

A Reformed Theology of Worship

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The main task of this paper will be to answer the question, “What is the public worship of God in the Church?” How is it different from the daily service to God which all Christians owe Him? Is it different and differently governed than private, family, or small group worship? In this paper we begin with a review of our historic doctrinal understanding of the worship of the Church, then move to a development of the theology of worship framed in biblical theological terms. Building on these we sketch a covenantal form of worship.

0. Introduction and background.

0.1 Contemporary perspectives on worship

In considering the debates about worship in the Church in our day, it is necessary to keep four things in mind. First, the form of contemporary Sunday services of evangelical churches lacks continuity with much of the past worship practices of the Christian Church. Worship in American churches, and increasingly in other countries, has been greatly influenced by the practices of American evangelicalism which grew out of the 19th century camp meeting. In the camp meeting there was a three-part form: music (to attract a crowd and put it in the right mood), preaching (to convert sinners), and an altar call (to secure a decision). The goal was the conversion of sinners, not the service of God by the converted saints. Neither the doctrine of salvation nor the doctrine of the Church was soundly represented in camp meetings. Second, the Western mind has grown hostile to making distinctions (male/female, marriage/cohabitation, truth/falsehood, man/animal). It is therefore not surprising that the distinction between the public worship of God and the rest of the Christian life should appear to be problematic to many. Third, dispensational theology has robbed much of the evangelical church of the sense that it can really learn from the Old Testament, let alone that Old Testament teaching might still be binding. So it approaches the issue of worship as it does ethics and doctrine (but not prophecy!), with only the New Testament in its hands and with suspicion toward the past. In this climate of thought, many Reformed and Lutheran (and even Roman Catholic) Churches imitate what seems to succeed in the “megachurches,” often with little thought given to the doctrinal consequences of their decisions. The fourth thing to bear in mind is

the constant effort on the part of the unseen enemy, the devil, to distort or corrupt the worship of God (Mat 4:9; Eph 6:11-12; Jas 4:7). Surely Reformed Christians must remember the lessons of Scripture and history.

0.2 Reformed confessional perspective on worship

As a confessional Reformed church, we must not approach worship in the pragmatic manner prevalent in many evangelical churches. We must not view ourselves as a generation of practical innovators moving the Church forward to ever greater successes. We are humble servants of Christ, exhorted “to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Through our Confession and Testimony, we recognize the spiritual unity we share with our fathers in the faith, both in doctrine and in practice. We affirm the continuity between the Old and New Covenants, and the continuity of the Church through the generations. In our Confession, we treasure the solemn and holy nature of the assembly of God’s people on the Lord’s Day and the means of grace instituted by God and blessed by his Spirit. We hold firmly to the holy and spiritual nature of the Church and to her place in God’s design for the world. She alone is the pillar and ground of the truth, and that truth which she upholds is the truth of God’s Word in its purity, apart from men’s traditions (Mark 7:7). Our goal is to glorify God and to enjoy Him in worship. This requires thoughtful and careful study of God’s will. “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24). Christ joins Spirit and truth together, governed by one preposition: EN PNEUMATI KAI ALHQEIAI. In making this statement, Christ does not reject the relevance of Old Covenant worship to the practice of the New Covenant Church, but gives us a concise restatement of the New Covenant promise that God’s Law will be written on our hearts (Jer 31:33-34; Ezek 36:26-27; cf., Heb 8:10; 10:16; 2Cor 3:3). Though there is indeed an element of discontinuity -- Christ’s body is the true temple -- a discontinuity that fulfills the gospel’s universal vocation (“...neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem shall you worship the Father...”), the conjunction of Spirit and truth directs us to worship God in every place according to His Word (“we know what we worship”) in the new dispensation of the Spirit, now that Christ has come.

Christ gives no liberty to think that the leading of the Spirit will open vistas of truth apart from His Word. The worship of God continues to be covenantal and directed by God's Word while being opened to all nations and all places through faith in Jesus Christ (John 12:32; Isa 49:6; 1Jn 2:2; Rev 5:9).

0.3 Perspective of the Reformers on worship

From ancient times through the Reformation, and until recent years, the Church understood the unique character of its public worship. At the Reformation, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Reformed churches in Europe argued about what should be done in worship and about what principles governed worship, but they did agree that the Church must gather weekly for the public worship of God. The Reformers taught that the life of the Christian in the home, in the workplace or in the market square should be honoring to God, but they also taught that God was to be especially honored in the worship of the Church gathered on the Lord's Day. Our confessional documents move quickly from a general definition of worship to how it should be carried out in church meetings and how the Sabbath day ought to be sanctified. For the Reformers, the worship of the Church was a sacred gathering set apart from the rest of life and governed explicitly by the Word of God.

1.0 The Westminster Assembly's Doctrine of Worship

The doctrine and practice of worship was a central concern of the English Puritan movement and of the Westminster Assembly. Charles I's attempt to impose a new liturgy upon the Church of Scotland in 1637 provoked widespread resistance. The "Long" Parliament, led by Puritans, called the Westminster Assembly to advise it in the further reformation of the doctrine, worship, and government of the Church of England. The doctrine of worship is central to the work of the Assembly. They devoted over seventy sessions to the study of worship, and the first document they produced was *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* [Murray 1994:171]. Because worship was a central concern of the Westminster Assembly, the Westminster doctrine of worship is not isolated in the *Directory*, nor in Chapter 21 of the *Confession of Faith*, "Of Religious Worship, and

the Sabbath Day.” The Westminster doctrine of worship is woven throughout the documents produced by the Assembly. It is integral to the theology of the *Confession* and *Catechisms*. The Westminster doctrine of worship is not left to man’s creative ingenuity but is explicitly set forth from the Scriptures.

