

Worship as Covenant Renewal or *Back to the Future Again*

by Robert Barnes

Have you ever wished the Bible were written in a different way? Of course you have. Everyone has wanted God to include that part where it's ok to ram your car into those idiots who speed through intersections 10 seconds after the light has turned red. "I'll say I did this on religious grounds!" you've thought, as you race your motor and prepare for impact.

From the more universal to the unknown, few have entertained such obscure fantasies as I have about the content of the Bible. One of my favorites is wishing that God would include more detailed information about the content of New Covenant worship.

Some of my ministry friends do not understand my concerns. They claim they can point to unalterable proof that the Bible teaches, for instance, that our modern worship must contain an opportunity for giving (an offering). Some "prove" that we must have only classical music and no contemporary music and lyrics. While I yearn for this issue to be more black and white (and thus be spared my didactic daydreams), and I do not like being in the position of pointing out what the Bible doesn't say, I find myself firmly committed to agnosticism on this point. The Bible does not give us precise, cookie-cutter directions on New Covenant worship.

Under the Old Covenant, God spent entire books (Leviticus!) going over key aspects of worship, repeating Himself for emphasis. But we have only a few snapshots of liturgical worship in the New Testament, and those are found in 1 Corinthians 14, Hebrews 9-12 (where attitude is addressed, see 12:28 "reverence and awe"). The praise found in Revelation is of special note because it shows an idealized universalized vision of worship. But for just that reason, it is in the category of descriptive, not prescriptive — it shows a picture of heavenly worship, but that picture does not contain a command to make our worship the exact same way. "Pastor Fitzgerald, we either need parking for 144,000 in our next worship center or 288 services each week. Take your pick."

What the Bible does give us are principles of worship that transcend epoch and covenant and cultural bounds. And the way those principles are manifested are "better" (see Hebrews 6-12) than under the Older Covenant. Our Lord's Supper in its various forms is a better representation of Christ's sacrifice than grain offerings or pigeon beheadings. Our baptism is a better sign of the covenant than circumcision is.

It would be a step backward to integrate sacrifices and feasts and offerings back into our liturgical worship, counter the counsels of many beloved Messianic Jews. But it is not a step backwards to go back to God's Word to Israel and find some of those principles and use them to form our worship of God, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. It is a blessing and a privilege and a sure sign of our connection to the Church in the Wilderness.

One emphasis we find in the Old Testament that is missing from modern liturgical worship is that *worship is covenant renewal*. The early church understood this, being predominately Jewish. This concept of worship as covenant renewal is likely the liturgy-shaping force behind the catholic thought and practice of the early and medieval church. But as our Protestant heroes rebelled against the Catholic apostasy of the 15-1600s, some threw out many good and acceptable practices (weekly communion, for instance). This was one idea that was left in the junk heap to our own ruin.

Old Covenant worship was, in contrast to ours, very private. With your family (or whoever could travel) you went to the temple in Jerusalem (or your local, official branch office). You purchased appropriate items to sacrifice and, in a rush of smoke and blood, it was over. The closest thing they had to the public sing-along worship that we enjoy are the psalms they sang together as the crowds walked up to Jerusalem (Psalm 103, for instance).

But aside from the many differences in the specifics, the concept of worship as covenant renewal runs unchanged from the instigation of a system to worship God (perhaps as early as Genesis 4:26) until today.

First, what is a covenant? The concept of covenant is not found exclusively in the Bible. Other cultures in early biblical times used the concept as a basis for various interpersonal and social relationships. Between nations, a covenant was a treaty (Ge 14:13; 31:44-55). Among individuals, a covenant was a pledge of friendship (1 Sa 18:3; 20:8; 23:18) or served as a business contract. When a ruler and his subjects were the parties to a covenant, such a covenant served as a national constitution and spelled out the responsibilities of the ruler and the ruled (cf. 2 Sa 3:21; 5:3; 1 Ch 11:3). God selected the concept of covenant (or contract, in more modern terms) to clarify the relationship that He sought to establish with his people. And He has not ceased to do so today.

The concept of covenant-renewal worship then, is this: Sabbath worship (whenever your Sabbath is, see Col. 2:16) is a weekly ceremony through which the central elements (Word, Prayer, Sacrament, in our case) present to us the opportunity to renew our side of the New Covenant. We ceremonially remind God of His promises towards His people and we press upon our neighbors and ourselves the excellent commands and promises of the law and the Gospel.

You can see how this would define the content of worship in a negative and positive sense — you could entertain restricting certain worship activities (such as children's church — why should children not be exposed to the means of grace?) or you could include others (weekly communion, songs and liturgies dealing with God's promises towards us or our sin or other aspects of our covenant relationship). These provide another way for us to make our worship more covenantal and at the same time, more common/universal with Christians around the world and throughout history.

Put more practically, no part of our worship service is more clearly an act of covenant renewal than the Lord's Supper. Its elements are rightly restricted to the covenant community. Its practice is alone dictated by the bylaws of our covenant with God, His Holy Word. If we are not in harmony with our covenant community (either by a relational breach or by disciplinary action, see Matt. 5:24 and 1 Cor. 5:1-13), then we are restricted from it. And if we take the Lord's Supper in unrepentant hypocrisy, the guilty will be judged with covenant sanctions (Deut. 28; 1 Cor. 10:1-5; 11:30) reserved for the enemies of God.

What would it be like if we allowed the principles and content of the Lord's Supper to spill over into every aspect of our Sabbath worship? Would we remove some aspects of our worship or include others we omit? Would we approach the entire service in a more solemn (yet joyous!) frame of mind? As we view our worship through the eyes of covenant renewal, some very interesting questions arise, questions that your covenant community must answer on a very practical level.