

THE LORD'S SERVICE

*Understanding Worship
at Covenant
Presbyterian Church*



The worship service of Covenant Presbyterian Church can strike some people as unusual or strange. Yet our worship, both in form and content, has deep biblical warrant as well as substantial continuity with the Christian church's worship throughout history.

We hope to demonstrate the holy simplicity and spiritual richness of worshipping in this manner. This form of worship, when engaged sincerely with the whole heart, has proven remarkably fruitful for nourishing godliness in the people of God, adults and children, across the ages.

The purpose of this brief booklet, then, is to explain why we worship as we do.

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What is Corporate Worship?

First, we must consider the question: What is the purpose of the assembled worship of the church on the first day of the week, the day which commemorates the Lord's resurrection? Put differently, why are we here and what is it we are trying to do?

There are numerous popular answers given to this question. Some see worship as a form of evangelism. It is true that a robust and biblical worship service should have a profound effect on unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:23-25). However, since God is the object of worship (1 Chr. 16:29, Ps. 100:2), evangelism cannot be the chief goal of worship. Worship and prayer are offered *to God* for His sake and as responses to His gracious gifts. While unbelievers may be present, it is primarily the Lord's people who are summoned to worship. In Christ, the saints alone have access to the heavenly sanctuary (Eph. 2:18, Hebrews 12:18-25). Thus, it is *from* the presence of the risen Christ that the church *goes out* to do evangelism (Mt. 28:16-20).

Another popular conception is that worship is first and foremost about education. Teaching and doctrine are seen as the chief reason for assembling together. It is true that a well-ordered worship service teaches in all its various elements, yet worship is more than teaching. It involves prayer, confession, praise, thanksgiving, and the administration of the sacraments.

Perhaps closer to the central conception of worship is the idea that praise, the exaltation of God, is the purpose of worship. While this is, of course, true, it is often thought of in a one-sided way. Worship is not simply about what we *render to* God. While it may sound pious to speak of “coming to give and not to get,” a crucial component of worship includes what we *receive from* God. Note the studied ambiguity of the title of this tract which is also the name given to our corporate worship (see the front of the bulletin): *The Lord's Service*. It conveys the idea that worship is both our service to the Lord *and* His service to us. God meets His people, speaks to us, cleanses us, consecrates us, nourishes us, and sends us out for service. As we wait on and worship the Lord, we find that He serves us as well. In fact, the whole of the service is a response to His prior service to us in Christ.

Worship as Covenant Renewal

We believe that a full description of the purpose of corporate worship is best captured by the term “covenant renewal.” Let’s unpack this a little. While there is no simple definition of a covenant, the Bible is a book structured by the covenants that the Lord makes with His people. The covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12, 15, 17) is enlarged by the covenant made at Sinai with Israel (Ex. 19, 24), with Moses acting as the mediator. It is further enlarged in the covenant made with David (2 Sam. 7, Ps. 89), and it comes to fruition in the New Covenant established by Christ (Mt. 26:26-29, 1 Cor. 11:23-26).

While all these covenants have distinctive aspects and noteworthy differences, they are all part of one unfolding purpose of God to draw a people to Himself. All the promises of God find their “Amen” in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20, Eph. 2:11-22, Heb. 1:1-2).

We may summarize the idea of the new covenant as follows. It is the ordered relationship, fulfilling all the Old Testament promises and covenant administrations, which God has established with His people in the blood of Christ. The new covenant, then, is a bond in the blood of Christ, sovereignly administered by God. It is the form or the shape that God’s personal relationship

with us takes. The new covenant relationship comes to its final consummation in the wedding Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-10).

Worship as Priestly and Sacrificial

We can now draw a preliminary conclusion. The covenant (here we are speaking of redemptive covenant arrangements between God and His people, not personal “covenants” between individuals) is established by sacrifice. Throughout Scripture, covenants are also *renewed* by sacrifice (Gen. 8:20-9:17, Ex. 24:4-11, Ps. 50:5). This means that worship, as covenant renewal, is sacrificial and priestly work. While *animal* sacrifices have been done away with, all God’s people are now priests (1 Pt. 2:9, Rev. 1:6) who are, in Christ, *living sacrifices* presented in Him in the heavenly temple (Rom. 12:1-2, Eph. 2:14-18). The work and worship of the church is often described in sacrificial terms in the New Testament (Rom. 15:16, Eph. 5:2, Phil. 4:18, 2 Tim. 4:6, Heb. 13:15-16). As the new temple and holy priesthood (Eph. 2:21, 1 Pt. 2:5), the worship of the church is temple-priestly service.

