-letter word carries, what damage has it caused! A believer’s life of ‘service’ has become attendance at a meeting! Yet nowhere in the post-Pentecost Scriptures can we find believers engaged in what we now think of as ‘worship’ or attending ‘a service’. Nowhere!

### ***An objection***

But what about Acts 13:1-2? After all, we read:

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<sup>6</sup> The same applies to ‘fellowship’. The biblical experience of ‘fellowship’ has been largely replaced by talk of a group of believers as a ‘fellowship’, especially, a church. Is a church a ‘love’, a ‘discipline’, a ‘teaching’, *etc.*? It is not a matter of semantics. Experience – that which really counts – is lost. Words, especially the use of words, matter.

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Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers... While they were ‘worshipping’ the Lord... (Acts 13:1-2).

Note that the prophets and teachers were – allowing the English word – ‘worshipping’. But what we are not told is that all the believers in Antioch were attending ‘a service’ and that they were all ‘worshipping’. So what was going on at Antioch?

Let Peterson set out his argument:

There is only one context in Acts where the language of ‘worship’ is specifically applied to the activity of Christian gathering. In Acts 13:2 the prophets and teachers of Antioch are said to be ‘worshipping’ – or, more literally, ‘serving’ – the Lord (*leitourgountōn... tō kuriō*) and fasting, when the Holy Spirit calls for the sending forth of Barnabas and Saul on their first missionary journey. The verb *leitourgeō*<sup>7</sup> and related words were regularly employed in the Septuagint in a technical sense, to describe the priestly ‘service’ of the God of Israel (for example, 2 Chron. 11:14; Joel 2:17; Ezek. 45:4; cf. Luke 1:23; Heb. 10:11).

Let us be clear: although Luke was using Greek words which in the Septuagint applied to the Aaronic priesthood, whatever else the prophets and teachers in the *ekklēsia* at Antioch were doing, they were not engaging in the old-covenant sacerdotal ministry! So what were they doing? Peterson:

It is possible... that Luke means that these prophets and teachers were carrying out *their appointed ministry* in the church. In other words, the ministry of prophecy and teaching, which was exercised by those especially gifted for the benefit of other believers in the congregation, was a specific way of ‘serving’ or ‘worshipping’ God under the new covenant.

Peterson broadened the point. He started by making a (very) tentative concession:

Although Acts 13:2 suggests that the terminology of ‘worship’ may be applied to what Christians do when they meet together [‘may’ and often is, but it seems very unlikely to me – DG] it is

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<sup>7</sup> Original ‘*leitourgein*’.

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important to remember that Luke sets this activity within the broader framework of Christian life and ministry. In the early chapters of Acts he also has much to say about the gathering of believers that goes beyond our traditionally narrow understanding of what ‘worship’ is. Contemporary churches have much to learn from this material.<sup>8</sup>

In short, I am convinced Acts 13:2 does not justify Christendom’s institutional ‘worship’.

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This brief *sortie* into the Greek has not been a waste of time. When speaking about the new covenant, ignoring the Greek, ignoring the way the Spirit uses the Greek, has very serious consequences. Of course it does! Shouldn’t believers stick to apostolic use of words, and never impose Christendom’s vocabulary and practice upon the *ekklēsia*? Alas, as I have said, many do act in a cavalier way at this juncture, with far-reaching ramifications.

Take Graham Beynon, for instance, in his ‘Engaging With God Together: A seminar on the theology and practice of corporate worship’, FIEC 2013 Leaders’ Conference. Note the priority of ‘theology’ in the title – theology leading to practice. But before he got to ‘practice’, Beynon needed to set out the *biblical* doctrine of ‘corporate worship’. Indeed, that doctrine not only should have preceded the practice, until he did establish that doctrine he should have said nothing about the practice, because there would have been nothing to say. But Beynon did not take that route; he actually played down the value of word studies! Instead – in common with so many – after a cursory pull of the forelock to what the new covenant says about worship, he got to the ‘real’ business and plunged into what might be called ‘The Techniques of Public Worship’, especially ‘How To Improve Your Corporate Worship’. The rest of his discourse, the overwhelming majority of it, was taken up with that, despite there being nothing in the post-Pentecost Scriptures for the practice – for the simple reason ‘public worship’ does not exist

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<sup>8</sup> Peterson pp150-151, emphasis original.

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in the new covenant! The early church did not engage in it, they never set it up; it never even crossed their mind.

Having, I hope, got that extremely serious negative nailed, let us now move on to the positive; that is, the heart of the subject.