

The Worship of the Church: A Reformed Theology of Worship

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1. Introduction and Background

Our main task will be to answer the question, *What is the public worship of God in the Church?* We begin with a review of our historic doctrinal understanding of the worship of the Church, then provide a brief summary of theological arguments supporting the regulative principle of worship. We then develop a theology of worship framed in biblical-theological terms. Building on all these, we sketch a covenantal form of worship.

1.1. Contemporary Perspectives on Worship

In considering the debates about worship in the Church in our day, it is necessary to keep three things in mind. First, the form of contemporary Sunday services of evangelical churches lacks continuity with many 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 of these meetings was to convert sinners; they were not the public worship of God by the Church. Second, dispensational theology has conditioned many Christians, even those who reject dispensationalism as a system, to approach ethics, doctrine, and worship by asking only what the New Testament teaches. The Old Testament is undervalued and the historic Christian traditions are held in suspicion and rejected. In this climate of thought, many churches imitate what seems to succeed in the “megachurches,” often with little thought given to the doctrinal consequences of their decisions. Third, we must bear in mind the constant effort of our unseen enemy to distort and corrupt the worship of God in order to obscure His glory and the only way of salvation through Jesus Christ (Matt. 4:9; Eph. 6:11-12; Jas. 4:7).

1.2. Reformed Confessional Perspective on Worship

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America is a confessional Reformed church with organic ties to the great catholic tradition mediated through the national church of Scotland. Therefore we do not view ourselves as a generation of practical innovators commissioned to find out what works. We are servants of Christ, told “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. We affirm the continuity as well as the discontinuity of the Old and New Covenants, and the continuity of the Church through the generations.

From ancient times through the Reformation, and until recent times, the Christian Church understood the unique character of its public worship. It was different from the rest of life. At the Reformation, all parties agreed that the Church must gather weekly on the Lord’s Day to worship God, even while they argued about the specifics of that worship. The Reformers taught that Christians should obey and serve God in the home, the workplace, and the public square, and that they should maintain daily times of private and family prayers. But godly life and worship in such venues was not the public worship of God. Our confessional documents thus move quickly

from a general definition of worship to how it should be carried out in church meetings on the Sabbath day. The worship of God by the Church was a sacred gathering set apart from the rest of life and governed according to its own rules by God's Word.

2. The Westminster Assembly's Doctrine of Worship

The worship of the Church was a central concern of the Westminster Assembly. Charles I's attempt to impose a new liturgy on the Church of Scotland in 1637 had provoked widespread resistance in Scotland and among the Puritans in England. In the midst of England's Civil War, the "Long" Parliament called an assembly to meet at Westminster to advise it in the further reformation of the worship, doctrine, and government of the Church of England. The goal was to produce a uniformity in religion among the three kingdoms of England, Ireland, and Scotland.

The Westminster Assembly devoted over 70 sessions to the study of worship. The first document they produced was *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (published March 1645). Because worship is such a central part of the life of the Church and a central concern of the Assembly, it is integral to the theology of the *Confession* and *Catechisms*. The doctrine of worship is woven throughout the documents produced by the Assembly. Thus, to grasp its complete teaching on worship, one must look further than chapter 21 in the *Confession of Faith*, "Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day."

2.1. Scripture is Sufficient to Direct the Church in Its Worship

The Assembly teaches that the Scriptures are sufficient to instruct the Church in the worship of God. The first chapter of the *Confession* states 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" (*Confession*, 1.8).

The preface to the *Directory for Publick Worship* reveals the Assembly's intent to ground the worship of God in the Scriptures and to set aside human inventions. They write 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. (*Directory for Publick Worship*, preface)

The distinction between "things of divine institution" and "other things" finds further explanation in the *Confession*. After 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. (*Confession*, 1.6)

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 for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life" of the first part.

By "other things" in its *Directory* and by "circumstances" in the *Confession*, chapter 1, the Assembly had in mind such practical issues as how long a section of Scripture to read, what parts of the Bible should be read more frequently, how long to preach, how often to give interpretive comments after the reading, which petitions to pray before or after the sermon, exactly when and where to meet, and so on. The main point of their teaching is that Scripture is sufficient to direct the Church's worship: There is no room in their acknowledgment of "circumstances" for innovative practices.

2.2. The Transcendent God Does Not Need the Church's Worship, but His Covenantal Grace Makes Our Worship Possible

"[God] is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures" (*Confession*, 2.2). Therefore, "To Him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience, He is pleased to require of them." Man cannot devise his own way to approach the all-sufficient God; he can only give to God what God requires of him.

Despite our sin and rebellion, God brings us into His presence by His Covenant of Grace—Christ as our Mediator reveals God's will to us by His Spirit speaking in His Word, offers Himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God, and rules us as our King (see *Shorter Catechism*, Q. 24-26). All of our worship proceeds ultimately from God's initiative and not our own.

In chapter 7 the *Confession* notes the discontinuity between the administrations of the Covenant of Grace in the periods of the law and 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. (*Confession*, 7.5)

These means of administering the covenant under the law had centrally to do with the worship of God at the temple, in which Christ was depicted in types yet to be fulfilled. Under

the gospel, now that Christ has come,

...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. (*Confession*, 7.6)

When the Assembly mentioned preaching, they intended preaching in the Church, just as they intended the observance of the sacraments to be done in the worship of the Church. Their goal was uniformity of doctrine and practice in the three Kingdoms; they had no use for preaching, meetings, or sacraments unauthorized by proper church authority. The Covenant of Grace, according to the *Confession*, is therefore set forth preeminently in the public worship of the Church where God draws near to man in order to draw man near to Him.