1.1 The Sufficiency of Scripture

The Preface to the *Directory for Worship* is important for understanding the Assembly’s approach to worship. After an extensive critique of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the preface states that after much prayer and consultation,

... not with flesh and blood, but with his holy word, [we] resolved to lay aside the former Liturgy, with the many rites and ceremonies formerly used in the worship of God, and have agreed upon this present Directory for all parts of publick worship. Wherein our care hath been to hold forth such things as are of divine institution in every ordinance; and other things we have endeavoured to set forth according to the rules of Christian prudence, agreeable to the general rules of the Word of God.

The distinction between “things of divine institution” and “other things” is further explained in the first mention of worship in the *Confession*, in **Chapter 1.6** (Chapter 1, Section 6). There, asserting the sufficiency of Scripture, the *Confession* declares:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing is to be added [...] Nevertheless we acknowledge that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.

The mention of the circumstances of worship in the latter part of this section indicates that the Assembly included worship in the “all things necessary” of the earlier part.

The Assembly’s teaching on the doctrine of worship is founded on the sufficiency of Scripture. This is buttressed by a further reference to worship in **Chapter 1.8**, where it is stated that one reason for making the Scripture available to people in their own language is “that the word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner.” Also, the *Directory* states “our care hath been to hold forth such things as are of divine institution in every ordinance; and other things we have endeavoured to set forth according to the rules of Christian prudence, agreeable to the general rules of the word of God...” These “other things” include matters such as how long a section of Scripture to read, what parts of the Bible to read from more frequently, how long to preach, how often to give interpretive comments after the reading, which petitions are prayed before or after the sermon, and so forth. Nowhere does the *Directory* leave license for creative or innovative practices in the worship of God. The underlying principle is the sufficiency of Scripture to direct us how to worship God.

1.2 The Transcendent Majesty of God

Chapter 2.2 of the *Confession* mentions worship in the context of the transcendent majesty of God, who “... is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures.”

Worship is part of the proper response to this exalted vision of God:

“To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience, he is pleased to require of them.”

It is not that God needs our worship, but rather that He commands and lays down the terms for our worship. God takes the initiative: He reveals Himself to us and He structures His relationship with us. This divine initiative is dealt with more fully in **Chapter 7.1**, “Of God’s Covenant with Man,” where we read:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

Through the Covenant of Grace, by means of our Mediator Jesus Christ, we are enabled to approach God in holiness and in peace, to receive the blessings he lavishly bestows upon his children. God determines and requires the worship and service which should be given to him. Worship is covenantal, grounded in the self-sufficiency, sovereignty, and holiness of God, and made possible through His condescending love for man. It is God's initiative to bind us in a relationship with Him by means of His covenant. Our response in worship is secondary, initiated by His acting on our behalf when we were incapable of worship (Eph 2:12). The *Confession* sets forth Biblical worship before the holy, sovereign and exalted vision of God. "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word" (Isaiah 66:1).

In **Chapter 7**, the heart of worship, namely, the preaching of the Word and the sacraments, are treated as "ordinances" by which the Covenant of Grace is dispensed. . This shows that the foundation of the Church's worship is the movement from God to His people. These ordinances are God's own acts whereby we have "fruition" of Him as "our blessedness and reward." We will return to this chapter of the Confession below.

Chapter 16, "Of Good Works," is not about worship as such, but again states this foundational principle of God's sovereignty over worship:

Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men out of blind zeal, or upon any pretence of good intention.

Matt. 15:9 is cited as a proof text. Recall that Roman Catholicism treats many acts of devotion as meritorious works -- reciting prayers, making pilgrimages, etc. This chapter of the *Confession* states plainly that God alone has the authority to determine what are good works. God alone determines

how He is to be approached and what pleases Him. There is no permission given for men's innovations even "upon any pretence of good intention."

1.3 Liberty of Conscience

The second section of **Chapter 20** of the *Confession* is devoted to the subject of liberty of conscience. This was a pressing issue for the members of the Westminster Assembly. They were Puritans who had been persecuted in the church and nation for refusing to observe ceremonies prescribed by the bishops under the direction of Charles I. By "conscience" the *Confession* means an inward conviction about what God requires. Violation of this inward conviction would result in fearing God's displeasure and seeking His forgiveness. Liberty of conscience is an application of the principle stated in the first chapter of the *Confession*, namely, that we learn what we are to believe and what God requires of us from Scripture alone. If any human authority, civil or ecclesiastical, commands us to believe or do something which is contrary to God's Word, we know immediately that this is not something God requires, and our conscience is therefore free. We may -- in fact, we should, disobey.

Chapter 20.2 defines another, more restricted sphere in which the conscience is free, in "matters of faith and worship."¹ In this sphere, not even what is "beside" the Word ["go beyond His Word" Modern Language Revision] may be imposed on the conscience. Here the *Confession* states the principle that God's people may not be required to believe anything or follow any practice in the worship of God not taught in Scripture. To follow in these matters mere human authority as if it were the voice of God is a betrayal of the liberty of conscience. Human authorities which attempt to impose extra-biblical beliefs or worship practices destroy our liberty of conscience. They are doing as the scribes in Jesus' day: "And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9). The *Confession* is clear and forceful on this point. In ordinary

¹The standard edition of the *Confession* has a slightly different reading. The original text, reproduced in our *Testimony*, uses a semicolon to indicate that the phrase "beside it [Scripture]" refers specifically to the spheres of faith and worship.

life such as politics, business or family freedom of conscience means not being obligated to do

anything contrary to the Word of God. But, in matters of faith and worship, freedom of conscience means not being obligated to believe or do anything “beside” [in addition to] the Word of God. Together with the principle we saw from **Chapter 16** [section 1.2, above], that no permission is given for men’s innovations even “upon any pretence of good intention,” the *Confession* demonstrates how God zealously guards our hearts and His worship.

