

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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## COVENANTAL WORSHIP BETTER THAN A HYMN SANDWICH

### (Transcendence)

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to ~~Shochem~~ and ~~called~~ for the elders of Israel and for their heads and their judges and their officers; and they presented themselves before God, And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel,"

### (Hierarchy)

"From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River [Euphrates], namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods. . . ."

### (Ethics)

"Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth. . . ."

### (Sanctions)

And the people answered and said, 'Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods. . . .'

### (Continuity)

Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance. And it came about after these things that Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being one hundred and ten years old. . . . (Joshua 24:1-33).

At last, worship has again become a central issue in the Church. It seems as though everyone from Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, and Lutherans, to Baptists and Charismatic is into worship these days. And, it seems as though a wide variety of denominations appear to have some common concerns: (1) that worship is the center of the life of the church; (2) that the Church cannot be renewed without renewing the dynamic place of worship; and, (3) that somehow the Church has to get back to its historic emphasis on worship, even though there may be disagreement on just how this "historic worship" is expressed.

The bottom line is that we're beginning to see a move away from what J. 1. Packer calls, "Hymn sandwich worship"! In a recent interview at Geneva College, he was asked,

You have talked about the element of renewal of worship as being central to renewal of the church at large. Two questions, then: What elements in Reformed worship are strong and healthy and what elements in Reformed worship are weak and unhealthy? Could you bring those questions together?¹

Lo and behold, even the Reformed-Frozen-Chosen churches are interested in liturgical renewal! But, listen to Packer's laser analysis that provides some well-directed heat, so as to do a little thawing of our "icy" brethren.

Reformed people have turned their back, a little too thoroughly I think, on the liturgical principle. We can use the Lord's Prayer in our worship; we have sung Psalms; but apart from the Anglicans, who are at this point out of step with the rest of the Reformed world, we have not allowed ourselves to use the liturgical forms at all. That I think has been a source of greater loss than it has gain.

We have only extemporaneous forms of prayer in our heritage. We have proved vulnerable to the desire  
Much too  
much of what goes on in our standard worship services is and of people rather than

On this point I think that the Charismatic have a lot to teach us because they have said in their godly simplicity, we are gathering together to worship and simply to praise the Lord. There isn't a need for a horizontal thrust in the worship, whereby its hidden agenda is to encourage and edify us.

We just look straight at the Lord and praise Him and thank Him for all that He is, and we can spend an hour at a time doing it if we live that way. It is a very proper thing for us to be doing. You don't really get that emphasis in the of Reformed worship as we know it today.²

The interviewer asked for it, and did he ever get it from Packer! Yet, this venerable churchman and author of probably the most popular evangelical book in years,

is part of a growing interest among all points on the theological spectrum. He sounds a familiar refrain, part of a large chorus growing out of the 60s.

Actually, the increasing consensus of interest in liturgy reminds me of that old song in the 60s, "Everybody's do'n it, do'n it, do'n it." Only now, the Jesus freaks, who were delivered out of the sexual revolution of alater era, have been saved, washed by the blood of the Lamb, and now many of them are the driving force behind liturgical renewal. They're "do'n" worship, and they're ready to join the liturgical revolution.

### Feelings, Nothing More Than Feelings

Here's a problem. I'm afraid that much of the liturgical interest we see grows out of misguided desires, bad theology,

1. *Covenanter Witness*, (1/1986), p. 7.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 7. Italicized emphasis mine.

and nothing more than feelings, as another song goes; I can't help it, but those songs just keep pop'n into my head; they're so descriptive of the 20th century. Anyway, let me illustrate my concerns about some of the disoriented liturgical direction of the 80s by telling you a little story.

Over a year ago, I went to hear one of my favorite writers on liturgy, Robert Webber, a man whose contributions in the area of worship are a delight! I just had to listen, see, and meet him. I had heard he was going to be in the area, speaking for the Evangelical Theological Society of the Southwest, and meeting at a little independent Baptist seminary way out here in the pa pa patch of East Texas. So I went, and I was amazed that he was allowed to speak on liturgy and on his pilgrimage into the Episcopal Church in this out of the way school in this out of the way part of the country.

But, there he was in his Gucci shoes, frizzy hair, and horn-rimmed glasses. He held them spell bound, or either some of these independent types were in shock; I couldn't tell which was the case. Anyway, he riveted their attention with what I thought would be to them some of the most offensive stuff possible.

