

LIVING THE CHRISTLIFE  
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**The New Testament on “Worship”:  
An Overview  
Pt. 1**

Three broad questions:

1. What does the New Testament mean by worship?
2. What do we mean by worship?
3. How should this shape our concepts and inform what we plan for our assemblies each Sunday?

In the New Testament, there are two Greek words that are usually translated to the English word *worship*. But the Greek words each refer to something specific, and neither one of them really equates with the English word *worship* in a way that many other words do equate fairly simply with an English word, e.g. *stone, road, ran, spoke, open, close, etc.*

***latreia* (n.), *latreuó* (v.)**

The words literally means service, serving—and often are translated that way. But these words are also translated as *worship*, in that they are referencing the divine service to God that takes place in assemblies, such as the tabernacle or temple—or in a church *service*.<sup>a</sup> (In Hungary today, when they ask if you will speak or sing in church, they ask if you will “serve.”)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship [*latreia*].—Romans 12:1-2

Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ““You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve [*latreuó*].””—Matthew 4:10

For we are the circumcision, who worship [*latreuó*] by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—Philippians 3:3

The general meaning when these words are used is that our lives are our worship. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit and our very living is our worship, our service, to God.

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<sup>a</sup> A related Greek word, *leitourgia*, meaning public service, is the word from which we get our English word *liturgy*.

*proskuneó (v.)*

This word is only in verb form. In its most literal sense, it means to fall at someone's feet, to make obeisance to them, to prostrate oneself before them. Even more literally, it means to "kiss," as in to kiss the ground in front of the person being so honored.

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.—Matthew 2:11

And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.—Matthew 28:9

And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God.—Revelation 11:16

When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man."—Acts 10:25-26

Then I [John] fell down at his [the angel's] feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God."—Revelation 19:10

It is not merely the act of kneeling. (A person can kneel before another person whom he actually hates.) It is the attitude of the heart and mind of adoration and obeisance and honor that is authentic—and that is being expressed by kneeling.

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."—John 4:23-24

So, to be clear, this verb, *proskuneó*, means to do a specific thing—although obviously the act will vary between individuals and occasions. But it does not mean or include other things, like visiting, talking, listening, thinking...or even praising and rejoicing. It has nothing whatsoever to do with gathering or attending.

Praising, rejoicing, and gathering, are all good things! The point is that when the New Testament (in the Greek) references those things it uses *other verbs* that mean, you guessed it, praising, rejoicing, and gathering. The New Testament does not (of course) refer to them as *proskuneó*. But we now (since the 12<sup>th</sup> century or so) have an English word, worship, under which we include all sorts of things—but when that same English word appears in the New Testament, the Greek word it represents does *not* include all sorts of things. And the irony is that we can have a "worship service," in which many good things take place but in which there may be almost no "worship"—at least no *proskuneó*.

It should be clear that NT worship is not anything that a person can *attend*, like a concert. Worship (whether *latreia*, *latreuó* or *proskuneó*) is something we *do*. We **can** attend a gathering,

an assembly—and we should.<sup>b</sup> And then the question becomes what are we going to *do* when we *attend*.

Our assemblies, gatherings, “worship services” (not a great term actually, but I find myself using it) clearly involve more activities than *proskuneó*—and that is appropriate. We greet one another, we share joys and concerns, we pray, we praise, we teach and exhort, we hear God’s word, we respond with commitment, we laugh, we interact.... And we may be stirred at various points in our gathering at which time we would kneel or fall on our faces if we could—such is the movement in our spirits.

Throughout history, forms of Christian “worship,” liturgies for Christian gatherings (and all gathering have a liturgy, whether they call it that or not) have been as varied as is humankind itself, as diverse as is the worldwide Church through the ages. There is no one way that is the right way.

There are, however, some types of activities and mindsets that are clearly the wrong way to plan for sacred assemblies! Two of those are extremely prevalent in American culture. And we will look at those next week.

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<sup>b</sup> Hebrews 10:25