1.4 Worship Ruled by the Word

The *Confession’s* chapter which deals specifically and in detail with worship is **Chapter 21**. It begins by stating the reason or basis for worship: the existence, lordship, sovereignty, and goodness of God. Echoing Romans 1, the Confession states that these attributes of God are known by “the light of nature,” that is, by general or natural revelation.² God has planted the “seed of religion” in all people, and so all people worship -- but, since the Fall, they worship created things instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:18-25). The chapter does not give a definition of worship, but describes it by using active verbs: God is to be “feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served” with one’s whole being. Stress is placed here upon the fact that worship comes from the heart, and is not primarily or only an outward performance. The emphasis on worship from the heart is continued in later sections, when the specific activities of worship are discussed.

Because worship is God’s and of God, the **first section** of **Chapter 21** also states a general principle of biblical worship, commonly called the “Regulative Principle of Worship”:

“But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or in any way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.”

²The inclusion of the “goodness” of God as seen in nature follows Calvin’s emphasis on this point (see *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I.V.)

The texts given in support of this principle are Deut. 12:32, Matt. 15:9, Acts 17:25, Matt. 4:9-10, the Second Commandment, and Col. 2:23. Calvin also expressed this principle of biblical worship in many places; for example, in commenting on Amos 5:27, he writes:

“we ought not to bring any thing of our own when we worship God, but we ought to depend always on the word of his mouth, and to obey what he has commanded lest we attempt anything but what he approves.”

This principle follows logically from fallen man’s need to be directed away from his native idolatries and to the true God. Without God’s revelation, we remain ignorant of what pleases Him. Without God’s revelation we will follow our natural inclinations, to the destruction of our souls and our bodies (Rom 1:28 ff.). And even with God’s revelation, we often resist the Spirit and pursue the desires of the flesh (Rom 7). Thus we need to be biblically directed if we are to worship in Spirit and truth.

Section two of Chapter 21 makes the point that the triune God alone is the proper object of worship, and that Christ is the only Mediator through whom our worship becomes acceptable to God. Chapters 2 and 8 of the Confession give the scriptural and doctrinal basis for this conclusion.

Section three begins to describe the parts or activities of worship. Prayer is mentioned first and prominently.³ We do not pray acceptably if we attempt to do so in our own righteousness or in our own strength. Prayer is acceptable when we rely on the mediation and intercession of Christ, and when we depend on the Holy Spirit to guide and enable us as we pray. True prayer is to be from the heart: with “understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance.” The *Confession* here stresses the inwardness and spirituality of true prayer. **Section five** sets forth the parts of “the ordinary religious worship of God,” i.e., Lord’s Day worship. These include: reading of Scripture (having its own importance in worship apart from preaching); preaching and hearing the Word; singing of Psalms; administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. *The Directory for Publick Worship* gives a fuller description of each of these parts.⁴ Note well the emphasis

³Calvin called prayer the “chief part” of public worship. *Institutes* III.XX.29.

⁴It is clear that the Assembly advocated the exclusive use of the biblical Psalms in praise. As the only approved manual for praise, they produced a metrical psalter containing only the 150 Psalms. The Assembly’s psalter was later revised in Scotland, and became the Scottish Psalter of 1650.

on the inwardness and spirituality of worship in this section. True worship not only calls for approved practices, but must also be from the heart. Scripture reading must be “with godly fear”;

preaching must be “sound”; hearing must be “conscionable (conscientious)”; singing must be “with grace in the heart”; sacraments must be received in a worthy manner. Correct form and inward devotion go together. The worshipers God seeks are those who worship Him in spirit and truth.

Section six expresses the truth taught by Jesus in John 4:21-24: because of His salvation, wrought by His life, death, and resurrection, worship no longer requires any special holy places. Churches are houses where worshipers meet, but they have no special sanctity. God is to be worshiped everywhere. Though in the view of the Assembly, worship must take place daily in families and in private devotions -- where it is still regulated by Scripture -- yet it is said to occur “more solemnly in the public assemblies.”

The chapter concludes with two sections on the Sabbath, described as a day set apart for the worship of God, both private and public. Here again the Assembly made a distinction between public and private worship, but there is no indication that the biblical principles of worship detailed above are limited to public worship. The Church of Scotland subsequently produced a *Directory for Family Worship*, applying these same principles in the home. Public and private worship are complementary.

1.5 Worship, the Church and the Sacraments

Chapter 25, “Of the Church,” deals with worship in three ways. First, in **Section three**, we read that the “ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God” are given to the Church “for the gathering and perfecting of the saints.” Here the focus is on worship as a means of grace to God’s people. Second, **Section four** states that the purity of the Church depends in part on whether the ordinances are administered purely, and public worship performed purely. The focus here is on the necessity to guard the purity of worship. Third, in **Section five** confidence is expressed that “there shall be always a church on earth to worship God according to his will.” Here the Assembly asserts that God Himself will zealously guard the purity of His worship on earth. The two latter statements attest to the importance of biblical worship in the Assembly’s theology. Worship that departs from

the will of God revealed in His Word defiles the Church. The communion of saints (**Chapter 26.2**) includes the obligation “to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God.”

In the Confession’s treatment of the sacraments (**Chapters 27-29**), the covenantal perspective of the Westminster theology is most clearly revealed. The sacraments are elements of worship, “holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace,” which solemnly engage Christians in the service of God in Christ “according to His Word” (**Chapter 27.1**). Baptism is for “the solemn admission” into the visible Church, and because it is covenantal it is administered to children of believing parents. The Lord’s Supper seals the benefits of Christ to true believers, nourishes them spiritually, and enables their further “engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him, and [is] a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other.” The sacraments embody in themselves all that true biblical worship is: they are ordained by God, carefully prescribed by His Word, and administered according to His command or they become invalid or even harmful (1Cor 11:29). The sacraments are solemn holy ordinances for the benefit of the Church; they are celebrated in the Church’s assembly; they are accompanied by the Word and by prayer; and they are administered and led by those given authority to do so in the Church.