A provocative way of putting this is to say that what happened to the animals in the Old Testament happens to us in Christ in the New Testament. We are slain with

him, raised with Him, and, in our forerunner and High Priest (Heb. 6:20; 4:14-16), we ascend as a fragrant aroma, a pleasing sacrifice to the Lord. The goal of all the animal sacrifices was always the offering of an obedient people in and with and through the one sacrifice of Christ (Ps. 40:6-8, 51:16-19, Heb. 10:5-10).

Sacrificial Worship: The Old Testament Background

With this background, and before we turn to our worship at Covenant, let us say a brief word about the nature of Old Testament sacrificial worship. While this material is complex and many sacrifices overlap in meaning, a few general remarks can be safely made. There were three basic actions performed on the animals to be offered. They can be conveniently remembered as cleansing, consecration and communion.

First, the animal is slaughtered and its blood splashed on the altar (signifying cleansing and forgiveness). Second, the animal is cut up and arranged on the altar (signifying consecration). Third, the animal is transformed into smoke and lifted up into God's presence (signifying joyful communion).

These three actions correspond roughly with three of the main types of sacrifices. The sin, or purification, offering focuses on cleansing and forgiveness. The whole burnt offering (often called the ascension offering) focuses on consecration. And the peace (or communion) offering focuses on fellowship with a meal in the presence of God. These sacrifices were generally offered in this order in the Old Testament tabernacle or temple service (Lev. 9).

Scholars have long recognized in this a basis for a general pattern for New Testament worship. Confession, followed by consecration, and culminating in communion, forms the inner logic of priestly, sacrificial temple worship in which covenant is renewed with God in both Testaments.

If we put all that we have thus far said together we can say the following: If worship is covenant renewal, and the covenant is an ordered relation in Christ where we both serve God and are served by God, then we can expect worship to have the form of a dialogue. God speaks and we respond. The overall structure of the dialogue will have, as its inner logic, the three-fold notion of confession, consecration and communion. In this conception, worship is primarily *formative*. That is, it is designed to shape us and is not first and foremost an expression of our desires or sentiments. It forms our desires so that we may express ourselves in a biblically robust manner.

The Order of Worship at Covenant Presbyterian Church

We can now assess more accurately the logic of the order of worship at Covenant Presbyterian Church. We shall do this by inserting the elements of worship from an actual Sunday bulletin and commenting on each part. Where the † symbol appears, the congregation is invited to stand.

PREPARATION FOR WORSHIP

PRELUDE

ANNOUNCEMENTS

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION *Revelation 4:9-11*

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”

SILENT PRAYER

The **PREPARATION FOR WORSHIP**, after the prelude and the announcements, centers on a Scripture passage, usually keyed to the theme of the service, on which to spend a moment in silent prayer and meditation as we come to worship the Triune God.

GOD CALLS US INTO HIS PRESENCE

† SALUTATION

Minister: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Minister: The Lord be with you! *Ruth 2:4*

People: And also with you!

With the SALUTATION, the minister greets the congregation in the Triune Name. The minister and the people then mutually bless one another.

† CALL TO WORSHIP *John 10:27, Psalm 95:7*

Minister: My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me.

People: The Lord is our God; we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

The CALL TO WORSHIP reminds us that God commands us, He summons us, to worship Him. The Psalms and the Old Testament in general, are full of calls to worship God corporately. Thus, at the outset we are reminded that worship is a divine appointment. We are assembled in the Spirit on the Lord's Day to commemorate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to renew ourselves in covenant union with the Triune God, and to anticipate the coming resurrection and marriage Supper of the Lamb.

† HYMN OF PRAISE

“Thine Be the Glory”

Having been summoned by the Lord, we answer that summons by offering a **SONG OF PRAISE**. Here, in the Easter Season (we will discuss the Church Year at the end of this pamphlet), the hymn celebrates the resurrection of Christ. Singing should be vibrant, full-throated, and robust in response to the glorious grace of God. While we do occasionally use contemporary hymns, the use of a hymnbook provides a source of theologically sound, musically diverse, time-tested songs for the church’s worship. As far as possible, we desire to sing what the church has sung for ages and what she will sing in the ages to come.