Webber came with one message: liturgy. He spoke positively of what the liturgical experience had meant to him. He talked negatively about the impotence of preacher-centered worship, and entertainment-oriented Baptist services with a thousand refrains of "Just As 1 Am" tacked on at the end of the service, so many refrains that they force the visitor to come forward just so he can go home. In many ways, he said it all, and I waited for the tar and feather job. But none came. Not only did he not get thrown out of town on a rail, but he aroused their interest so much so that the questions flew fast and furious at the end of his first talk on the first night.

Then came the disappointment for me. (Jim Jordan was with me, so if you doubt what I'm about to say, he's my second witness.) A questioner asked something to the effect, "How did you really become interested in the Episcopal Church?" Then Webber floored me with his response. He took his glasses off and he leaned over the lectern, peering out of the windows across the room; I know that he wasn't looking outside at the beautiful East Texas landscape, because it was pitch dark; he was thinking of how to answer the question, as he paused. Finally, he said, "Well, I went into an Episcopal church and something hit me in my gut that told me this is where I belong."

As he kind of rambled on a bit more about his existential gnaw, he noticeably took a few people back. I hate to say it, but it reminded me of that old Peggy Lee song, "Is That All There Is?", which I'm hesitant to refer to again because I used her song to describe something, as I recall, several newsletters ago; but in this vacuous society, I find Peggy Lee's song most descriptive of just about all the weak-kneed theology and practice I see.

Even so, I just don't know how else I would describe Webber's answer, or lack thereof, except to say, "Where's the beef?" Where's the Scriptural beef? When it came time to lay out the Biblical rationale, Webber gave us a "visceral twitch" of an answer. You know, the same kind of visceral twitch kids get when they go to see Madonna, or some other rock group. On second thought, I think I would rather see Madonna than Webber; she's got him beat on the visceral twitch stuff.

Don't misunderstand, I'm not down on Robert Webber; I still think he's written some great things on liturgy. But he just didn't give me anything to sink my sharp little evangelical teeth into. He didn't give me any' real solid, pulsating, Word-oriented guidelines. Nothing except gush and goo.

I'm not saying that worship does not and should not speak to the whole person, including the experiential; it should, and it is the whole-personness and total environ-

ment of Biblical worship that is so persuasive in a liturgical experience. I'm saying, however, that there must be more than just experience, more than a visceral tug from the torso. There must be solid Biblical rationale that is well thought out and powerfully presented. There must be a **covenantal** understanding of worship!

### Covenantal Worship

Think about the various reasons people go to worship services on Sunday. Some go because they want their "spiritual batteries re-charged"; they want to be "lifted," as one person told me. Some go because they want to feel holy. Some go because they want to learn. Some go because they want to see their friends. Some go because they want to lead, if they're a leader type. Yet, all of these reasons are not the correct purpose for entering worship, even though some of them are part of it. So what is the primary reason for going to worship?

The main purpose for going to worship is to renew the covenant, because worship is supposed to be a **covenantal** process! A classic New Testament example is the Book of Revelation, which David Chilton has ably demonstrated that it follows the five-fold covenant pattern. He says it is a covenant, as well as a worship service.

The Book of Revelation is part of the Bible. At first glance this may not seem to be a brilliant insight, but it is a point that is both crucially important and almost universally neglected in the actual practice of exposition. For as soon as we recognize that Revelation is a Biblical document, we are forced to ask a central question: What sort of book is the Bible? And the answer is this:

The Bible is not an Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge. Nor is it a collection of Moral Tales, or a series of personal-psychology studies of Great Heroes of Long Ago. The Bible is God's written revelation of Himself, the story of His coming to us in the Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ; and it is the story of the Church's relationship to Him through the Covenant He has established with her.<sup>3</sup>

For the real "proof of the pudding," as to whether or not the Book of Revelation follows the covenant pattern, I'll leave it to Chilton's excellent work; I believe that his commentary is irrefutable! But he does go on to conclude about the covenantal nature of the book,

Unless we see the Book of Revelation as a Covenant document – i.e., if we insist on reading it primarily as a prediction of twentieth-century nuclear weapons or a polemic against first-century Rome – its continuity with the rest of the Bible will be lost. It becomes an eschatological appendix, a view of "last things" that ultimately has little to do with the message, purpose, and concerns of the Bible. Once we understand Revelation's character as a Covenant Lawsuit, however, it ceases to be a "strange: "weird" book; it is no longer incomprehensible, or decipherable only with the complete New *Index*. In its major themes at least, it becomes as accessible to us as Isaiah and Amos. The Book of Revelation must be seen from the outset in its character as Biblical *revelation*.<sup>4</sup>

What about worship? Chilton also adds some choice comments about the liturgical nature of the Book of Revelation.

