

## Singing the Climate Crisis—In Worship

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### Our Existing Inheritance

Looking through the thematic indexes of hymnals or online databases, it is not unusual to find a section dedicated to the theme of creation. The theme is anchored in our liturgical calendars, and from time to time many of our traditions call us to focus on the world around us. We are asked to turn our eyes from the divine and human to pay attention to the wider expanses of beings and lives among which we find our home. Much of the repertoire filed under these kinds of headings is deeply familiar (“All things bright and beautiful”, “How great thou art”). They are songs which have both shaped and responded to our imaginations of our faith and of the world around us over the course of many centuries.

The natural world has raised its head in many different ways throughout the history of Christian worship. Hymns speak of the vagaries and disasters of the natural world and of the goodness and innocence of nature. They are used to celebrate the harvest and human harmony with creation. And they have been written in response to destructive human pollution, industrialisation, and exploitation of animals. Different writers, movements, and periods have brought with them different sets of relationships and priorities, and this can be seen in the broad variety of existing repertoire, from Charles Wesley meditating on the uncertainties created by an earthquake, and John Austin inspired by the beauty of birdsong, through to Fred Pratt Green reflecting on the ecological destruction brought about by human wars.<sup>1</sup> The repertoire that we inherit is the product of different imaginations and time-periods, with varying understandings of the role of the natural world in the lives of Christian believers.

As the climate crisis unsettles the world around us, some of this repertoire remains useful. It engages us with nature and helps to bring our faith and devotion in closer relation to the rest of God’s creation. As many of us picking repertoire for services and events have discovered, however, it is also easy for many of these songs to begin to jar. They often point us back to ecological

relationships which have since swung in very different directions. They can sometimes lead us down avenues that leave us passive in response to the crises we are facing or even reinforce our patterns of exploitation and dominion. As with other social/cultural shifts that change our relationships to different aspects of the world and society, the climate crisis forces us to re-examine our worship. It asks us whether we are fostering the relationship with creation that we are called to live as Christians. We are pushed to consider the need for different patterns of relationship as we meet the challenges ahead.

### A Challenge to Wrestle

Recent album projects by The Porter’s Gate and by Resound Worship will already be familiar to many readers of this journal. The two albums, in different ways, seek to respond to the challenges we are faced with, crafting repertoire that tries to do justice both to Christian traditions and to a world on the brink of wide-scale ecological disaster. Neither album project has a single uniform way of grappling with these challenges, and each approaches them from a range of different entry-points. The writers take ways of worship and singing that we are already largely familiar with and look for places where these can be tweaked and pulled in new directions. Resound Worship’s *Doxecology* album, released in 2020, draws together thirteen songs on “themes of creation, ecology & Christian hope.”<sup>2</sup> The songs, written in a fairly conventional worship style, take us through a celebration of the creation process; the praise of creation for its maker; the future redemption of the created world; lament for human destruction; cries for mercy; a search for God in a time of crisis; narratives of hope; and themes of work, rest, and justice, alongside a range of others. The Porter’s Gate album, *Climate Vigil Songs*, meanwhile, seeks to address a broader set of scenarios both in and beyond a worship context. The album comprises 14 songs and expands the focus further, with lyrics focussed on justice

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1. Gillian Warson, “Environment, Hymns of,” *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology* (Canterbury Press), accessed June 27, 2022, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/e/environment,-hymns-of>.  
2. Resound Worship, *Doxecology*, accessed September 8, 2022, <https://www.resoundworship.org/projects/doxecology>.

and the coming kingdom; a song from the perspective of the earth; and verses drawing out the sacramental dynamics at work in natural processes. Both albums present a balance of familiar and unfamiliar. They use patterns that we are used to and rework them to include ecological perspectives that sometimes surprise us, and sometimes feel like a natural extension of our regular practices. They push us into new areas whilst avoiding too much disruption to the fundamental logic of our familiar patterns of worshipping.

Bringing together a focus on ecological crisis and the different thoughts and feelings that this evokes with the expectations of Christian worship music genres is far from a straightforward process. Both projects thus involved a process of work and reconciliation, grappling with challenges and reflecting upon existing models, learning and experimenting, stretching boundaries and acknowledging limitations. On one hand, the album-writers had to face up to a realisation that a lot of worship music has been ecotheologically naïve. As ecotheologians have pushed us to envision a world in which humans are part of a broader community of beings, existing repertoire often fails to do these relationships proper justice. At the same time, each album is faced with the challenge that many aspects of ecological crisis don't fit easily within Christian popular musical paradigms. Christian popular music is not adept at articulating scientific information, certain emotions fit better than others, and politicised content often has to be kept at a distance. Likewise, a focus on scriptures and relationship with God often dictates the logic by which other themes can find a way into a song.

An example from the *Doxecology* album serves to illustrate some of the balance that the albums strike. "If the fields are parched" draws on familiar scriptural imagery to describe a devastated world. Can rocks still cry out in praise to God if the rest of the natural world is destroyed? Are we ignorant of the signs of destruction around us? Will our children thank or praise us for what we've done? Each question draws on sayings and passages that are familiar to us from the scriptures, whilst placing them together in new ways that resonate explicitly with our contemporary ecological dilemmas. Following a typical worship song format, each verse lead into a simpler chorus, addressing God directly and asking for mercy. As with many hymns and worship songs, the sequence of the song builds towards a final verse emphasising the hope that lies before us, in this case, of the renewal of the earth. The narrative can't quite resist a positive ending, but insists that this ending is located in the world around us and not simply a matter of individual salvation or escape. As a song it enables a focus on the climate crisis, but in a way that feels remarkably familiar. The play between metaphor and literal imagery allows a direct focus on the issues around us but doesn't force one. It offers both the potential to unsettle our familiar expectations or to find a sense of security in them depending on what we seek to focus on.

## Finding Our Own Response

Listeners to the albums will have a range of different responses to the music that they offer. Some will want to put the songs to use, whilst others will wonder whether their congregation is prepared to sing about the climate. Some will also, likely, be frustrated that the albums don't go far enough in pushing us into new ways of worship since both projects contain a fair amount of caution in their approaches. They aim to bring about shifts in the way we relate to God and the world without pushing anyone too far out of their familiar patterns in doing so. It is an approach which is conscious of the potential to alienate, and which does everything it can to keep an existing constituency on board. Songs need to be useful, they need to be sung, and they need to fit into the expectations of a context. Otherwise, they will be discarded as unhelpful and will never make an impact. In part, this is the logic of the market that we have all grown used to in many realms of music production. But it is also a pragmatic logic which focuses on what is possible and what brings about results, perhaps focussing on this to a greater degree than on what might be ideal.

This pragmatism and step-by-step adjustment is one of the musical possibilities we have in our toolkit, and it is a useful one to have available. However, it is only one of the avenues that we might choose to go down. In grappling with the climate crisis, we are all challenged not to buy into a particular product, but to wrestle with our own situations. These album projects push us to think about the limits and conventions of our existing worship practices. Is it possible to do justice to the full range of plants, ecosystems, landscapes, and animals whilst singing together with other human beings inside a church building? Do genre expectations prioritise modes of feeling that we might need to move beyond in embarking on new emotional journeys? Which aspects of our traditions might we be able to rethink? Which ones resist our need to reform? How do our own traditions enable us or hinder us from relating well to our ecological environment/challenges in song? Our answers to these questions will be many and various, but they are questions we are all called to grapple with. In the months and years ahead of us we will all spend increasing amounts of time confronting and processing them.



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