† PRAYER OF ADORATION

Having been called into God’s presence and having responded with praise, we offer a brief **PRAYER OF ADORATION** and petition seeking His blessing and guidance. The prayer often highlights the fact that we worship the **Triune God** in and through Christ. **Christian** worship is always robustly Trinitarian in nature. We do not worship “God” in general. We worship the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These prayers are often keyed to the content of the opening hymn and they seek to focus us on the grandeur, glory, and goodness of God. Though this is an extemporaneous prayer (a prayer not written out in advance in the bulletin), it is prepared by the minister, and could, in principle, be written out. Our service does have a few, short written prayers. Written prayers have the value of brevity, focus, theological accuracy (they are drawn

almost exclusively from Scripture), and as instructional devices one can take home and expand upon in private prayer. The written nature of a prayer should not preclude its being offered fervently and from the heart. Having been called by God into His presence, and having responded in praise and prayer, we now move to the second major portion of the liturgy, the cleansing of our sins.

GOD CLEANSSES US OF OUR SINS

CALL TO CONFESSION

Revelation 1:5

Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead, has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us kings and priests to his God and Father.

CORPORATE CONFESSION *(kneel as able)*

Almighty God, in raising Jesus from the grave,
you shattered the power of sin and death.
We confess that we remain captive to doubt and fear,
bound by the ways that lead to death.
We fail to proclaim the gospel in word and deed,
we ignore your call to discipleship.
We overlook the poor and the hungry,
and pass by those who mourn. Forgive us, God of mercy!
Help us to trust your power to change our lives and
make us new, that we may know the joy of life abundant,
given in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.

*Silent Prayer.***Amen.***(continued on next page)*

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ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Having entered God's presence in response to His call we recognize that such entrance, and subsequent abiding in His presence, requires the forgiveness of our sins. This is the "inner logic" element of confession we spoke of earlier. While there can be slight differences in well-ordered services, the **CONFESSION OF SINS MUST** be early in the service. God must cleanse us for the covenant renewal to proceed. The function of this prayer is primarily objective. It does not depend on whether we've had a good or a bad week, or whether we feel particularly sinful at the time. It is a statement that we are sinners and we regularly sin, and thus as we appear before God we always stand in need of pardon. This is the basic prerequisite for priestly access to the heavenly temple.

There is a brief scriptural call to confession by the minister reminding us of our need, followed by a **CORPORATE PRAYER OF CONFESSION** (in bold). We kneel for this prayer as a sign of humility and penitence (Ps. 95:6, Acts 20:26). After a moment of silence for the private confession of sins, the congregation rises and receives an **ASSURANCE OF PARDON** from the minister. Christ has committed to the minister of the gospel the power to declare and enact the forgiveness of sins (Mt. 16:19, Jn. 20:23). The assurance of pardon, then, is Christ's very word of full forgiveness to His flock.

† THE PEACE

Minister: The peace of Christ be with you!

People: **And also with you!**

Minister: Let us offer each other a sign of Christ's peace.

Having confessed our sins and been assured of forgiveness in Christ, we are now at peace with God and seek to be at peace with our neighbors. We express the peace that Christ has conferred in the equivalence of the "holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16), by offering a sign of peace to one another. This juncture in the service provides an opportunity to seek forgiveness, if needed, from our brothers and sisters in Christ (Mt. 5:23-24) before we come to the Holy Supper later in the service.

† THE GLORIA PATRI (with hands lifted)

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, amen.

† HYMN OF PRAISE "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"

Having heard the pardoning voice of Christ through His minister, the congregation, now at peace, ascribes all glory to the Triune God with this brief, ancient hymn. Gloria Patri is Latin for "Glory to the Father." The hymn celebrates the present and coming glory of the Triune God's peaceable kingdom. We lift our hands, as often done, even commanded, in Scripture (Ps. 28:2, 63:4, 119:48, 134:2, 1 Tim. 2:8), to orient our bodies upward to heaven taking a posture of receptivity to the Lord. This whole portion of the Liturgy (God Cleanses Us Of Our Sins) ends with a Hymn of Praise.