1.6 Four point Summary

1. The Assembly clearly followed Calvin in adhering to the principle that worship is to be guided by, and strictly limited to, what is warranted by Scripture. This comes to expression in several places, and is indeed an underlying theme in the Confession. Rejecting this principle of biblical worship taught by the Westminster Assembly constitutes a fundamental departure from the Confession’s doctrine of worship.⁵

2. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* teaches the basic unity of the Covenant of Grace in both dispensations. According to the Confession, the difference between Old Testament and New

⁵The term “Regulative Principle” is not used by the Confession. We are setting forth the *Confession’s* teaching on worship which people attempt to sum up with this term, but we ask our readers to evaluate this doctrine on the basis of theology and not terminology.

Testament worship is significant, but the governing principles of biblical worship are the same.

There is now greater simplicity; there are no holy places; baptism and the Lord's Supper have replaced the OT sacraments, etc. However, none of this affects the abiding principle that we are commanded to worship God according to His Word and are forbidden to go beyond it. Biblical support for this foundational principle of the doctrine of worship comes from both Old and New Testaments. It is not merely a principle for the Old Covenant age, for it is rooted in God's unchanging nature, especially His holiness. Iain Murray comments: "Puritan worship cannot be understood without the high vision of God contained in the *Confession*." [Murray 1994:189].

3. The Biblical principle of God-ordained and God-directed worship is based upon the transcendent majesty of God. It protects the worshiper's freedom of conscience so he can worship sincerely from the heart. The principal function of the Church in the world is to be a worshipping community. Making disciples entails making worshipers through Word and sacrament.

4. The Confession continues Calvin's insistence that true worship involves not only the proper scriptural form, but also the right attitude of the heart.

1.7 Worship and the Covenant of Grace in the Westminster Confession

There is an additional point which merits further development. As we indicated, the covenant lies at the heart of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The members of the Assembly knew nothing of suzerainty treaties (Kline 1963), and their approach to Covenant Theology was more systematic than historical-redemptive. Nevertheless, Covenant Theology is particularly evident in the Confession of Faith as it applies to worship in Chapter 7. We noted earlier that this chapter begins with the clear statement that it is only through a covenantal relationship that man is capable of approaching God:

Chapter 7.1 The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

The light of nature (**Chapter 21.1**) is not sufficient to show man how to worship the Creator. Apart from God's gracious covenant, mankind could "never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward."

A large measure of the blessedness and reward that God's reasonable creatures experience of Him is supplied in worship. Thus, the Assembly goes on to state plainly the relationship between the covenant and God's worshipers in **Sections five and six** of this chapter. Notice in **Section five** that much of what we know as the worship practices of the Old Covenant is listed:

Chapter 7.5 This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel; under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.

Now notice how in **Section 6** the worship practices of the New Covenant are listed:

Chapter 7.6 Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity and less outward glory, yet in them it is held forth in more fulness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.

The Confession emphasizes the unity, and hence the continuity, of the covenant more than it does the discontinuities and differences between the two administrations of the one Covenant of Grace. Word and sacrament together form the essence of Christian worship. They are the means God has instituted to reveal Christ and the benefits of his covenant to us and to apply them to us. Our

response is to hear, believe, and obey the Word, and to partake of the sacraments in faith. Through these means, the grace of the covenant is signified, sealed, and exhibited to us, by the working of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of Christ.⁶

The Westminster documents develop and explain the doctrines of the Word and sacraments with great care. For example, the Assembly devoted three entire chapters of the Confession to the sacraments. Their development of the doctrine of the Word and sacraments addresses not only how the Word and sacraments are to be administered by pastors but also how they are to be received by the Church, and how the Lord adds His blessing through them. Thus, “The spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word an effectual means . . . unto salvation” (*WLC* Q. 155). In the theology of the Assembly, the sacraments are not mere rituals and commemorative liturgical acts; they “become effectual means of salvation by the working of the Holy Ghost, and the blessing of Christ, by whom they are instituted” (*WLC* Q. 161). The Assembly warns against neglect or abuse of these principal means of grace by which the benefits of Christ’s death are conveyed to believers. God the king, the Redeemer, gives gifts to His people. He speaks His Word, he sends His Spirit, He seals His promises with the sacraments. In all this, there is a discourse from God to His people.

In **Chapter 21.3** the Confession states that prayer is “one special part of religious worship.” In the Assembly’s teaching, prayer is in fact integral to and accompanies every other part of worship: the reading and preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the giving of praise (*WLC* Q. 104, “calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks”). These are all accomplished through prayer. The grace of faith is “increased and strengthened” by prayer (**Chapter 14:1**). The prayers of God’s people provide the vehicle for faith to express itself back to God who gave it. As John Calvin put it, “Prayer . . . is the chief exercise of faith, and by which we daily receive God’s benefits” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book III, Chap. 20). The God of the covenant discourses

⁶Compare *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Questions 155 and 161.

with His people and invites His people to discourse with Him. Prayer accompanies the

administration of all the ordinances of the New Covenant, and thus completes the covenantal discourse from God to man and back to God. (Reflect on Isaiah 55:11 and John 16:28 in this light.)

Consider how this covenantal theology of worship is reflected in a few other relevant portions of the Westminster documents.

Chapter 14.1 The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the word: by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.

WLC Q. 154 What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation? A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.

The *Larger Catechism* repeats the language of **Chapter 7.6** (above) of the *Confession* as Q. 35. It then immediately moves to the identification of the Mediator of the Covenant of grace (Q. 36), the incarnation (Q. 37) and the deity of Christ (Q. 38). Question 38 declares Christ's divine mediation necessary "to satisfy God's justice, procure his favor, purchase a peculiar people, give his Spirit to them, conquer all their enemies, and bring them to everlasting salvation." This is obvious covenantal language, found in the covenant passages of the Scriptures. Compare these benefits with the promises of God in Gen 22:16-18, Exodus 19:3-8, Lev 26:6-9, Deut 26:17-19, Deut 33:27-29, etc. The Covenant of Grace forms the context in which the Westminster Assembly developed its theology of worship. Westminster worship is fundamentally covenantal in nature. God proclaims, reviews, affirms, promises, commands obedience. His worshipers respond in faith, prayer, praise, offerings, and obedience.

