

Covenant Renewal Worship

(adapted from *The Worship of the Church*, sec. 4.4-4.5)

The structure of biblical covenants - discussed previously

God, having entered into relationship with His people, calls us to fellowship with Him through a covenantal dialogue.

4.4 Covenant Renewal Worship, Old and new Covenants What was done in these assemblies?

Old Testament Covenant Renewal

God called His people to assemble before him periodically throughout the Exodus. Following the giving of the Decalogue at Sinai, Moses led the people in covenantal worship (Exodus 24:1-8)

Later, Moses prescribed for the Israelites a covenant renewal ceremony that was to take place as they entered the Land of Promise: Deut. 11:26-32; Deut. 27:1-13

The event is recorded in Joshua 8:30-35.

(What are the common elements in these gatherings?)

Later, King David called an assembly to announce the plans God had given him for the building of the temple, as well as the Lord's covenant with him to preserve his line on the throne of Israel. (1 Chron. 28:1-8; 19-21). The leaders of the people brought materials for the temple; David prayed, gave thanks, and they worshipped the Lord together (1 Chron. 29:10-20).

Following a period of spiritual decline in Israel, there was major covenant renewal under King Hezekiah. The temple was sanctified and the worship was restored, with the singing of praises and the sound of trumpets continuing until the completion of the burnt offering. When the offering was complete they bowed, worshipped, brought thankofferings, and the Levites sang praise with the words of David and Asaph (2 Chronicles 29:1-11, 20-33).

After the return from exile and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah also the people in covenantal worship (Neh. 8:1-12)

New Testament Covenant Renewal

Again in the New Testament there is an assembly for renewal of covenantal commitment

The church is called by God to meet with him and worship him. (Acts 20:7-8)

Baptism is the sign of the covenant established between the believer and God through Christ. NT worship includes a review of the covenant, and believers reaffirm their participation in the covenant. The Scriptures are read and explained (1 Tim 4:2,13). The Lord's Supper is also a reminder of the covenant: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25-30)

The activities of worship are described as "elements" in the language of the Westminster Confession. The elements, or parts, of worship correspond to a covenant ceremony.

The parties to the covenant communicate in the reading of Scripture and prayer. God's past dealings with His people are recounted in the reading of the Word. We are reminded of Christ's

work of redeeming us from death, and his gift of life everlasting. The reading, preaching, and singing of the Word exhort us to be obedient to our King. In the singing of the Psalms, there is thus simultaneously praise rendered to God and instruction given to His people.

There is no bloody sacrifice, because Christ has completed that sacrifice once and for all.

But we are instructed to remember His sacrifice in the Lord's Supper, and the supper also serves as a means of communion with Christ and his people. The Lord's Supper also points us the return of our King, as we are to do it until he comes again.

What about the blessings and cursings prominent in the Old Covenant? They are also present in the New: The benediction proclaims the chief blessing of the covenant ("I will be your God, and you will be my people").

There are warnings against unbelief (Heb. 4:1-13), and the gathered church exercises church discipline, a reminder of the curses of the covenant (1 Cor. 5:1-5).

4.5 A Biblical Theology of Worship

In both the New and Old Covenant settings, God calls his people to assemble before him; these assemblies point to the final assembly of the redeemed multitude from every nation.

There is discontinuity in the nature of these assemblies, for Christ has fulfilled the shadows and types – earthly temple, sacrifices, priesthood, etc.

But there is also continuity: the people of God in every age are called to remember His deeds, to remember his covenant demands, and to pledge loyalty to him. The assemblies are a source of encouragement in perseverance. There is a kind of continuity in the fact that sacrifice is required in both eras, but the only effective sacrifice in either age is the blood of Christ.

Prayers, the singing of psalms with grace in the heart, and the signs of the covenant (though these also change from Old to New) are common to both Old and New Covenants.

A further distinction in Old vs. New Covenant worship is the manner in which Christ is present; in the Old, He was present to worshippers in types and shadows; they looked for Him, but He had not yet come (Heb. 11). In the New Covenant, Christ has come. He is present with His people through the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-21), and every aspect of New Covenant worship is done in the name of Christ: The sign of participation in the Covenant, (Acts 2:38), the gathering of the assembly (Matt. 18:20), prayers (John 14:14; 15:16), preaching and teaching (Acts 5:41), and the covenant meal (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17) are all to be done in His Name in Christian worship. Because Christ is present in heaven and we are united to Him, we participate in the worship of Heaven (Heb. 7:24-8:2).

On the basis of these observations of covenantal structure in Biblical worship, the Westminster standards understand the Church's public worship to be fundamentally covenantal.