3. David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 10.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

tion, for he believes that the book follows a set worship pattern. He says,

The lectionary nature of Revelation helps explain the wealth of liturgical material in the prophecy. Revelation is not, of course a manual about how to "do" a worship service; rather, it *is* a worship service, a liturgy conducted in heaven as a model for those on earth (and incidentally instructing us that the Throne-room of God is the only proper vantage point for viewing the earthly conflict between the Seed of the Woman and the seed of the Serpent): "The worship of the Church has traditionally, quite consciously, been patterned after the divine and eternal realities revealed in [Revelation]. The prayer of the Church and its mystical celebration are one with the prayer and celebration of the kingdom of heaven. Thus, in Church, with the angels and saints, through Christ the Word and the Lamb, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the faithful believers of the assembly of the saved offer perpetual adoration of God the Father Almighty"

The failure to recognize the significance of Revelation for Christian worship has greatly impoverished many modern churches. . . . It is this "ceremonious" view of worship that is taught by the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Since all the action of Revelation is seen from the viewpoint of a worship service, this commentary will assume that the prophecy's liturgical structure is basic to its proper interpretations

And indeed, that is exactly what Chilton does in his commentary. He proves that the Book of Revelation follows a basic pattern found throughout the Bible that weaves **worship and covenant together!!!** I believe that Chilton is exactly right, but where else is this covenantal worship pattern found? Many places, but it can most easily be seen in the passage at the beginning of this newsletter: Joshua 24.

### Covenantal Worship in Ancient Israel

After the land is conquered, and after the land has been divided, Joshua gathers all of the people to worship. Following dominion, he led them in sabbath worship. He drew them together to renew their covenant through a set liturgy, a covenantal liturgy. Here we see the covenant in all five of its parts, and here we see worship tracking the covenant, which will lead to some very interesting insights about the nature of worship in just a moment.

But wait a minute. Is this just my opinion? Is this just some tricky "smoke and mirrors" job? No it's not only my view, but others have also not iced the covenantal nature of worship in Joshua 24. And so, no, there's no slight of hand. Walter Brueggeman, professor of Old Testament and Dean of Academic Affairs at Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Groves, Missouri, says the following about this passage.

The liturgy of this worship [Joshua 24], then, is covenant liturgy. It may have served varied purposes, depending upon the status of the covenant relation. When the covenant relation was in good repair, worship may have been primarily joyful and grateful remembering. But more often, public worship was intended to (a) lead Israel to new appreciation of the covenant which had *fallen into* or (b) to lead to renewal of covenant which had been *disrupted by infidelity* on the part of Israel.

It is this latter situation which concerns us, i.e., these events in the worship life of Israel when covenant was renewed or restored. The current under-

standing of this worship is supported primarily by the parallels which have been discovered in the political treaties and alliances known in ancient political documents [such as suzerainty treaties]. As in most formal relationships, the procedure was fixed and not free, so that the steps taken follow a regular pattern:

(a) The naming of the great king, the one who grants the treaty to the lesser party, including titles and attributes which do honor to him.

(b) The recitation of past deeds of graciousness by the king directed toward the lesser party.

(c) The covenant stipulations in which the greater member of the treaty gives the conditions upon which the relation will exist, i.e., the obligations imposed upon the lesser member.

(d) The oath of loyalty by the lesser member which includes an acceptance of the conditions just pronounced.

(e) A recital of the blessings and curses which will result from honoring or dishonoring the treaty.<sup>6</sup>

Brueggeman's observations confirm my observations about the covenant. He says that worship is essentially covenantal in its structure and content, following the suzerain treaty pattern. And, he even adds that the covenantal pattern is five-fold, noting the same divisions that I have presented. To see this covenantal structure of worship, however, a simple explanation of Joshua 24 will suffice.

### Transcendence

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and their judges and their officers; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel" (Joshua 24:1-2a).