1.8 Reformed Worship is Covenantal

From this discussion we see that the *Confession of Faith* views Christian worship as a covenantal act. Worship is practiced within the structure of the Covenant of Grace. Were it not for that covenantal relationship, Christians could receive no “fruition of God” as their “blessedness and reward” [“perfect enjoyment of God as his blessing and reward” *MLC*]. Consequently, it is only through a covenantal structure that the worship of the Church can be rightly understood. With Covenant Theology in place, the practice of worship is defined by the nature of the covenantal relationship which God has ordained between Himself and His creatures.

The covenant view of worship is not a Puritan innovation on the part of the Westminster Assembly. Consider Calvin’s comment on Psalm 50:5.

The prophet here declares that sacrifices were of no value whatever except as seals of God’s covenant, an interpretative handwriting of submission to it, or in general as means employed for ratifying it.⁷ There is an allusion to the custom then universally prevalent of interposing sacrifices, that covenants might be made more solemn, and be more religiously observed. In like manner, the design with which sacrifices were instituted by God was to bind his people more closely to himself, and to ratify and confirm his covenant. The passage is well worthy of our particular notice, as defining those who are to be considered the true members of the Church. They are such, on the one hand, as are characterised by the spirit of meekness, practising righteousness in their intercourse with the world; and such, on the other, as close in the exercise of a genuine faith with the covenant of adoption which God has proposed to them.

This forms the true worship of God, as he has himself delivered it to us from

⁷“Propheta autem clare hic denuntiat nihil esse momenti in sacrificiis, nisi ut sint quasi sigilla, vel syngraphae, vel alia adminicula ad sancendum Dei foedus.” A literal translation reads: “The prophet, moreover, announces here clearly that there is nothing of importance in sacrifices, except that they are, as it were, seals, or promissory notes, or other aids to confirm God’s covenant.”

heaven; and those who decline from it, whatever pretensions they may make to be considered a church of God, are excommunicated from it by the Holy Spirit. As to

sacrifices or other ceremonies, they are of no value, except in so far as they seal to us the pure truth of God. All such rites, consequently, as have no foundation in the word of God, are unauthorised, and that worship which has not a [distinct] reference to the word is but a corruption of things sacred. (*Commentary on the Psalms.*)

Calvin is here viewing worship primarily as something that God does, namely, a confirmation of his covenant to his assembled people. Consider also Calvin's remarks on passages such as Ps 50:15 "Call upon me in the day of tribulation" and Matt 7:7 "Seek and you will receive; knock, and it will be opened unto you":

So then all the passages that keep occurring in the Scriptures in which calling upon God is enjoined upon us, are as so many banners set up before our eyes to inspire us with confidence. It would be rashness itself to burst into God's sight if he himself had not anticipated our coming by calling us. Therefore he opens a way for us in his own words: "I will say to them, 'You are my people'; they will say to me, 'Thou art our God.'" [Zech 13:9 p.] We see how he precedes those who worship him, and would have them follow him, and thus not to fear for the sweetness of the melody that he himself dictates. (*Institutes*, Book III.XX.13)

We conclude from this study that the central insight of the Reformed doctrine of worship, and particularly the systematic development of the doctrine of worship taught in the Westminster documents, is its covenantal basis and practice. As the biblical examples of covenantal assemblies show, this worship takes place as God meets with His people who are called into a solemn and holy congregation. There God initiates a sacred dialogue with His people and administers holy ordinances to them which proclaim, apply, and seal the covenantal relationship that He has ordained with them. In turn, God's people respond with thanks, praise, petitions, and obedience.

We now turn to a consideration of the doctrine of worship from a biblical-theological perspective. This will build and expand on the Westminster doctrine of worship, articulating it in language drawn more directly from the Scriptures.

2.0 A Biblical Theology of Worship

2.1 The Continuity Between the Old Covenant and the New

Biblical theology demonstrates that the Church of the New Covenant continues the Church of the Old Covenant. “We [Christians] are the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit” (Phil 3:3). God promised a New Covenant to the house of Israel, the covenant which the Church receives (Jer 31:31-34; Lk 22:20; Heb 8:8-9). Gentile believers are no longer strangers and aliens but fellow citizens with the saints, the wall of partition having been abolished by Christ (Eph 2:14-15, 19). James writes to “the twelve tribes scattered abroad” (Jas 1:1). Peter addresses “the pilgrims of the Dispersion” (1Pe 1:1). The addition of the Gentiles to the Church fulfills God’s promise to build up David’s house (Ac 15:14-17). Therefore the Hebrew Scriptures are the property of the Church (2Tim 3:16), written to instruct the Church (1Co 10:11), their prophecies were intended to serve the Church (1Pe 1:10-12). The Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms all speak of Christ who is the cornerstone of the Church’s foundation (Lu 24:27, 44; Eph 2:20).

The Church continues Israel, but it is a renovated Israel. Some things have been replaced, in particular those things that served as shadows of Christ’s salvation to come. For example, prophets, priests, and kings each had a place in the administration of old Israel. Each revealed a portion of Christ’s rule to come. With His appearing, Christ assumes the mediatorial offices of prophet, priest, and king, so the Church today has no prophet bringing new word from God, no priest offering sacrifice to God, and no king in the Church except Christ. Christ is prophet, priest, and king, and in Him the saints are prophets to proclaim the good news, priests to serve God, and kings reigning with Christ (Rev 1:6, 1Pe 2:5, 9). Nevertheless, there is continuity between Israel and the Church in the continuing office of elder, who has true ruling authority. “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls” (Heb 13:17). “Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you” (Ti 2:15).

Where is the point of continuity in worship? It cannot be found in the specifics of temple sacrifice because Christ has fulfilled them. He is our priest, and He has made all the saints priests.