Chapter 16, "Of Good Works," does not discuss public worship, but it does use similar language. Man pleases God on God's terms only.

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. (*Confession*, 16.1)

The pretense of "good intention" does not make human innovations such as saying the Rosary, venerating relics, or going on pilgrimages a "good work." The principle here is the same as in the worship of God: What is acceptable to God as good works are those things of divine institution.

2.3. Liberty of Conscience Must Be Preserved in the Worship of God

Chapter 20 of the *Confession*, "Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience," deals with a pressing issue for the members of the Westminster Assembly. Many of them had been persecuted for refusing to observe ceremonies prescribed by the bishops under the direction of Charles I. The chapter teaches that liberty of conscience sets us free from believing or doing anything contrary to the Word of God, no matter what civil or ecclesiastical authority commanded it. We may—in fact, we should—disobey. But in two spheres the conscience is free even from what is "beside the Word":

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith or worship. (*Confession*, 20.2)

In other words, God's people may not be required to believe anything by way of doctrine not

taught in Scripture, nor may they be required to engage in any practice in the worship of God that is not warranted by the Word of God. In these matters, to follow mere human authority as if it were the voice of God is a betrayal of liberty of conscience. In ordinary life such as politics, business, or family affairs, freedom of conscience means not being obliged to do anything against the Bible. In matters of faith and worship, freedom of conscience means not being obligated to believe or do anything “beside,” that is, *in addition to*, the Word of God.

2.4. God Alone Speaking in the Scriptures Reveals How He Is to Be Worshiped: He May Not Be Worshiped in Any Way Not Prescribed in Scripture

Chapter 21, “Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day,” begins with man’s innate need to worship and concludes with the weekly worship of the Church on the Lord’s Day. “The light of nature” shows that God is good and should be “feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served,” with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. After thus echoing Romans 1 and the first great commandment, the chapter draws a contrast between true and false 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 other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture. (*Confession*, 21.1)

John Calvin expressed a similar teaching:

From this we gather that a part of the reverence that is paid to Him consists simply in worshipping Him as He commands, mingling no inventions of our own. (*Institutes*, IV.X.23)

Worship according to God’s rule follows logically from fallen man’s need to be directed away from the idolatries that please him and toward the true God. Without God’s revelation, we remain ignorant of what pleases Him. Without God’s revelation man will follow his natural inclinations towards devising his own way to God and will always end up with idolatry.

Section 2 of chapter 21 teaches that worship is due to the triune God alone. Christ is the only Mediator through whom worship can be acceptable to God. Sections 3 and 4 deal with prayer. Calvin wrote that God called the temple the “house of prayer” (Isa. 56:7; Matt. 21:13), “for He taught by this term that the chief part of His worship lies in the office of prayer” (*Institutes*, III.XX.29). The Assembly states that prayer is to be from the heart, offered through Jesus Christ alone, directed only to God, and must be done with “understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance.”

Section 5 sets forth the parts of “the ordinary religious worship of God,” that is, Lord’s Day

worship in the Church. These include the reading of Scripture, preaching and hearing of the Word, singing of psalms, and the administration of the sacraments. The *Directory for Public Worship* gives a fuller description of these parts of public worship. Throughout its teaching, the *Confession of Faith* emphasizes both the inwardness and spirituality of true worship that in form is according to the Scriptures. Scripture reading must be “with godly fear”; preaching must be “sound”; hearing must be “conscionable (conscientious)”; singing must be “with grace in the heart.”

Section 6 teaches that since the coming of Christ, worship is no longer tied to the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Daily, in families and in private devotions, men should worship God, and so, “more solemnly, in the publick assemblies, which are not carelessly or willfully to be neglected” (*Confession*, 21.6). The last two sections of the chapter deal with one day in seven set apart for the worship of God. It is a time for “public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy” (*Confession*, 21.8).

2.5. A Mark of a True Church Is Its Purity of Worship

God gave to the catholic, visible Church “the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God.” These means of grace are for the gathering and perfecting of the saints. The presence of God by His Spirit in the Church’s ministry makes them effective (*Confession*, 25.3). While some churches have degenerated so badly that they are no longer churches of Christ, “there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to His will” (*Confession*, 25.5). The *Confession* lists three marks by which particular churches are judged to be more or less pure. Two of these pertain explicitly to worship:

And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them. (*Confession*, 25.4; cf. *Larger Catechism*, Q. 108)

2.6. Saints Are Bound Together in the Worship of the Church

Chapter 26 of the *Confession* teaches that, because Christians are united to Christ, they are united to one another and have holy obligations to God and to one another. There is a continuing duty of love that binds the saints together in church and out. This holy communion of the saints is visibly expressed when they gather for worship:

Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification. (*Confession*, 26.2)

Joining in public worship is the central means by which Christians encourage and edify one another.

