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Worship and Ecology

Worship and ecology: an odd couple?

The topics of ecology and Christian worship aren't often considered together, so a book that combines them into a single theme might be a curiosity for you. Perhaps you are excited to see these two important subjects explored together in a single book. Such a combination might also raise suspicions. Is the book actually using Christian worship to advance a narrow political viewpoint? Or is it intended to make Christian worship simply *seem* more environmentally relevant—to “greenwash” Christian worship? Or perhaps it is an attempt to be trendy or novel; some popular books intentionally create an unlikely pairing for the sake of novelty, or even as a joke: *The Simpsons and Philosophy*, or *Flower Arranging for Stock Brokers*, for example. This little book begins with the conviction that Christian worship and ecology are not novelties or small topics. They are both deep and broad, and are matters of life and death.

Take the English word *worship*. It is derived from the Middle English word *worth-ship*, which refers to the act of ascribing worth, or value, to something. So someone putting prices on items at an estate sale is engaged in an act of worth-ship. Everything in the estate

is assigned a measure of worth: a box of buttons, a set of crystal goblets, a rusty bucket, a handmade mahogany desk. The worth of everything in the environment of the estate is considered and measured.

Unlike an estate sale, Christian worship doesn't ascribe monetary worth to things. Christian worship is, however, an act of worth-ship in which Christians ascribe ultimate worth to God and in which we may find everything in our own environment ascribed surprising measures of worth by the living Word of God. The book of Proverbs values wisdom as "better than gold, even fine gold" (Prov. 8:19). Jesus underscores the worth of God and neighbor, saying, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). The worth of God's people can be measured in apparently paradoxical ways: you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:19), and yet, you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people (1 Peter 2:9). At baptism, declarations of the newly baptized's worth are abundant: "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 231). At a funeral, the dead are ascribed worth in God, as the presider commends to God "a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 283). And, over literally *everything* in the cosmos, God's own original ascription of worth still resounds in our liturgies: God saw everything that had been made, and indeed, it was very good (Gen. 1:31).

So, Christian worship is, among other things, *worth-ship*. It is an act that ascribes worth to God, to us, and to the whole environment around us, stretching out to include the entire "very good" cosmos. In short, the horizon of concern in Christian worship extends outward to the entire universe.

Next, consider the concept of ecology. Ecology, by definition, has to do with the interdependence of . . . *everything*. Asking ecological

questions often means focusing on or beginning with living things on Earth, yet it inevitably involves even realities far outside of Earth: the moon's gravity lifts Earth's large bodies of water toward the moon's surface, forming Earth's tides; most of the energy in our food has recently traveled 93 million miles across space at light speed from our nearest star, the sun, and is stored on Earth by green plants; more than two tons of natural materials from outer space fall to the earth every day, becoming part of our soil, water, food, and bodies. And the bulk of the earth itself is made of materials formed out of the explosions of ancient stars. So ecology, too, extends outward toward the mysterious horizons of the universe.

But ecology also moves toward closer horizons, equally mysterious. Your own hands that hold the book you are now reading are themselves made of earth—made of water that has fallen many times as rain, salts from the oceans, minerals from the farms' fields, perhaps energy that had been stored in the milk or flesh of other animals. The book itself—and every other manufactured thing in the space around you—is made exclusively of materials that have either been grown from the earth or mined out of it. Ecology stretches out to the boundaries of the universe yet also reaches deep within us, into each of our cells.

Thus ecology and Christian worship both extend outward toward “everything,” to attend to the worth of things, their interconnections with things seen and unseen, and their place in the whole living creation. Their consideration together in a single theme is no novelty, but rather a natural partnership. Both are, in fact, ways of seeing everything as part of the one great whole. Nothing is considered irrelevant or outside of their scope of vision. Both attend to the very small and close at hand (grains of sand, a mustard seed) and extend outward to the widest horizons, beyond our knowing (the foundations of the earth, the depths of the sea, the stars of the heavens, all that is, seen and unseen).