GOD CONSECRATES US BY HIS WORD

At this point, the service moves from cleansing to consecration. The Word of God is a sharp, two-edged sword which cuts us (Heb. 4:12-13) as living sacrifices and prepares us to ascend into fuller communion with God.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

We pray for the Spirit of the risen Christ to be poured out on the reading, the preaching, and the hearing, of God's Word. The Word is inspired by the Spirit (2 Tim 3:16) and, by that same Spirit, it speaks to the people of God.

It will be noted below that we always read from three portions of God's Word: The Old Testament, a New Testament reading, as well as a reading from one of the gospels. This is an ancient practice of the church and reflects her desire to hear from the whole counsel of God. The readings are generally thematically linked and follow a three-year cycle. The complete collection of the readings coordinated in this fashion is called "the lectionary." We use the lectionary with freedom often choosing other readings that might better support the sermon text.

Nevertheless, over the three year period the church hears from virtually every portion of the Word of God. This protects the church from the various idiosyncrasies of the minister or worship leaders, and forces her to confront the texts of Scripture she might otherwise ignore. Often, at Covenant, the sermon text (in bold)

is substituted for one of the weekly lectionary readings. Thus, the historic lectionary is used in conjunction with the Reformation pattern of preaching through whole books of the Bible.

Scripture commands that it be read publicly in the gathered assembly (1 Tim. 4:13, Col.4:16, Rev. 1:3). These readings should be attended to with faith, love, and reverence as the very voice of God to the congregation.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Genesis 1:1-3

*The **OLD TESTAMENT LESSON** is read by the minister. The reading opens with a reminder to hear God's word and closes with the response below from Isaiah 40:8.*

*Minister: The grass withers, the flower fades,
People: **But the Word of our God will stand forever!***

In response to the lesson, the people, as an act of worship and a pledge of their obedience to what they have just heard, give thanks to God for His speech to them, acknowledging its enduring authority. This simple response forms in us an attitude of grateful receptivity to the whole counsel of God.

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON*Revelation 18:9-19*
(sermon text)

The **NEW TESTAMENT LESSON** is read by the minister. The reading opens with a reminder to hear God's word and closes with the response below.

Minister: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God!

See the note on the response to the **OLD TESTAMENT LESSON** on the previous page.

† **PSALM 148***"Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah"*

Worship continues as the people respond to the Word of God by singing another portion of Holy Scripture, the Psalms. In addition to the general command to sing the Psalms (Eph. 5:18-19), this song provides for a fuller engagement with, and embodiment of, the read Word of God. The Psalter should be privileged in the singing of the church since it is the divinely given songbook.

† **GOSPEL READING***John 10:22-30*

The **GOSPEL READING** is read by the minister. The reading opens with a reminder from the minister to hear God's word and closes with the response below. This response ties the gospel to the One who is its author and content, the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is read last, and with the congregation standing, out of

honor for the life, death, and resurrection of the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Minister: This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

People: Praise be to you, O Christ!

PREACHING OF GOD'S WORD*The Fall of Babylon*

Though all of worship is "sermonic" (that is, it teaches), the preaching and teaching the Word is a central part of worship (1 Tim. 4:11, 13, 5:17, 6:2b-3, 1 Cor.1: 17-25, 2:1-4, 4:17, Rom. 1:15, Gal. 1:9). The sermon should be driven by, and tethered to, the text for the edification of God's people and building them up in our holy faith. The congregation should attend to the preached Word with holy expectation for God Himself had deigned to speak to them through the mouth of the minister. Often a brief outline of the main sermon points is included in the bulletin here.

† **CONFESSION OF FAITH***The Nicene Creed*

Having been prepared as living sacrifices by the Word of God, we respond and present him with our lives. We do this first by affirming our faith in God and His Word though the use of one of the ancient Creeds of the church. In this example we use the Nicene Creed, a product of the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D and the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. The creeds affirm the basic doctrine which is to be believed, trusted in, and confessed by

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the whole church. The use of the creeds ties our faith both to Holy Scripture, which they faithfully reflect, to the historic practice of the church, and to Christians of all ages who have lived and died by the faith expressed in the creeds.

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

The offering of prayer is another central part of worship. Corporate prayer is commanded in Scripture (1 Tim. 2:1-4). The prayer takes place here because we present our petitions to God only after hearing Him speak to us in the ministry of the Word. This is the beginning of the next aspect of the “inner logic” of the service. The now cleansed and consecrated people move into fuller communion with God. The prayer should ascribe praise to God and include petitions for the world, the church, the civil authorities, and the sick and afflicted. Here the whole church is praying even if the prayer is led by the minister. These are the prayers of the people and not simply the prayers of the pastor.