The worship service begins with the familiar, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel." It starts with the very same introduction to the Deuteronomic covenant, "Moses spoke to the children of Israel according to all that the Lord had commanded him to give to them" (Deuteronomy 1:3). Why is this connection important? Because I have demonstrated time and again in

my book on the covenant, that Deuteronomy is a covenant. Since it is, and since the worship of Israel opens with this key formula, its liturgy is covenantal.

More to the point, by starting, "Thus says the Lord," everyone knows (1) that the service is called by God, not man, and (2) that it is not, nor should it be a man-centered worship. The service begins on a certain transcendent note that sets a theocentric tone. It is for God and not man.

Traditionally in liturgical services, there have been five parts. The first part of the service is the call to **worship**. It can be a Scripture reading, the recitation of the Lord's prayer or some other prayer, or most often it is the singing of a hymn. In any case, liturgical/covenantal worship begins with a specific call to worship God. Everyone knows when the service starts, and everyone knows what they are to start to do: turn upward to the Lord.

### Hierarchy

"From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River [Euphrates], namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River, and led him through all the land of Canaan,

6. Walter Brueggeman, *Hoses: Tradition For Crisis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1968), pp. 22-23. Brackets mine.

and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac. And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau, and to Esau I gave Mount Seir, to possess it; but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt by what I did in its midst; and afterward I brought you out. And I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea; and Egypt pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. But when they cried out to the Lord, He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and brought the sea upon them and covered them, . . . Then I brought you into the land of the Amorites who lived beyond the Jordan, and they fought with you. . . ." (Joshua 24:2b-13).

The second section of the liturgical covenant rehearses the history of God's covenant faithfulness, and reminds them of their unfaithfulness. It focuses on the possession, loss, and re-possession of the land. It does so to draw our attention to the issue of authority and mediation.

In Deuteronomy, the second section does precisely the same, mostly covering the very identical history. It covers the issues of history and accountability,

In traditional liturgical worship, the second part of the service is confession of sin. Why? It is historical in nature, recounting what has happened in the days ahead, and specifically taking note of man's unfaithfulness as opposed to God's faithfulness. Also, it provides an opportunity for the representative(s), officers, to pronounce in the name of the Lord that those who confess their sins are clean. As Jesus says immediately following the passage on Church discipline and excommunication, "Truly I say to you[covenantal introductory formula], whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). He means by this that the Church has the power to grant forgiveness or to excommunicate, if what it binds has been bound in heaven, meaning, if it has acted true to the Bible.

### *Ethics*

"Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth . . ." (Joshua 24:14-15).

The third part of Joshua 24 gives a specific command, or stipulation. It cites an important precept that is the summary of the entire stipulations section in the Deuteronomic covenant, 'You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name' (Deuteronomy

6:13). So, of all the segments of the covenant, the third section centers on obeying the Word of God.

Accordingly, the third aspect of the traditional liturgical service focuses on the reading and preaching of Scripture. It usually follows one of the versions of the lectionary, an arrangement of Bible readings that follow the Church calendar. And, it takes the participant in worship to the heart of his relationship to the Lord: obedience to the Word.

### *Sanctions*

And the people answered and said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods. . . ." (Joshua 24:19-27).

After the call to obey the Word, the people respond with an oath before witnesses. Three times they say, "We will serve the Lord." And furthermore, Joshua writes down their oath, recording the events of the day so as "to serve as a witness" (Joshua 24:26-27). He calls them to do exactly what Moses had done in the fourth section of Deuteronomy: take an oath before witnesses (Deuteronomy 27-30).

in the historical service of the Church, the fourth part of the worship is the recitation of the creed, and/or the observance of baptism and communion. All of these are ways of taking an oath before God, and all of them act as a witness to the confession of the Church.

### *Continuity*

Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance. And it came about after these things that Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being one hundred and ten years old. . . . (Joshua 24:28-33).

The final segment of Joshua 24 perfectly parallels the last part of Deuteronomy (31-34). Joshua dismisses the people to claim their inheritance just as Moses had done. Then he dies just as Moses died after his final benediction. Finally, the people go out and take dominion.

in similar fashion, the concluding and fifth part of historic worship in the Church is the dismissal. The people are given a benediction and essentially told to go and take dominion. The ancient Mass used to end, "The Mass is over, go forth and conquer in the name of Christ."

Thus, the worship of ancient Israel had five parts that strictly followed the covenant of Deuteronomy. Worship was covenantal then, and so it remained covenantal in the New Covenant. Indeed, so it should be now!