2.7. The Sacraments Are Signs and Seals of the Covenant of Grace

The essential nature of the public worship of God is the weekly assembly of God's people before God to review His covenant with them and to renew their part in it. In the *Confession's* treatment of the sacraments (chapters 27-29), the covenantal perspective of the Westminster theology is most clearly revealed. Baptism is the sacrament by which one enters the Church and becomes part of God's people. It is for "the solemn admission" into the visible church (*Confession*, 28.1). It is performed as part of the worship of God. The Lord's Supper is the sacrament in which Christ is exhibited as spiritual nourishment to the soul, and by which our continuance and growth in Him is confirmed (*Larger Catechism*, Q. 177). In it, God's people partake in the sign of the Covenant of Grace given to us by Christ. It is not a private matter; it is "a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body" (*Confession*, 29.1). Both sacraments "are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace" (*Confession*, 27.1). They are a sign of Christ and His benefits, they "confirm our interest in Him," they mark the difference between Christians and the world, and they "solemnly...engage [partakers] to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word" (*Confession*, 27.1). The role of the two sacraments in the public worship of God reveals the essential nature of His worship. The public worship of God by the Church is a covenantal activity.

2.8. Summary of the Westminster Assembly's Doctrine of Worship

Two themes run through the *Confession of Faith's* teaching about worship. The more obvious theme is the emphasis on purity of worship. A church is pure according as its worship is pure, both inwardly and outwardly. True worship is done according to the Scriptures, which are sufficient to guide the Church in its worship. Pure worship not only does not contradict the Scriptures, it also does not go beyond them. Worship should be offered to God according to His rule (from L. *regulare*, "to control by rule, direct"). This principle is called the *regulative principle of worship*. We will summarize the arguments that support this teaching in the next section.

The second theme in the *Confession's* teaching about worship is less clearly spelled out, but it too is fundamental. The public worship of the Church is a covenant ceremony. The parts of public worship—prayer, Scripture reading, the sacraments, preaching, and singing psalms—are all means of grace by which the Covenant of Grace is brought to bear on the believer. The Covenant of Grace, administered for a time in the dispensation of law, and now given its permanent and catholic form in the gospel, provides the content of public worship in the Church. We will develop this topic in the final section of the paper as we develop a biblical theology of worship.

3. On the Regulative Principle of Worship

The Reformed understanding of the practice of biblical worship is usually summarized by the *regulative principle of worship*. The clearest statement of this principle is found in the *Confession*, 21.1, and is commented upon in the *Testimony of the RPCNA*, 21.1-3. This principle is an essential part of Scripture's doctrine of worship. The theological necessity for this principle follows from

the need to preserve the purity of the gospel, God's holiness and man's creatureliness, the second commandment, the need to guard the liberty of conscience of the Christian worshiper together with the limited delegated authority of the Church on earth, and the unity of the Church expressed in her worship. We comment on each of these.

3.1 God's Holiness and the Gospel

Because God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His holiness, humans, who are creatures as well as sinners, must be careful to draw near to God only in the way appointed by God. "God is in heaven, and you on earth" (Eccl. 5:1-2).

3.1.1. The Gospel

The predominant material in the Old Testament exhibiting the more careful, detailed (Ex. 25:40; Heb. 8:5), and severe (Lev. 10:7 "...lest you die") regulation appears in God's governing of the ceremonial sacrifice activity of the Levitical priesthood in the sanctuary. The way of access into the throne room and presence of God was portrayed in these ceremonies (Heb. 9:6-10; 10:1-3), which Christ has now fulfilled in His priestly ascension at the right hand of the Father (Heb. 9:11-15; 10:19-25). Having been fulfilled, these ceremonial foreshadowings of Christ have been discontinued (Heb. 10:11-18), and now in the New Testament we find the same careful and severe scrutiny expressed with reference to the gospel message (Heb. 2:1-3a; Gal. 1:8-9; Acts 4:12).

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard *Him*. (Heb. 2:1-3)

3.1.2. God's Holiness

In Deuteronomy the explicit reason for the careful regulation of God's worship (Deut. 12:31-32) is the covenant relationship between God and His people (Deut. 4:36-40), and the absolute lordship of God involved in that relationship (Deut. 5:6-7). The reason stated for God's judgment on unauthorized worship practices is that they are an affront to God's zeal regarding His own worship: "By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy" (Lev. 10:3).

This need for caution and reverence is not eliminated under the New Covenant: "Let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28-29). God initiates the covenant relationship with His people, and, in His holy sovereignty, He determines the terms of that covenant, including the way in which the people approach Him in worship.

3.2. The Second Commandment

The regulative principle governs the central elements of life of the Church: its doctrine,

its governance, and its worship. In these matters, the Church has no authority to go beyond God's Word and to innovate. Thus, in the light of Scripture as a whole, the *Larger Catechism* (Q. 108-109) gives us this interpretation of the second commandment: It requires "the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his Word" and forbids "any religious worship not instituted by God himself." The "reasons annexed" are significant: They include "God's sovereignty over us, and propriety [ownership] in us, His fervent zeal for His own worship, and His revengeful indignation against all false worship" (*Larger Catechism*, Q. 110).

The second commandment applies in every worship setting: individual, family, ecclesiastical, and civil. However, the worship of the Church assembled is the only covenant occasion where all of what are known as "the means of grace" are dispensed. This has been the case since the end of the age of the patriarchs. Today the worship of the family and of the individual is primarily a meditation on God's Word accompanied by prayer and praise. Those leading family or group worship do not have the authority to preach officially, to dispense the sacraments, to pronounce the benediction, or to exercise ecclesiastical discipline. The worship of the Church properly takes place as the Church is assembled for that purpose under the direction of the elders.