OFFERTORY

The offering begins transitioning the service more decisively toward communion. The offering is not a “break in the action” to collect money. It is an act of worship. In the giving of our offering, we signify the full gift of ourselves and all that we are to the Lord. Remember, we are being **offered**, in Christ, as living sacrifices.

† DOXOLOGY (with hands lifted)

**Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host:
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.**

As the offering is brought forward to the Lord’s Table we sing another ancient Trinitarian hymn, the **DOXOLOGY** (“word of praise, or word ascribing glory”). Here we acknowledge the goodness and generosity of the Triune God who is the source of the gifts which we return to His work. The mention of the heavenly host reminds us that worship takes place in heaven amidst the angelic hosts and departed saints (Heb. 12:18-25, Rev. 4-5). Corporate worship is formed by, and reflects, the reverential awe, the majesty, and the order of the heavenly locale in which it occurs.

GOD COMMUNES WITH US AT HIS TABLE

† SURSUM CORDA

Minister: Lift up your hearts.
People: We lift them up to the Lord.
Minister: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
People: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

As we move into Eucharistic celebration (also called “Communion” or “The Lord’s Supper”), another ancient exhortation is used to

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call us to the heavenly locale of our worship. Our communion with Christ, now risen and ascended, takes place in the heavenly temple to which we “lift up our hearts.” *Sursum Corda* is Latin for “lift up your hearts.” The note of thanksgiving reminds us of the need for gratitude which is to suffuse the Eucharist (Eucharist is a transliteration of a Greek word which means gratitude).

Minister: It is right, and good, and a joyful thing, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to You, holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore with angels and arch angels and with all the company of heaven we praise and magnify Your glorious name, evermore praising you and singing...

† **THE SANCTUS** *(sung)*

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts,
heaven and earth are full of your glory!
Hosanna, hosanna in the highest!
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna, hosanna in the highest!

In response to the *Sursum Corda*, the minister prays a short prayer acknowledging our joyful duty to give thanks and the fact that we do so with the whole company of heaven. The prayer serves as a preface to another ancient hymn known as **THE SANCTUS** (Sanctus is Latin for “holy”). The Sanctus reminds us again that the thrice Holy God surrounded by His hosts is the sphere where our worship occurs. We bless the Lord whose coming is both

memorialized (first coming) and anticipated (second coming) in the Supper.

† **PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND
THE LORD’S PRAYER**

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

The celebration of the Supper moves into a **PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING** to God for all the benefits of creation and redemption, as well as the anticipation of the coming marriage Supper of the Lamb. Creation (bread and wine), Redemption (the visible display of the death of Christ), and the coming wedding feast (anticipated in the feast of the Lord’s Supper) are all celebrated in the sacrament. The Supper remembers what Christ has done in the past, communicates His benefits to us in the present, and anticipates His coming in glory.

The prayer of thanksgiving concludes with the saying, in unison, of **THE LORD’S PRAYER**. These are the actual words Jesus taught us to pray (Mt. 6:9-13, Luke 11:2-4) and they provide the pattern for all true prayer. They are particularly relevant here because they emphasize the coming of God’s kingdom of which the Supper is a foretaste.

EUCCHARISTIC MEDITATION**PRAYER OF CONSECRATION****WORDS OF INSTITUTION***Distribution of the Bread and Communion in the Body of Christ**Communion Meditation Silence**Distribution of the Cup and Communion in the Blood of Christ***COMMUNION SONG***“Behold the Lamb”***PRAYER OF BLESSING**

The Minister gives a brief mediation on the Supper, connecting it to the Sermon just preached, and highlighting its character as a sign and seal of the gospel. A prayer is then offered to the Risen Christ for the sending of the Spirit to consecrate the elements for use in this holy mystery of communion with Christ and with one another.

The Supper is celebrated simply and in accord with the Lord’s institution. Thanksgiving having been offered, the elements, bread and wine, are distributed after the pattern of our Lord’s very words on the night He was betrayed (Mt. 26:26-27). Since the Supper is both a time of self-examination (1 Cor. 11:27-32) and of holy feasting (it is instituted in a Passover feasting context) we reflect this by partaking of the bread in silence, and singing a fitting communion hymn during the partaking of the cup. The celebration of the Eucharist is closed with the minister praying a prayer invoking God’s blessing on the whole ordinance.