Church leaders are elders, not priests. He is our sacrifice, and we now give God our bodies as living sacrifices and offer Him the sacrifice of praise. There is no re-offering of Christ, as in the mass. Christ is the temple torn down and rebuilt in three days, and we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. There is no one location in which the Church specially serves God, and the Church meets as truly in the fields as it does in a cathedral.

The point of continuity in worship is found in the people of God called to assemble to meet with Him. Just as Israel assembled before God, the Church now assembles before God. Just as Israel always appeared before God with a sacrifice, so the Church always appears before God with Christ's sacrifice (Heb 10:14). Because God commands His people periodically to assemble before Him, when Paul discusses church meetings he refers to these not, as we might expect, as worship services (or a mass or a divine liturgy), but as a "coming together" (1Cor 11:17; 1Cor 14:26). He adds the defining phrases "in assembly" using the general meaning of EKKLHSIA as a gathering (11:18), "in one place" (11:20), and "the whole assembly in one place"(14:23). The contrast is between the saints when they are dispersed and when they come together. The basic category is the assembly of God's people before Him, not the worship service or the liturgy.

The background for this category of "assembly" is Israel under the Old Covenant. Usually the LXX (the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) calls the assembly of Israel SUNAGOGH. But sometimes it uses EKKLHSIA. In a covenant renewal sermon on the plains of Moab, Moses recalled the archetypal assembly before God, the gathering at Sinai:

"Then the LORD delivered to me two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words which the LORD had spoken to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly" (Hebrew -- QaHaL, LXX -- EKKLHSIA) (Deut 9:10).

In Deuteronomy 18:16, Moses refers to Israel's prayer to God at Sinai "in the day of the assembly" (QaHaL, EKKLHSIA).⁸ All of these usages refer to Israel gathered for covenant assembly, gathered

⁸See also Deut 31:12 for the verb form in both Hebrew and Greek. 2 Chronicles 29:28 also uses QaHaL, EKKLHSIA for Israel assembled for worship at the temple.

for a “worship service.” The term never refers to Israel as an organized community in any other context. Further, in the Psalms the assembly (QaHaL, EKKLHSIA) is where the praises of Messiah are declared (Psalm 22:22, 25; Psalm 40:9-10). And in the assembly also the saints and the heavens (the angels, cf. Heb 12:22) will praise God (Psalm 89:7; Psalm 107:32; Psalm 149:1).

The continuity of thought between Israel assembled and the Church assembled is further revealed by the occasional use of SUNAGOGH in the New Testament for Christian meetings. James describes how someone coming into a Christian meeting -- SUNAGOGH not EKKLHSIA -- should be treated (Jas 2:2). In Hebrews the instruction not to forsake assembling together uses the verb form SUNAGW (Heb 10:25).

2.2 The Assembly of the Saints Before God

The fundamental distinction in the theology of worship, therefore, is not public worship versus private worship, formal worship versus informal worship, or Lord’s Day worship versus all-of-life worship. The fundamental issue is the nature of the assembly of the saints before God and what is required of it. So we must address the question, “what is the assembly of the saints and what is it for in both the Old and the New Covenant -- when, where, and for what purpose does the Church meet? Reflection on the teaching of the Westminster Assembly, that we have reviewed, is particularly helpful here. We saw that in the teaching of the *Westminster Confession*, the Church comes together on the Lord’s Day in covenantal assembly in the presence of God, and, blessed by the Holy Spirit, it partakes of the means of grace, praises God, and prays to Him, thereby engaging in a covenantal dialogue with Him.

2.3 When does the Assembly meet?

Israel first met in assembly at God’s call for “a feast” and to “serve God” at Mt. Sinai when He came to them (Ex 3:12; 5:1; 19:10 ff). Ever after, Israel assembled at God’s command on the appointed days, the three annual feasts when all Israel was to appear before God in one place, but above all every Sabbath “in all your dwellings.” [“wherever you live” NIV] (Lev 23:2ff.). The appointed day in the New Covenant is the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, the day on which

Christ rose. On that day Jesus also first came to His disciples after His resurrection, when they were assembled behind closed doors. When the disciples gathered on the first day of the week to break bread, Paul spoke to them (Ac 20:7). The saints gather at God's call each Lord's Day. (Note the title of the *WCF* chapter on public worship: "Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day.") Such has been the practice of the Church from apostolic times.

The Sabbath was given to the Church as a reminder of God's creation and redemption (Ex 20:11, Deu 5:15). In itself it is a "memorial" or "reminder" of God's covenant lordship:

Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever (Ex 31:16-17).

Christ is the Lord of the Sabbath (Mk 2:28). Keeping the Sabbath on the first day of the week is a reminder and sign that Jesus our Lord rose on that day to His glory, becoming King in the Kingdom of God by the New Covenant and heir of the children whom God has given Him. On the Lord's Day we not only remember God's great works of creation and redemption, but look forward to the completion of redemption and the renewal of creation in that Sabbath rest which awaits the people of God (Heb 4:9). The last two sections of Chapter 21 of the *Confession of Faith*, which most explicitly discusses worship, deal with the observance of the Sabbath. As Iain Murray notes:

"... The compilers of the Directory [for Public Worship] considered it essential to include a section on "The Sanctification of the Lord's Day." In short, they believed that a true view of public worship stands or falls with a true view of the sanctification of the day" [Murray 1994:190].

2.4 Where does the Assembly meet?

Israel first met in assembly at Sinai, the Mount of God, then at the tabernacle, followed by the temple (both dwelling places of God) and in weekly Sabbath convocations throughout the land (Lev 23:2-3). The Sabbath holy convocations in synagogues (places of assembly) looked to the altar and the sacrifices for mediation with God. But now, Jesus has fulfilled the meaning of the temple

and has gone into God's presence in heaven, into the true temple built without hands. There He serves as our high priest, presenting to the Father the merits of His sacrifice, and making intercession for us. When the Church assembles before God on earth, no veil excludes her from the Holy of Holies. God's synagogues today look to heaven, where Christ is seated and ministering (Heb 8:1-2; 9:8, 24; 10:19-22). Through the Covenant of Grace in Christ the way to God is open.