3.3. Liberty of Conscience and Church Power

In light of Christ's headship over the Church, the elders must be careful to maintain the liberty of conscience of the members: They are God's people and subject to Him. The Church's authority in matters of faith and worship is not legislative, but solely ministerial. When the elders of the Church call the people together to worship, determine what shall be done in worship, and direct the people to participate, they must not, in Christ's name, impose practices on people that are not authorized in Scripture (Matt. 15:9; Matt. 28:18-19).

Liberty of conscience has a broader application than to the practices of the Church when it assembles for worship. In the broader sphere church rulers are not to require belief in anything not taught in the Word, or to command people to do anything not based on the Word. Since this limitation of church power applies in the areas of belief and behavior outside of the worship assembly, it must certainly apply to public worship, which God guards with holy jealousy. In regard to doctrine and practice, the Word says: "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you" (Deut. 4:2). In regard to worship, it says, "You shall not worship the LORD your God [as the Canaanites do]...Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (Deut. 12:31-32). Church authority is limited by the Word of God, especially in matters of faith and worship. This follows from God's holy authority. This limit on church authority protects the gospel from adulteration by unbiblical worship practices, and it guards the liberty of conscience of the believer, who is thereby assured his freedom to worship God in the church assembly as God Himself has appointed.

3.4. Unity of the Church

Churches whose worship practices conform to the regulative principle of worship should

enjoy and demonstrate unity in their most central purpose on earth. Worship governed by the Scriptures will be centered on Christ Jesus through the means of grace instituted in His Word. Such worship will avoid the temptation to innovate that has led to the fraying of the connection between contemporary Protestant worship practices and the worship of Christian churches in the past. Christ prayed that we would be one, a prayer that includes not only the Church living at any given time on earth but the Church through all of time (John 17:20-21; Heb.11:29-30). The surest path to vindicating this catholicity of the Church in worship is to worship according to the rule of the Scriptures.

At the time of the Reformation, it was necessary for Christian leaders to guard the liberty of conscience of worshipers against centralized ecclesiastical tyranny. Today, we must guard the liberty of conscience of worshipers against the tendency of every congregation to claim the right to worship as it sees fit, where worship is redefined through practice, not biblical principle. We must not forget that it is Christ who is at the center of the worship of the Church, and that the Church's worship is a response to His call to come before God. The Church enters into the heavenly sanctuary and bows before her Lord. This is not a place for self-expression or creativity. This is a place for holy reverence and joyful submission to His revealed will.

3.5. Our Confessional Standards

Should we eliminate the negative clause contained in our *Testimony*, 21.2, “in harmony with the Scriptural principle that whatsoever is not commanded in the worship of God, by precept or example, is forbidden”? This statement rephrases the *Confession's* clause (21.1) “or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.” It is the judgment of this committee that the statement in our *Testimony* would be implied even if it were to be removed. However, by “commanded” or “prescribed” is meant more than the imperatives of Scripture concerning worship. “Commanded” or “prescribed” also include approved examples and sound deductions from Scripture (*Confession*, 1.6). If we agree that God governs His Church and her worship by His Word, it follows that what is forbidden in the public worship of God are worship practices devised by human thought or inherited by custom alone.

All Christians recognize that many otherwise lawful things cannot be done in worship. Husbands and wives will not kiss in worship, pastors will not recite their poems instead of reading a text of Scripture in worship, the congregation will not end prayer with “Hip, hip, hooray!” Because we could multiply the examples of otherwise lawful practices that are inappropriate in worship, and because we could find ourselves in interminable debates about what these are, and why they are inappropriate, the negative statements in the *Confession* and in our *Testimony* protect the church from endless sinful disputes and divisions. We go to God's Word to learn how He wants to be worshiped, and we limit ourselves joyfully to His sovereign good pleasure.

4. A Biblical Theology of Worship

As we sketch a biblical theology of the doctrine of public worship under the New Covenant, we will be looking to find where there is continuity between Old Covenant and New Covenant worship, to define the nature of public worship, and to outline the form of that worship. Our

conclusions will be the same as the *Confession of Faith's* teaching about worship, but the method of development will be biblical-theological rather than systematic.

A covenantal view of worship was not an innovation on the part of the Westminster Assembly. John Calvin, for example, in commenting on Psalm 50:5, describes worship in covenantal terms.

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. 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 characterized by the spirit of meekness, practising righteousness in their intercourse with the world; and such, on the other, as close in that 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 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*)

While the richness of Scripture does not permit us to take one aspect of its teaching, or one metaphor, and employ it to the exclusion of all others in speaking about worship, the Scriptures do provide us with a paradigm which has all-encompassing implications, and which is especially helpful in our thinking about worship:

God's covenants are His gracious instruments for the accomplishment of His purpose that the creation should serve Him. The covenant character of revelation appears in all the Scripture and binds the sixty-six books together in one unified Word of God. It gives the two divisions of the Bible their names, the Old Testament and the New Testament, or Covenant (Jer. 31:31-33; Heb. 8:13). The covenant concept lies at the heart of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*. (*Testimony*, 1.1)

The structure of God's covenantal dealings with men will be detailed as we work out the implications of covenant renewal as our model for worship.