The rationale for weekly communion is, briefly, as follows: First, it coheres with the general pattern of the Old Testament sacrifices which often culminated in a fellowship meal. Second, it coheres with the nature of the incarnation. The Word has become, and forever remains, flesh. Thus, it is fitting that the read and preached Word be followed by the “enfleshed” Word in the sacrament. Third, it coheres with the apparent practice of the early church. Paul assumes that when the Corinthians assemble, they assemble to celebrate the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:20-26, see also Acts 2:42-47). Fourth, it coheres with the nature of the sacrament itself. The sacrament is a sign and a seal of the gospel. Jesus instituted the Supper as the way to memorialize and remember His entire earthly ministry. Thus, it is always the divinely given appropriate response to the gospel. “Communion” consummates and seals the union which the Word and Spirit have wrought between us and Christ. As such, it reaffirms the fact that public worship is covenant renewal.

GOD COMMISSIONS US TO GO INTO THE WORLD

† **HYMN OF PRAISE** *“At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing”*

*As we prepare to go forth to love and serve the Lord, we sing a final and thematically appropriate **HYMN OF PRAISE**.*

† BENEDICTION

*The minister pronounces the Lord's **BENEDICTION** (Latin for "good word" or "blessing") on the people. This is not simply a nice way to end the service. It is a genuine blessing from the Triune God upon the people with whom He has renewed His covenant relation. In the benediction, God, through his minister, places His name and lifts up the light of his countenance upon His people (Num. 6:24-27).*

† THREEFOLD AMEN

A brief sung "Amen" allows the congregation to give its hearty ascent to the whole of the service as they depart.

Some Concluding Remarks on Worship at Covenant

If we recall our earlier discussion about the "inner logic" of the service, and add to it the **call** to worship at the beginning and the charge/benediction at the end which **commissions** us to go forth in obedient service, we can handily summarize the whole service of covenant renewal with five "C's" as follows: *Call, Cleansing, Consecration, Communion, and Commissioning*. We have tried to make this prominent in the five headings embedded in the liturgy: God Calls Us Into His Presence, God Cleanses Us Of Our Sins, God Consecrates Us By His Word, God Communes With Us At His Table, God Commissions Us To Go Into the World. This is, we firmly believe, the whole logic of public worship as covenant renewal in a nutshell.

The Church Year

A brief word should be said about our use of the “Church Year.” At Covenant, we acknowledge the seasons of Advent (culminating in Christmas), Epiphany (the coming of the Gentile magi to Christ and the spread of the gospel to the nations), Lent (a period of reflection on the cost of discipleship), Easter, and Pentecost. We say “seasons” because each of these times occupies a number of weeks in the church year. We also note and celebrate certain other major events in our Lord’s life which occupy a single Sunday, such as the Baptism of the Lord, the Transfiguration, and the Ascension. We do not do this because we are, or are becoming, Roman Catholic. These are not, for us, authorized or obligatory holy days, and we use the church year with a good bit of freedom. Major Protestant bodies have, for centuries, followed the church year.

The rationale for this is two-fold. First, all churches organize the year in some fashion – this is inescapable. Thus, everyone has some kind of “Church Year.” The only question is whether the organization will be left up to the taste of the individual minister, or whether it will follow some other, hopefully wiser and more time-tested, criteria. Here, we consciously choose to defer to the wisdom of the historic church. Secondly, the days and seasons we celebrate

all have a solid biblical foundation in the redemptive events which are fulfilled in the life and ongoing ministry of Christ. Thus, throughout the year, we are drawn into the mystery of Christ and seek conformity to His image through conscious mediation on, proclamation of, and obedient response to, His saving work.

On the Question of Formal “Traditional” Worship

We realize that this service is different from what many people are used to. It often seems too “Catholic,” or too “stuffy,” or just plain strange. Hopefully, this brief pamphlet has dispelled your concerns and helped you to see the profoundly biblical basis of this approach to worship. The problem, we believe, is that the modern church has simply lost touch with the biblical basis that underlies the various elements in the Liturgy (“Liturgy” is the common word for the church’s public worship). Be assured, nothing is done here simply because “the church does it.” Our quest is to be thoroughly biblical.