“For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire.... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel” (Hb 12:18-24).

When the saints assemble, they are the holy temple of the Holy Spirit (1Co 3:16-17) and stand in God's presence with no barrier between them and heaven, except that of sight.

Under the Old Covenant, in the weekly convocations of Israel, the first of the appointed feasts (“My feasts,” the Lord declares them, Lev 23:2), all Israelites knew that the entire nation met on the same day to remember God's creation and redemption, and that at the altar sacrifices were being offered for all of Israel. In the New Covenant, when any local church meets, it joins with the church in heaven. It meets not just on its own but as part of the universal assembly of believers in God's presence. In each church assembly, the saints come to the one “general assembly and church of the firstborn” (Hb 12:22-23).

2.5 What is the Purpose of the Assembly?

For what purpose does the whole Church assemble in one place on the Lord's Day? A number of recent writers have referred to the Church's public worship as covenant worship.⁹ The essence of Reformed liturgy is that it is covenantal, writes Vandooren. Frame writes, “Therefore,

⁹See the bibliography attached to the report of Synod's Committee.

true worship is saturated with reminders of God's covenant lordship." Old writes, "[W]e have in the

covenant theology of the Pentateuch the rationale for the reading and preaching of Scripture in worship -- namely, that it is demanded by a covenant understanding of our relationship to God and to each other.” The covenant pattern for the assembly appears most clearly in the covenant review and renewal on the plains of Moab in Deuteronomy. There, the congregation is called by God, who has established His covenant with Israel. They are reminded of the history of God’s dealing with them in the Exodus and wilderness wanderings. God declares His law to them. God exhorts them to obedience. God declares His blessings for obedience and cursings for disobedience. Finally, a commemoration and renewal of the covenant is established for the future (see Josh 8:30-35).

But what about the New Covenant assembly? Certainly the Lord’s Supper is a covenant reminder. Each time the church observes Communion, it hears, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1Co 11:25). In the weekly assembly of the whole church, the saints rehearse and confirm their covenant commitment. All parts of a covenant appear: the parties to it know themselves and each other, they remember how they came to be in covenant, they review the requirements of the covenant, they hear the curses and blessings attached to the covenant, and they reaffirm the covenant by a sign. There is not a precise correspondence between each part of worship defined in the Westminster documents and each part of a covenant ceremony. However, each component of the worship service expresses an aspect of the Covenant of Grace. Each part is a means of grace to the worshipers. Each part is an expression of one part or another of a covenant ceremony. Likewise, the worship service order does not move precisely through a covenant ceremony, but there is a general movement from naming the parties to the covenant in the call to worship through reviewing their relationship in the reading and preaching of the Word and to the covenant sign in the Lord’s Supper and a closing blessing. We will now briefly review the different parts of the covenant form of worship as seen in the New Testament Scriptures.

3.0 A Covenantal Form of Worship

3.1 Call to Worship

There is a standing call from the Lord to His Church to assemble in every place on the Lord's Day:

Psalm 50:5 "Gather My saints together to Me, Those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice."

14 Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High.

15 Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."

In each particular congregation the elders issue this call in the name of Christ. The call to assemble before our covenant King names the parties to the New Covenant: God in Christ meets with His saints in Christ. Christ the Mediator brings God and His people together by His Holy Spirit. God Himself calls us solemnly to meet with Him.

3.2 Confession

A subject appearing before His King and who has broken His law needs to make amends. Under the Old Covenant the saints brought sacrifices and laid hands on them, confessing their sins (Lev 4:15;16:21). Under the New Covenant the saints take hold of the sacrifice of Christ and confess their sins in faith that God will forgive them (Heb 9:14, 1Jn 1:7, 9). Apart from sacrifice there can be no appearing in God's presence. Anyone not clothed in the righteousness of Christ will in the end be cast out of the King's presence.

3.3 Praise

In response to the call to assemble, with faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice, the saints come with joyful praise, thanksgiving, and offerings. With such sacrifices God is well pleased (Heb 13:15-16).

Psalm 105:1 Oh, give thanks to the LORD! Call upon His name; Make known His deeds among the peoples!

2 Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works!

3 Glory in His holy name; Let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD!

4 Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face evermore!

The New Covenant is a wedding bond between God and His people, the Church is a bride espoused to the Lord. God is a great King and greatly to be praised. He is pleased with the praises of His saints; indeed, he dwells in the praises of Israel. And His praises bring blessing to His saints as they speak to one another, teaching and admonishing one another with the word of Christ (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16). The Word of the covenant is reviewed, proclaimed, and celebrated in song before the Lord.

3.4 Recollection of God's Saving Acts

In the reading and hearing of Scripture, in the preaching of the Word, in the singing of psalms, and in the sacraments, the saints hear again God's mighty acts of creation and redemption. The saints belong to God because He made them and He has rescued them from their enemies, Satan, sin, and death (Psalm 107:1-3). The entire history of redemption recorded in Scripture delights God's people. Again, as in the call to assemble, the saints listen to God and hear the life-giving Word that feeds their souls.

3.5 Exhortation

The reading and preaching of the Word instruct the saints how to live as the redeemed sons of God. The Ten Words which God spoke at Sinai sum up His moral law, but Scripture is full of instruction about how to live as God's people. In the preaching of the Word God speaks to His people through the elders. Thus, in the reading and preaching of the Word, the saints hear God Himself speak again to them while they add their own amen to it. The saints mix what they hear with the faith God gives them, consciously stirring up the faith that is in them to believe and embrace what is taught, so as to live the ensuing week in a manner pleasing to the Lord. Calvin notes:

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]

All the saints share in teaching and admonishing one another. Even newborn babes in Christ, those weak in the faith, those who have been caught in a fault, and those with no gift for preaching can join the assembly in using psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to instruct all present in praising God, confessing sin, handling adversity, and remembering God's salvation. At the temple only the Levites sang. Now, since all are priests, all sing to God. Therefore, in the singing of psalms throughout the Church's weekly assembly the saints also hear God speak his Word, recalling His salvation and instructing the saints in how to live.