4.1. There is Both Discontinuity and Continuity Between the Old and New Covenants in the Life of God's People

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). The New Covenant that the Church receives was promised to Israel (Jer. 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:8-9). Under the New Covenant, Gentile believers are no longer strangers and aliens but fellow citizens with the saints, Christ having abolished the wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14-15, 19). Therefore James could address Christians as “the twelve tribes scattered abroad” (Jas. 1:1), and Peter could call Christians “the pilgrims of the Dispersion” (1 Pet. 1:1). The addition of the Gentiles to the Church fulfills God’s promise to Noah’s son Japheth that he would dwell in the tents of Shem, to Abraham that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed, and to David to build up his house, that is, David’s kingdom (Acts 15:14-17). The Church therefore is Israel renovated and enlarged under the New Covenant. All the Hebrew Scriptures thus belong to the Church (2 Tim. 3:16). They were written to instruct the Church of the New Covenant (1 Cor. 10:11); their prophecies serve the Church (1 Pet. 1:10-12). As Christ said, the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms speak of Him, upon whom the Church rests (Luke 24:27, 44; Eph. 2:20).

The Church continues Israel in a renovated form. Some parts of Israel’s life, which served as shadows of Christ to come, have ceased. For example, prophets, priests, and kings were mediators between God and Israel; but with his appearing, Christ permanently assumed those offices. Therefore the Church has no prophet bringing new words from God, no priest offering daily sacrifices at the temple, and no temporal king. Christ is our prophet, priest, and king, ruling His Church from the right hand of God as the only Mediator between God and man. In Him the saints are prophets to proclaim the gospel, priests to serve God, and kings reigning with Christ (Rev. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Nevertheless, there is continuity between the Old and New Covenants, as well as discontinuity. For example, the Church continues to have an office given to Israel, that of elder, which is an office that predated the giving of the Mosaic Covenant (Ex. 4:29; 24:1), predated the kingship, and continued after its demise (Josh. 23:2; Ruth 4:2; 2 Sam. 5:3; 1 Kings 8:1; 2 Kings 23:1; Ezra 8:1; 10:8). In the Church, the elders ruled alongside the apostles (Acts 15:4, 22) and were appointed by the apostles in every city (Acts 14:23; see Titus 1:5). The New Testament lists their qualifications (1 Tim. 3), explains that they are the victorious Christ’s gift to His Church (Eph. 4:11), and gives them instructions (1 Pet. 5:1-4). The elders have 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” (Titus 2:15).

4.2. Under Both Dispensations of the Covenant of Grace, God Calls His People to Assemble Regularly Before Him

What continuity exists in the worship of the Church from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant? The temple is no more; sacrifices have ended; there are no priests. These were all types of the reality yet to come. There is continuity in these things, however. The form has indeed

changed from type to reality. When the Church meets, it gathers with the hosts of heaven, in the presence of Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, who intercedes with God for us. The veil is rent, and the entire Church in its worship has access to the temple in heaven (Heb. 12:18-24; 7:25). Christ also is our sacrifice, and He is our priest.

In one thing, however, the form of worship remains the same in Old and New Covenant. The Church assembles regularly before God, in a sacred convocation, to review and renew its covenant with Him. Given our usual vocabulary concerning the public worship of God, it is noteworthy that when Paul discusses a meeting of the church, he does not call it a worship service, a mass or divine liturgy. He writes of the Church *coming together* (1 Cor. 5:4-5; 11:17; 14:26). He adds the defining phrases in assembly using the general meaning of ἑκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) as a gathering (1 Cor. 11:18); in one place (1 Cor. 11:20); and the whole assembly in one place (1 Cor. 14:23). The contrast is between the saints when they are dispersed in their families, workplaces, by themselves, or in the public square, and when they come together as the assembly.

The background for this assembly is Israel's sacred assemblies. Usually the Septuagint (LXX) translates the assembly of Israel συναγωγή (*synagogē*), but sometimes it uses ἑκκλησία (*ekklēsia*). In a covenant renewal sermon on the Plains of Moab, Moses recalled the archetypal assembly of Israel before God at Sinai.

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. (Deut. 9:10, Hebrew – לְיָדִי [QaHaL], LXX – ἑκκλησία, [*ekklēsia*]).

Elsewhere Moses referred to Israel's prayer to God at Sinai *in the day of the assembly* (Deut. 18:16, לְיָדִי [QaHaL], LXX – ἑκκλησία, [*ekklēsia*], see also Deut. 31:12 and 2 Chron. 29:28 for similar usage). In the psalms the *assembly* (לְיָדִי – ἑκκλησία) is where the praises of Messiah are declared (Ps. 22:22, 25; Ps. 40:9-10), and in the *assembly* also the saints will praise God (Ps. 89:7; Ps. 107:32; Ps. 149:1).

The continuity of thought between Israel assembled and the Church assembled is further revealed by the occasional use of συναγωγή (*synagogē*) in the New Testament for Christian meetings. “For if there should come into your assembly—(*synagogē* not *ekklēsia*)—a man with gold rings . . . and you pay attention to the one wearing fine clothes . . . have you not shown partiality among yourselves?” (Jas. 2:2-4). Finally, note that the command to believers not to forsake *assembling* together uses a noun form related to *synagogē* (ἐπισυναγωγή, *episynagogē*) for “assembling” (Heb. 10:25).