On the matter of formality, prepared prayers, and repetition, we make the following remarks. Worship must be from the heart (Mt. 15:8-9). It must be done in Spirit and truth (Jn. 4:23-24). This is true regardless of the forms a church

uses for worship. All churches have some kind of “liturgy.” They all use forms, styles, and manners of structuring to order public worship. They all engage in some form of “repetition” from week to week. We seek to use the forms we have chosen, in accord with their biblical rationale, to worship fervently from the heart, with reverence and awe (Heb. 12:28-29).

On the question of an ordered liturgy, with certain repetitive elements (which are varied on occasion) we offer the following considerations. First, God conducts the glorious liturgy of creation (Ps. 19) in a repetitive manner. He makes the sun rise and set the same way every day. His fatherly providence has ordered the whole cosmos with certain repetitive and completely predictable rhythms. Thus, not all repetition is vain repetition. The creation worships its Creator by its daily performance of the same glorious song. This repetition, in fact, is necessary to give our lives meaning and joy.

Second, all of life is, in some fashion, liturgical. This follows from the fact that all of life is “worship” (Rom. 12:1-2). We get up and go through hundreds of the same actions daily. No one suggests that they should not kiss their children, brush their teeth, go to work, cut the lawn, or any of a myriad of other things because “it would just be by rote.” It is precisely this patterned discipline which

brings liberty and fruitfulness to our lives. Repetition gives life meaning. This is not to say that we don’t enjoy variations from the pattern (though in most cases the variations are also repeated, only at different intervals), but simply to assert that the vast bulk of life is a type of liturgical repetition.

Third, as we have briefly tried to show, Old Testament worship, both at the tabernacle and in the temple, is ordered, prescribed, and repetitive worship. While it varies with the Israelite calendar, the rites, the sacrifices, and the array of actions are all formal and constantly repeated. In addition, the temple and synagogue worship of Jesus, the apostles, and the early church, glimpses of which can be seen in the early part of the Book of Acts, was formal worship. The synagogues had set prayers at set times, and systematic reading and teaching of Scripture (Luke 4:16-20, Acts 2:42 where “*the prayers*” most likely refers to common prayers from Israel’s public worship). The fact that the New Testament does not seem to lay down rules for worship services does not mean that there were none at hand. The church borrowed from the temple and the synagogue patterns. After all, she is the new temple-synagogue (1 Cor. 3:15, Jas. 2:2 where the word “*assembly*” means “synagogue”).

Finally, if we look at the heavenly worship in the book of Revelation (especially chapters 4 and 5) we see that the saints in heaven and the heavenly host engage in formal, reverential,

ordered worship. The four living creatures (Rev. 4:8) sing the same song, over and over, for all eternity! The saints and the angels engage in ordered singing and petition, often in sequence answering one another, in the heavenly temple. This is the pattern we seek to imitate as we are lifted up into the heavenly liturgy to worship the Lamb!