3.6 Prayers

Just as all sing to God, so all pray to God. One leads in prayer, but each one in the assembly joins in with his own amen. In the Church's prayers God is again praised, sins are confessed, thanksgivings are made, and requests are made of our Lord, beginning with prayer for all men and for those in authority. As with the singing of psalms, prayers are offered throughout the meeting by the help of the Holy Spirit through Jesus our mediator.

3.7 Blessings and Curses

God's blessings and cursings are related directly to proclamation of His Law. As Francis Turretin writes:

[The covenant of grace contains] not only the promises of grace and salvation on God's part, but also carries with it the stipulation of obedience on man's part, so that just as God promises to be our God in love and protection, we in turn are his people by worshipping and obeying him (Jer 31:33; 2Cor 6:16, 17). [Turretin, II, 11, Q. 23, v.]

The benediction at the end of the meeting of the assembly most clearly expresses God's continuing blessing on His people throughout the week. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit" enable us to walk before God in obedient love. We leave the assembly with "grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." But in addition to the benediction, the blessing of all of God's promises is rehearsed and refreshed to His saints. We have the promises of inheriting a kingdom that is unshakable, of looking forward to putting on an imperishable body at the resurrection of the dead, of living with our Lord in the New Heavens and New Earth, of anticipating the time when "every tear will be wiped away, when there will be "no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, no more pain." We also have the blessing of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and who leads us in the ways of Christ. Along with Old Covenant Israel, we have this firm promise of God: "And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God" (Deut 28:2).

The covenant also contains curses for disobedience. The warnings, admonitions, and commandments of the Word discipline all who hear, leading God's people to repentance and to greater care to conform to God's will. The unregenerate are left inexcusable and under the curse of the Law. Paul reminded the Corinthians that because of unrepented sin many among them had fallen asleep (1Co 11:30). The weightiest church discipline takes place within the assembly of the saints, the elders acting for the Church in declaring God's judgment. Paul writes:

"In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1Co 5:4-5).

The discipline must be exercised not only for the sake of the one judged but also to protect the Church. "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1Co 5:6). The Church must judge those on the inside and put away from itself the evil person (1Co 5:12-13). In Israel, God Himself threatened to cut off from his people any who were guilty of certain secret, unrepented sins (e.g., Lev 7:20-21; 17:10; 20:18; 22:3; 23:29). In the New Testament assembly, God continues this

judgment (1Co 11:30-32). Christ continues to threaten cursings on His churches when they begin to turn away from Him (Rev 2 and 3).

3.8 Covenant Signs and Seals

Lastly, the covenant has signs by which the Church draws renewed strength from God and pledges itself anew to His service. The Lord's Day Sabbath is such a sign that is given to us weekly. Baptism is the sign of our entrance into the covenant and of our rebirth as saints committed to follow the Lord. The Lord's Supper is a sign of God's eternal grace to us in Christ, a seal of His love and mercy, and a sign of our commitment to be His people. In these New Testament sacraments "grace and salvation are held forth in more fulness, evidence, and efficacy, to all nations" (*WLC Q. 35*).

3.9 Covenant Life

Since all the saints are the Lord's, in the weekly assembly, as in all of the life of the communion of saints, the strong should look out for the weak, no favoritism should be shown to the rich when they enter the assemblies, and all should remember to seek the edification of others. Enmities should be removed and forgiveness of one another should be the rule, so that the love of the saints should be visible in the assembly as in all their dealings with one another throughout the week. All should give generously for the care of the poor and to provide for those called to the ministry of the Word. As the Westminster Assembly summarized so beautifully:

Chapter 26.1 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 are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

4.0 Conclusions

The basic continuity of worship between the Old Covenant Church and the New Covenant Church is in its weekly assembling before God to enjoy the means of grace. This has always been understood by the Reformed 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 also by everyone (as far as their business will allow) 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].

That “holy convocation” is an assembly to celebrate God’s covenant and to renew our commitment to Him. Its heart is the Word of God read, preached, heard, and believed. The sacraments make visible the message of redemption set forth in the Word and seal it to us. These are the ordinances in which the God’s covenant is dispensed in the New Covenant age. Confession of sin, the singing of psalms, prayers, blessings and curses, and the bringing of offerings are also integral parts of the covenant assembly. The question, “What is the public worship God in the Church?” has been answered by the Scripture’s teaching concerning the assembly of the Church, both under the Old and the New Covenant.

Can the saints pray, sing, read, and meditate at times other than the stated assemblies of the Church? Of course. May they often! 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 entire covenant community is not reviewing and renewing its commitment to the Lord.

Is a church assembly free to devise its own way to remember God’s covenant and renew its commitment to Him? Clearly not: it is not the Church’s covenant, but Christ’s. Since the Church is

one, when the local church meets it joins in the assembly of the universal Church of saints and of angels. We should seek uniformity of practice among the churches, rather than each church doing what is wise in its own eyes as though it had no king. The Church is in the world, but not of the world. Our approach to God should not be defined by culture or custom, but by God's revelation.

In this paper we have argued that the Reformed churches, and particularly the Presbyterian churches holding to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, are theologically committed to the principle of biblical worship. We recognize that over the generations cultural innovations, the creative influences of individuals, innovations in churches with other theologies, and even unbiblical practices have attempted to move Reformed worship away from the biblical principle of worship that follows from the Reformed understanding of God and His covenant in Christ. Yet theology and worship cannot be separated. When one changes, the other is sure to follow. Covenant Theology has proved itself 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 because worship expresses the most fundamental and profound dimension of the relationship which God has sovereignly instituted with His rational creatures. "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Respectfully submitted,

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