4.3. The Saints Assemble at Appointed Times Before God to Express Their Loyalty to the Lord of the Covenant

The fundamental issue concerning the public worship of God, then, is the nature of the assembly of the saints before God, for what reason it comes together, and what is required of it.

The assembled congregation of the New Testament Church, like the assembled congregation of Israel, is God's people met together in His presence at an appointed time to review and renew their part in God's covenant with them, and to celebrate His gracious benefits toward them. In its worship the assembly of the saints expresses its faith and its loyalty to the God of the Covenant.

We have shown above that the concept of the covenant is embedded in the Westminster Assembly's doctrine of worship. Dr. E. Clark Copeland helpfully summarizes much research on the structure of biblical covenants:

Covenant was a common form of agreement between men and nations throughout the whole of the Old Testament period....One feature was common to all covenants: they were religious acts sworn to in the name of God or the gods of both parties, often accompanied by sacrifice (see Gen. 31:51-54; Jer. 34, esp. 15-22; Ezek. 17:11-21, esp. 18). In suzerain-vassal [king-subject] treaties a copy of the covenant was deposited in the temple of the national god of each king, that the gods should witness to covenant fidelity....Moses recorded his writing the book of the law and giving it to the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant with the command, "take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you" (Deut. 31:26; see also 9-13). God's covenants closely resemble the suzerain-vassal treaty form, as can be seen in the Sinai covenant, Exodus 19-24:

The Preamble naming the parties: the Lord God, and Israel, through Moses, their mediator (19:3, 7-15; 20:2, 18-21).

The Covenant History, giving reasons for covenanting (19:4), summarizing Exodus 1-18, pointing back to all of Genesis.

The General Purpose: God claims Israel as His precious possession; Israel is to be the Lord's obedient servant, a kingdom of priests (19:5-6).

Stipulations (20:1-17; 21:1-23:19): The Ten Commandments are permanent principles applied to specific matters in 21:1-23:19.

Blessings (23:20-33)

Covenant Document (24:4)

Oath (19:8; 24:3): "All that the Lord has said we will do and be obedient."

Sacrifice (24:5-8) and *altar* (20:22-26): Compare 24:8 with Matthew 26:28 and parallels.

Covenant Meal (24:9-11): They saw God and ate and drank.

When this covenant was broken by the making of the golden calf (Ex. 32), it was renewed (34:10-27) in similar details. (Copeland in White, 1978:30-31).

Worship seen as covenant renewal leads the Church to remember the various aspects of covenant enactment, to confess her failures in serving God to seek God's forgiveness, to renew her intention to obey the Lord, and by His grace to experience the restoration of joyful communion with her risen Lord. According to the *Westminster Confession*, the Church comes

together “more solemnly, in the public assemblies” (21.6), especially on the Lord’s Day, to engage in a covenant dialogue with God through the “means of grace”: prayer, Bible reading, preaching, singing psalms, and the sacraments.

Israel’s first assembly took place at Sinai at God’s call for a *feast* and to *serve God* when He came to them (Ex. 3:12; 5:1; 19:10ff). Ever after, Israel assembled at God’s command on the appointed days to *remember* God and His covenant. At the center of Israel’s assemblies lay the ark of the covenant, first in the tabernacle and then in the temple. Under the Old Covenant all Israel gathered to the temple three times yearly, and in their home locations weekly (Lev. 23:2-3). The appointed day in the New Covenant, now that Christ is risen, is the first day of each week (see John 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7; and *Confession*, chapter 21, “Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day”). Such has been the practice of the Church from apostolic times.

The Sabbath existed under the Old Covenant as a sacred time each week, a day to be kept holy by resting and by remembering God as Creator and Covenant Redeemer (Ex. 20:11, Deut. 5:15). As such it was a “feast.”

These are My feasts. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings. (Lev. 23:2-3)

Since the fourth commandment is addressed particularly to heads of households, these assemblies may at first have been extended family assemblies. Later, no one knows when or by what impetus, synagogues developed in places where at least ten Jewish men could gather. They met weekly for prayers and Scripture reading. In their architecture, they were oriented towards the temple in Jerusalem, the appointed place of worship (John 4:20-22). Whatever was done in the synagogues looked to the temple worship, where alone sacrifices were made to atone for the sin of Israel. The types were presented in the temple; the continuity of worship of the entire Israel of God was assured in the local synagogues.

Three times yearly Israel’s males were to assemble before the LORD at the place of His choosing, to remember His covenant dealings with them and to pledge their loyalty to Him (see Ex. 23:14-17; Lev. 24; Deut. 16). By itself the Sabbath was a covenant sign given as a reminder of God’s creation, the redemption of God’s people (Ex. 20:11; Deut. 5:15), and the heavenly consummation yet awaiting them (Heb. 4:1-10). The weekly Sabbath is a “memorial” or “reminder” of God’s temporal and eternal, earthly and heavenly, 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)

Under the New Covenant, through Christ’s completed work, the saints have greater access to God in many ways. The church assemblies include women and children as well as men. No longer tied to one place, Jerusalem, nor to the temple, nor to yearly feasts, the Church assembles

weekly everywhere in the world in the presence of its eternal priest in the heavenly temple, where He intercedes for the saints with His own blood:

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. (Heb. 12:18-24)

Only with the blood of Christ can sinners be counted saints and worthy in Christ to worship their covenant God. When the saints assemble in Christ, they stand in God's presence with no barrier between them and heaven except that of sight. Since the Covenant of Grace is one covenant, the Church assembles for the same purposes as it did before the coming of Christ: to pledge its loyalty to the Lord of the covenant by remembering Him, hearing Him, praising Him, thanking Him, and being fed by Him.