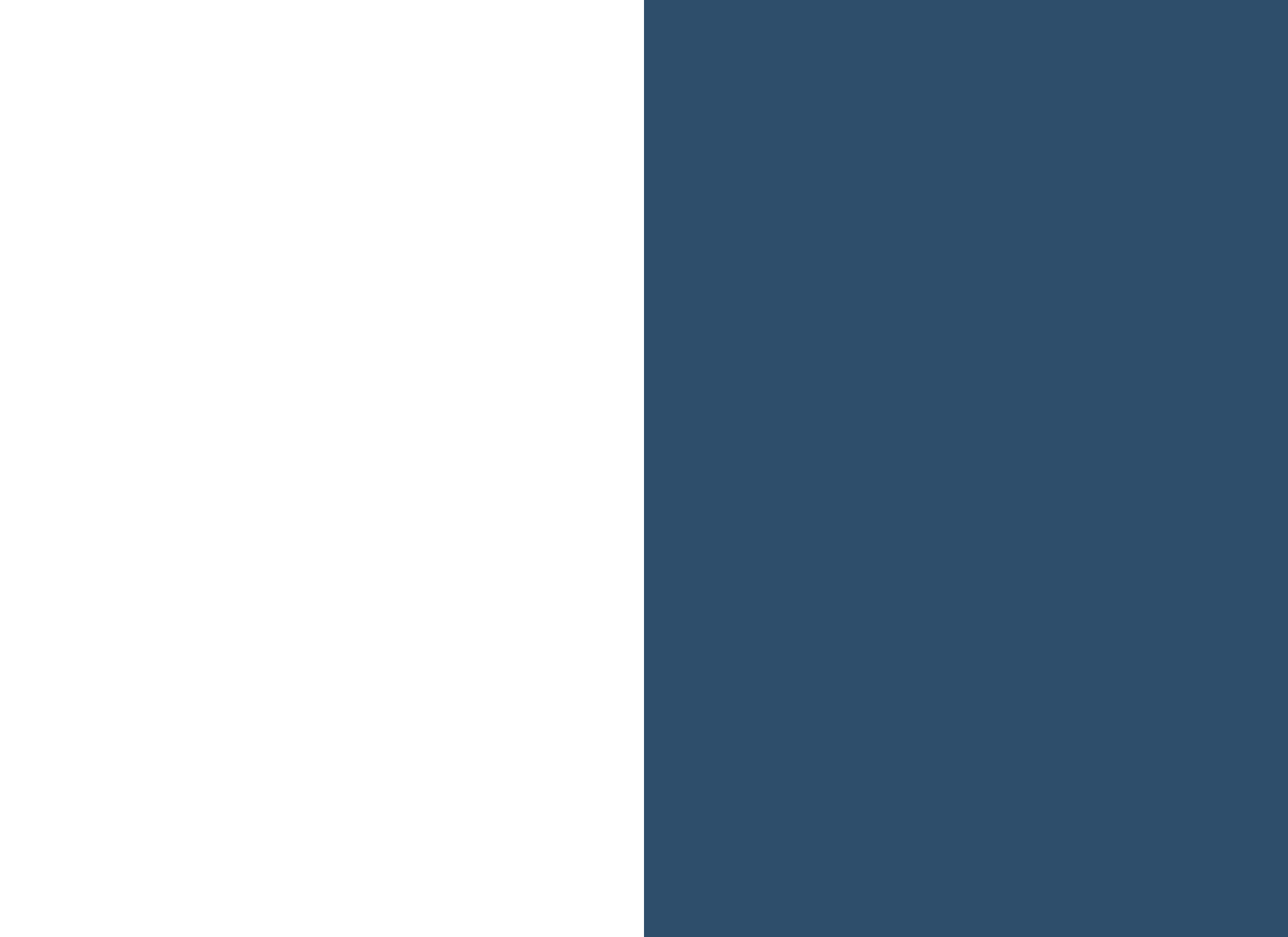
A Word about Children

In addition to its traditional nature, some feel that worship in this form is too difficult to understand, especially for children. We believe that nothing could be further from the truth. This form of worship (or something akin to it) has, for nearly two millennia, nourished poets and peasants, philosophers and common folk, rich and poor, children and adults. It has proven its value in innumerable cultural, economic, and political settings. It is, by far, the majority report on how the historic church has worshipped God.

Let us consider what even a young child who worships in this setting will assimilate in a few short years – even apart from the sermon. They will realize that God summons us into worship. They will sing tried and tested hymns of the faith. They will instinctively realize that when we come into the presence of God we must confess our sins, and they will pick up large portions of the public confessions

of sin. They will grasp that God has appointed the ministry to, among other things, assure us of His pardon. They will learn the short, ancient Trinitarian hymns – The Gloria Patri and the Doxology. They will pick up various short prayers for illumination before the reading of the Word. They will hear virtually the whole Bible read, recognizing that the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Gospels are one organic book. They will sing dozens of Psalms. They will learn large portions of the ancient creeds of the church. They will learn how to pray in public for the various needs of the church and the world. They will learn that the Lord's Supper is the appropriate weekly response to the read and preached Word. Accordingly, they will learn to express their gratitude through the Sursum Corda, the singing of the ancient Sanctus, and the Lord's Prayer. The whole service is a veritable catechism of Christian prayer and doctrine for children who, above all, learn by imitation and repetition. As such, it has nourished and formed the Lord's little ones for faithful service across the centuries.

Our sincere hope is that you will prayerfully consider the material presented here, and join us in worshipping the Triune God with reverence and awe in accordance with the whole counsel of the Word of God.





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