

# NewsNote: Woof 'n Worship? Seriously?

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Just for the sake of adequate seriousness, I will resist all temptations to pun. That is no easy resistance in light of the report from the [Associated Press](#) about American churches developing special services for congregants and their dogs.

The story, reported by Gillian Flaccus, begins with Rev. Tom Eggebeen of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. Faced with an aging and declining congregation, the pastor decided to do something innovative -- he started a service for both people and dogs, "Canines at Covenant."

Gillian Flaccus described Eggebeen's idea: "He would turn God's house into a doghouse by offering a 30-minute service complete with individual doggie beds, canine prayers and an offering of dog treats. He hopes it will reinvigorate the church's connection with the community, provide solace to elderly members and, possibly, attract new worshippers who are as crazy about God as they are about their four-legged friends."

Flaccus also cited Laura Hobgood-Oster, a religion professor at Southwestern University in Texas, who recently conducted a survey that revealed more than 500 churches that conduct blessing services for pets and six that go so far as to offer pet worship services like the "Canines at Covenant" service. One church near Boston offers a "Woof 'n Worship" service. The professor sees "pet-centric" services as a growing trend.

The reason she offers is especially interesting: "It's the changing family structure, where pets are really central and religious communities are starting to recognize that people need various kinds of rituals that include their pets . . . . More and more people in mainline Christianity are considering them to have some kind of soul."

The report goes on to explain that the dogs at the "Canines at Covenant" service showed little evidence of interest. Nevertheless, the service was very pleasing to the human participants who brought their dogs. One woman brought two dogs, a black Lab and a Dachshund-terrier mix. She told the reporter, "I don't have any kids, so my pets have always been my children, so it does mean a lot . . . . I haven't been to church in a long time and this may push me into it. I'm getting older and I've been thinking about those things again."

Gillian Flaccus offers a very interesting report on the "Canines at Covenant" service and the larger phenomenon of "pet-centric" services. Her report also points to a deep theological confusion that these services bring to light. There are several dimensions to this confusion.

First, the Bible clearly presents animals as part of the goodness of God's creation. As Christians, we are to see the glory of God in the diversity and wonders of the animal kingdom. We are to respect all animals as intentional creations of God and to acknowledge the gifts that these creatures represent. God created animals for his own glory, and humans are to see the glory of the Creator in each animal species and individual.

Second, God made human beings as the only creatures made in his image. As the image-bearers of God, humans alone have the capacity to know and to worship the Creator. Animals reflect the glory of God, but only human beings can see the glory of God and know the Creator. Animals may possess consciousness, but they do not have souls. They lack the capacity to know the Creator.

Third, God assigned human beings dominion over the animal kingdom and clearly marked a separation between humans and animals. This separation is clear, ranging from the dominion theme to the prohibition of bestiality. To compromise that separation is to disobey God. Some part of our contemporary confusion over this distinction is due to emotionalism and sentiment, but much of it is driven by an ideology that reduces the status of humanity to that of the animals.

Fourth, while we recognize and celebrate the consciousness of many animals, we recognize that their consciousness is different from our own. We must also be aware that we tend to read features of human consciousness onto animals. We enjoy stories and movies that feature talking animals and endearing animal characters, but this is fiction, not fact. Many animals do enjoy forms of community and relatedness, but they are not humans. We must always be aware of the temptation to read human abilities and states of mind onto animals.

Fifth, to put the matter simply, animals do not worship God. Jesus told the woman at the well [John 4] that the Father seeks worshippers who worship him in spirit and in truth. The biblical concept of worship is not limited to attendance at a service, but involves the conscious and active knowledge of himself through Jesus Christ. Dogs do not worship. As Gillian Flaccus reported, the dogs at the "Canines at Covenant" service "didn't seem very interested in dogma." That observation is cute, but profoundly understated.

Sixth, the Bible says a great deal about animals. From Genesis to Revelation animals are keys to understanding God's revelation. Genesis shows us the indescribable wonder of the animals in creation. The Bible reveals the catastrophic impact of the Fall on animals, leading to

predation and violence. At the end of the Bible, we are given the picture of the new creation and the reversal of the curse of sin as the lion and the lamb lay together. But, amazingly enough, even as the Bible mentions animals as beasts of burden and agents of violence, it gives virtually no attention to animals as pets.

Seventh, America is a pet-centric culture, and this reveals much about us. We have the wealth to spend billions of dollars on pets. The ownership and enjoyment of pets is a sign of wealth and plenty. We are also a society that is trading human relationships for the companionship of pets. We cut off our elderly from extended family and leave them alone with their pets. We see increasing numbers of younger people who decide not to have children, but instead to pour themselves into relationships with their pets. Restaurants, malls, and hotels are asked to allow pets even as they allow children. Professor Hobgood-Oster points to the pet-centricity of our society as evidence of "the changing family structure, where pets are really central." The woman who brought her two dogs to the "Canines at Covenant" service said, "I don't have any kids, so my pets have always been my children." Postmodern Americans see these statements as evidence of new lifestyle choices. Christians should see these statements as tragic.

Eighth, the churches that offer these services are concentrated in the liberal wing of American Protestantism. The declining membership of liberal churches is matched to a loss of theological focus. Churches concerned with the preaching of the Gospel, committed to authentic evangelism and biblical preaching, are not going to demonstrate the confusion that leads to "Canines at Covenant." It is not surprising that Covenant Presbyterian Church lists its support for same-sex marriage and opposition to California's "Proposition 8" defending traditional marriage on the front page of its Web site.

I am thankful for dogs. My own family cherishes a friendly and inquisitive Beagle who reveals the glory of God in just being a Beagle. But Baxter does not go to church. I am absolutely convinced that animals will be a part of the New Creation we are promised in Christ. But it is believers in Christ -- redeemed humanity -- that yearn for this New Creation. To blur the distinction between humans and animals is to confuse the Gospel itself.

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