4.4. Covenant Renewal Worship Under Old and New Covenants: What Was Done?

The pattern for the assembly's activities appears in the covenant review on the plains of Moab. God called His people to meet with Him. Moses reminded them of God's past dealings with them in the Exodus and making a covenant with them. He declared His law to Israel and exhorted them to obedience. Through Moses God pronounced His blessings on obedience and cursings on disobedience. Also, a way was established to commemorate and renew the covenant in the future (Deuteronomy). After Israel entered Canaan, they renewed the covenant on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim, with the ark of the covenant in the midst of the people (Josh. 8:30-35). At a later covenant gathering called by David to announce plans for building the temple, Israel's assembled leaders listened to David declare the covenant that God had now made with him, in faithfulness to the covenant promises He had made with Israel. They offered materials for the new temple. David prayed to Israel's covenant God. They all celebrated God's faithfulness and bowed before the LORD (1 Chron. 28). The Scriptures record the restoration of temple worship and the renewal of the covenant made by Hezekiah. They began the worship of God again, the temple being sanctified. Sacrifices resumed:

So all the assembly worshiped, the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded; all this continued until the burnt offering was finished. And when they had finished offering, the king and all who were present with him bowed and worshiped. (2 Chron. 29:29-30)

They brought thankofferings, the Levites sang the words of David and Asaph, and the people

rejoiced.

Consider now the New Covenant assembly. Weekly the saints rehearse and confirm their covenant commitment to be the Lord's. The historic public worship of the Church in its solemn assemblies moves generally through the parts of a covenant ceremony. The parties to the covenant know themselves and each other to be called by God to meet and worship Him. At their baptism, the saints remember how the covenant was established between them and God through Christ. They review the requirements of the covenant, they are reminded that blessings and curses are attached to the covenant, and they reaffirm their part in the covenant by a pledge. The Lord's Supper is a covenant reminder: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25).

There is a correspondence between the *elements* of worship as defined by Westminster and the parts of a covenant ceremony. For example, the parties to the covenant communicate in the reading of Scripture and in prayer. The saints are reminded of God's past dealings with them in hearing the Bible read and explained. In particular, God's people are reminded how Christ by His death redeemed them from death and gave them life. Through the reading of the law and in the preaching of the Word, the saints are exhorted to live loyally to God. In singing psalms, the Church praises its God and instructs itself at the same time. In the Lord's Supper, the Church has a memorial sign of Christ's salvation, the experience of its present communion with God in Christ, and a reminder that it awaits the return of its King. The benediction expresses the blessings of the covenant, while the warnings against unbelief (Heb. 4:1) and the exercise of church discipline in its gatherings remind the Church of the curses attached (see 1 Cor. 5:4-5; 11:29).

4.5. Summary of a Biblical Theology of Worship

God commanded His people under both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant to assemble before Him. There is some discontinuity in the nature of these assemblies, since Christ has now fulfilled the shadows of the earthly temple, the sacrifices, and the priesthood. There is also continuity in these assemblies because they are times for pledging loyalty to the God of the covenants and for being equipped by Him to persevere in the terms of the covenant. There is likewise continuity in the provision of sacrifice to atone for the sins of the worshipers; but whether before or after Christ's coming, true efficacy of sacrifice is found only in Christ's blood. Continuity can be found also in the covenant renewal of the assembly's worship in which Scripture is read and explained, prayers offered, psalms sung, and the covenant signs observed. The Westminster standards' understanding of the public worship of the Church as being fundamentally covenantal is correct.

5. Sketch of a Covenantal Form of Worship

The call to assemble before our Covenant Lord comes from God, naming Him as the one who calls, and the saints as those called to gather. The Lord says, "Gather my saints together before me, those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifices. Offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High" (Ps. 50:5, 14). God in the New Testament warns believers not to forsake assembling together (Heb. 10:25). The normal, regularly appointed time is the first

day of the week, exactly when and where being up to the elders.

As subjects appearing before our Lord, we must seek pardon for past sins. Under the Old Covenant, the saints brought animals for sacrifice, laid their hands on them, and confessed their sins (Lev. 4:15; 16:21). Under the New Covenant, the saints by faith lay hold of the sacrifice of Christ, confessing their sins to God (Heb. 9:14; 1 John 1:7, 9). In the solemn assemblies of the Church, the saints properly respond to God's call to meet with a confession of sin and hear God's assurance of forgiveness for Christ's sake. Apart from Christ's sacrifice, there can be no appearing in God's presence. Anyone not clothed in Christ's righteousness will be cast out of the King's presence (Matt. 22:12).

Saints meeting with their King respond to His call to meet with praise, thanksgiving, and offerings as well as confession of sin. God is pleased with the sacrifice of praise and with the good deeds of sharing this world's goods (Heb. 13:15-16). And He instructs His people to give Him thanks:

Oh, give thanks to the LORD! Call upon His name; Make known His deeds among the peoples! Sing to Him, sing Psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works! Glory in His holy name; Let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD! (Ps. 105:1-3)

The New Covenant is a wedding bond between God and His people. Their meeting each week properly brings joy and delight. So the saints sing psalms to God.

