

## Covenantal Worship

(adapted from *The Worship of the Church*, sec. 5-6)

We've looked at examples of worship in the Old and New Testaments and considered the activities involved in each and the significance of the activities in the context of covenantal relationship with God. The next section of the report provides a summary of covenantal worship in the NT Church.

### 5. A Sketch of Covenantal New Testament Worship

#### 5.1 Our Covenant Lord calls his saints to gather and worship Him

The Lord says, "Gather my saints together before me, those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifices. Offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High" (Ps 50:5, 14). God in the NT warns believers not to forsake assembling together (Heb 10:19-25). The normal, regularly appointed time is the first day of the week, exactly when and where being up to the elders of the church.

#### 5.2 The Saints seek pardon for sin

Under the Old Covenant, the saints brought animals for sacrifice, laid their hands on them, and confessed their sins (Lev 4:15; 16:11-22). Under the New Covenant, the saints by faith lay hold on the sacrifice of Christ, confessing their sins to God (Heb 9:11-15; 1John 1:5-10). In the solemn assemblies of the Church, the saints properly respond to God's call to meet with a confession of sin and hear God's assurance of forgiveness for Christ's sake. Apart from Christ's sacrifice, there can be no appearing in God's presence. Anyone not clothed in Christ's righteousness will be cast out of the King's presence (Matt 22:12).

#### 5.3 The Saints respond with praise, thanksgiving, and offerings

God is pleased with the sacrifice of praise and with the good deeds of sharing this world's goods (Heb 13:10-16). And he instructs his people to give him thanks (Ps 105:1-3). The New Covenant is a wedding bond between God and his people. Their meeting each week properly brings joy and delight. So the saints sing psalms to God.

#### 5.4 Recounting the history of the Covenant Relationship

The giving of the Law under the Old Covenant began by recounting God's saving Israel: *I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*. Likewise, in the New Testament, God's saving acts in Christ are proclaimed in the gospel. God in Christ has vanquished the enemies of his people: the power of sin, Satan, and the last enemy, death itself (Col. 1:9-14).

#### 5.5 Instruction in God's Covenant

Scripture instructs and exhorts God's people to obey their sovereign Lord in everything at all times. In the reading and preaching of the Word, the saints hear God himself speak to them. They hear warnings and encouragements. The hands that hang down, and the weak knees, are strengthened. Their feet are given straight paths to run in. The unregenerate are left without excuse, the unrepentant face God's correcting chastisement. Weighty church discipline takes place within the assembly (1Cor 5:4-5). The saints all add their *Amen* to his word, mixing faith with God's word, showing they believe and embrace it: "For first, the Lord teaches and instructs us by His Word. Secondly, He confirms it by the sacraments. Finally, He illumines our minds by the light of His Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and sacraments to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within." (Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.XIV.8).

### 5.6 Mutual Admonition through the singing of the Psalms

Col. 3:15-16 - In singing the psalms, all the saints share in teaching and admonishing one another. Even newborn babes in Christ, even those weak in faith, even those who have been caught in a fault, even those with no gift of preaching join the assembly in singing psalms. Through the psalms the word of God dwells richly in his people, so that each instructs all how to praise God, how to confess sin, how to handle adversity, and how to remember God's covenant.

### 5.7 Offering up our desires to God in prayer

Just as all sing to God, so all pray. When one leads in prayer, each adds his *Amen* to it. In the church's prayers, the covenant is again remembered and affirmed as the church offers up its desires to God, with thanksgivings and confessions of sin. Paul wrote to Timothy to instruct him *how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth* (1Tim 3:15). By calling the church the *house of God* Paul teaches that the church is now the temple of God (2Ki 12:4-5, 1Chr 26:12, 2Chr 5:14). His rules still govern His house. When the church meets, it prays: "Therefore, I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence... I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel...[and] with good works (1Tim 2:1-2, 8-10)."

### 5.7 Signs and Seals of the Covenant

When the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is administered, it seals God's love to his people. In Communion, as in Baptism and in the preaching of the word, grace and salvation are held forth in fullness, evidence, and efficacy, to all nations.

### 5.8 God's Blessing as the assembly ends

A parting benediction conveys God's blessings on the saints in the week to come. They leave the assembly with "grace, peace, and mercy from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." They also leave with the hope of the resurrection and the life to come and the promise of the Holy Spirit's presence, "lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

Throughout the meeting of the church with God, the saints exhibit lives renewed in Christ: enmities are forgotten, forgiveness being the rule, so that love covers a multitude of sins. The strong look out for the weak, the rich receive no favoritism, each one aims to edify the others (Heb 10:24-25). Our Confession summarizes marvelously: "All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man. (*Confession*, 26.1)

## 6. Conclusions

The question, "What is the public worship of God in the Church?" has been answered by (1) Scripture's teaching concerning the assembly of the Church, and (2) the nature of covenantal worship as described in the scriptures and the relationship between in the Old Covenant Church and the New Covenant Church .

Writing in the 17th century, Turretin states: “For although sacred assemblies for the public exercises of piety can and ought to be frequented on other days...and every pious person is bound in duty to his conscience to have privately his daily devotional exercises, still on this day above others a holy convocation ought to take place (as was the custom on the Sabbath, Lev. 23:3) in which there may be leisure for devout attention to the reading and hearing of the word (Heb 10:25), the celebration of the sacraments (Acts 20:7), the psalms and prayer (Col 3:16; Acts 1:14), to alms and help to the poor (1Cor 16:2) and in general to all that sacred service pertaining to external and stated worship. (Turretin, Vol. II, 11, Q.XIV, xxvi)

The historic Reformed understanding of covenantal worship is reflected in the most ancient post-Biblical reports of Christian worship as well. In *The First Apology of Justin Martyr* (c. 155 AD), we find a description of second-century worship that includes these same elements of worship.

We may (and should!) pray, sing, read, and meditate at times other than the stated assemblies of the Church. But private and family worship, though also governed by the word of God, is different from the public worship of the Church. Those times are not assemblies of the Church, nor are all the means of grace dispensed; hence, in those times the whole covenant community is not reviewing and renewing its commitment to the Lord.

The report concludes that the assembled church is not free to devise a different way to renew the covenant with God because:

- (1) It is not the Church’s covenant, but Christ’s. The Lord of the covenant determines how it is to be observed.
- (2) When the local church meets, it joins with the assembly of the universal Church of saints and of angels, therefore we should seek unity of practice among the churches, rather than each church doing what is wise in its own eyes as though it had no king.

Our approach to God should not be determined by culture or custom, but by God’s revelation of His will. Just as we cannot know God accurately without His self-revelation, so we cannot worship Him as He is properly worshipped (in Spirit and in Truth) unless we do so in the manner He has revealed.

Theology and worship cannot be separated. When one changes, the other is sure to follow. Errors in worship practices will lead to errors in theology, and vice-versa. Covenant theology has proved to be a solid, biblical understanding of God’s special revelation. The worship that follows from covenant theology is spiritual, God-centered, word-directed, and a blessing to the saints.

God is unique and his covenant is unique. God’s worship is directed by God’s word from the beginning of time because worship expresses the most fundamental and profound dimension of the relationship which God has sovereignly instituted with his rational creatures.