What is the reading of Scripture in God's worship but recounting the history by which God brought His people home to Himself? The giving of the Law under the Old Covenant began by recounting God's saving Israel: *I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery* (Ex. 20:1-2). Likewise, in the New Testament, God's saving acts in Christ are proclaimed in the gospel. God in Christ has vanquished the enemies of his people: the power of sin, Satan, and the last enemy, death itself (Col. 1:13-14).

Instruction in how to serve God follows the history of His salvation. Scripture instructs and exhorts God's people to obey their sovereign Lord in everything at all times. In the reading and preaching of the Word, the saints hear God Himself speak to them. They hear warnings and encouragements. The hands that hang down, and the weak knees, are strengthened. Their feet are given straight paths to run in. The unregenerate are left without excuse, the unrepentant face God's correcting chastisement. Weighty church discipline takes place within the assembly (1 Cor. 5:4-5). The saints all add their Amen to His Word, mixing faith with God's Word, showing they believe and embrace it:

For first, the Lord teaches and instructs us by His Word. Secondly, He confirms it by the sacraments. Finally, He illumines our minds by the light of His Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and sacraments to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within. (Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.XIV.8)

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

Just as all sing to God, so all pray. When one leads in prayer, each adds his Amen to it. In the church's prayers, the covenant is again remembered and affirmed as the church offers up its desires to God, with thanksgivings and confessions of sin. Paul wrote to Timothy to instruct him *how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth* (1 Tim. 3:15). By calling the church the *house of God* Paul teaches that the church is now the temple of God (2 Kings 12:4; 1 Chron. 26:12; 2 Chron. 5:14). His rules still govern His house. When the church meets, it prays.

Therefore, I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence....I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel (1 Tim. 2:1-2, 8-9; see 2:11-12).

When the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is administered, it seals God's love to His people. In communion, as in baptism and in the preaching of the Word, grace and salvation are held forth in fullness, evidence, and efficacy, to all nations (*Confession*, 7.6).

Throughout the meeting of the church with God, the saints exhibit lives renewed in Christ: Enmities are forgotten, forgiveness being the rule, so that love covers a multitude of sins. The strong look out for the weak; the rich receive no favoritism; each one aims to edify the others (Heb. 10:24-25).

Our *Confession* summarizes marvelously:

All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man. (*Confession*, 26.1)

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

(See appendix.)

6. Conclusions

The question, “What is the public worship of 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 Covenants. The basic continuity of worship between the Old Covenant Church and the New Covenant Church is in its assembling before God to enjoy the public means of grace. 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 (1 Cor. 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.

Turretin’s summary of Christian worship is not only the historic Reformed position, but is reflected in the most ancient post-biblical reports of Christian worship as well. In *The First Apology of Justin Martyr* (c. 155 A.D.), we read:

On the day which is called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the country side gather together in one place. And the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as there is time. Then, when the reader has finished, the president, in a discourse, admonishes and invites the people to practice these examples of virtue. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as we mentioned before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is presented, and wine with water; the president likewise offers up prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability, and the people assent by saying, Amen. The elements which have been “eucharistized” are distributed and received by each one; and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. Those who are prosperous, if they wish, contribute what each one deems appropriate; and the collection is deposited with the president; and he takes care of the orphans and widows, and those who are needy because of sickness or other cause, and the captives, and the strangers who sojourn amongst us—in brief, he is the curate of all who are in need. Sunday, indeed, is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, in as much as it is the first day on which God, transforming the darkness and matter, created the universe; and on the same day our Saviour Jesus Christ rose from the dead. (Bard Thompson, 1961:9)

In a letter written about 113 A.D. Pliny the Younger reports to the emperor Trajan, giving the information he gleaned from the testimony of former Christians:

They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind.

(*The Letters of the Younger Pliny*. New York: Penguin. 1963/1977 reprint. Letters, 10.96-97. See: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>)

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 unity of practice among the churches, rather than each church doing what is wise in its own eyes as though it had no king ("No unchangeable order of public worship should be established by the church, but to maintain the dignity of worship an order of exercises is usually necessary" (RPCNA *Directory for the Worship of God*, I.9). 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 covenantal biblical worship. We recognize that over the generations cultural innovations, the creative influences of individuals, developments 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. Defective worship will lead to defective theology. 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 of time 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."

7. Appendix: Examples of Orders of Service

Examples of Orders of Service that conform to the covenantal theology of worship developed in this paper follow. These orders are merely illustrative.

Call to Worship
 Prayer for the Lord’s Assistance and Blessing
 Psalm of Praise
 Baptism, when administered, may go here
 Reading of the Law
 Prayer or Psalm of Confession
 Assurance of Pardon
 Psalm of Praise
 Presentation of Tithes and Offerings
 Prayer for Enlightenment
 Reading of Scripture
 Proclamation of the Word
 Prayer or Psalm of Response
 Prayer for Church and World
 Psalm of Praise
 Benediction

Call to Worship
 Prayer for the Lord’s Assistance and Blessings
 Psalm of Praise
 Reading of the Law
 Prayer or Psalm of Confession
 Assurance of Pardon
 Psalm of Praise
 Scripture text for sermon
 Sermon
 Words of Institution
 Warning and Invitation
 Celebration of the Lord’s Supper
 Prayer of Intercession and Thanksgiving
 Presentation of Tithes and Offerings
 Benediction

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