

# **An Explanation of the Worship Practices at Covenant Bible Church**

## **What the Old Testament teaches us**

Since Adam's fall, man's approach to God has been through sacrifice. It is not possible for sinful man to be received by a holy God apart from an atonement (Heb 9:22; Lev 17:11). Since the coming of Christ and his sacrificial atonement on the cross, animal sacrifices have ceased, because they were all typological. That is, they prefigured Christ and taught about him. Now that he has fulfilled the types, there is no longer an ongoing need for a sacrifice. Sacrifice is still required for atonement, but the need is satisfied by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. As Jeffrey Meyers has put it, "The way of sacrifice has not been abrogated; *animal* sacrifices have." Language such as that found in Heb 13:15 indicates that all worship is sacrificial in some sense.

Old Testament worship revolved around the animal sacrifices. This teaches us about worship. Since the coming of Christ, the requirement for animals to be sacrificed has ended, but the *sacrificial system* still shows us how to worship. This is the fact that most Protestant churches have missed, and it has led to helter-skelter patterns of worship which do not reflect a proper approach to God and do not teach men about our covenantal relation to him. Thus the church has been deprived of an important device by which they might better know their God and be able to please him in worship.

## **A note about liturgy**

Many churches today, particularly those in the Baptist and Charismatic traditions, but also many in the Reformed camp, decry the use of liturgy. They follow what they call "non-liturgical" orders of worship. What they mean by this is anybody's guess, but what they seem to mean is that each pastor/congregation should just make up his/its own order of worship as he/it sees fit. Rarely (if ever) do you find a church with *no order* of worship at all. Even if it's just "welcome the people, sing three songs, have a sermon, go home," it is nonetheless an order and, thus, a liturgy. The Greek word from which we get "liturgy" occurs several times in the NT, notably in Acts 13:2 where the church in Antioch is seen "ministering" to the Lord, and in Heb 9:6 where it is used to describe the rituals prescribed by God in the OT and attended by the priests. It is also used in Rom 12:1 where it describes the appropriateness of the Christian presenting his body as a "living sacrifice" (Paul calls this our "reasonable service" and the word "service" translates *latreia* or "liturgy").

So the question is not "should we have a liturgy when we gather for worship on the Lord's Day?" but rather what should our liturgy look like. In other words, does the Bible give us guidance for liturgy, or are we just supposed to make it up to suit our own ideas and tastes? Together with a growing number of churches in the Reformed camp – including most of those in the CREC – we at CBC believe that the Bible *does* give us the appropriate pattern for corporate, Lord's Day worship and that it is found in the sacrificial worship models of the OT.

Notice that I said the Bible gives us a *pattern* – it shows us what elements should be present in what the church does when it gathers on the Lord's Day for worship. The *specific details* can, will, and should vary, but the pattern is fixed and it is important. Furthermore, not only is it important to include all the elements, there is a sequence that is likewise revealed.

## Translating Old Testament Patterns to New Testament Practices

There are three major sacrifices in Old Testament worship, observed in a specific order:

The Purification Offering

In this offering, the people's sins were expiated.

The Ascension Offering (also called the "whole burnt" offering)

In this offering, the animal to be sacrificed was cut up, washed, rearranged and placed on the altar to be burned.

The Peace Offering

In this offering, the people experienced the rest that comes from trusting in the promises of God, and celebrated their fellowship with him.

The sacrifices correspond to 3 key elements in NT worship:

Confession and absolution (cleansing)

Consecration (ministry of the Word; *see* Heb 4:12, the Word cuts us up)

Communion (culmination of worship in the Eucharist meal)

These 3 elements have bookends around them:

Call to worship (God commands us to draw near) Lev 1:1-2; *cf.* Rev 1:10; 4:1

Commissioning (God sends us out to live for him) Num 6:22-27

There is also the Tribute Offering that immediately follows the Ascension Offering. As the smoke from the blood sacrifice of the Ascension Offering rose up, the people were invited to bring a grain offering (tribute) and it was placed on the fire so that its smoke mixed with the smoke of the Ascension Offering and rose up to God as a sweet smelling savor. This order is essential and goes all the way back to the time of Adam's family immediately after the fall. Cain got in trouble because he skipped the Ascension Offering and went straight to the Tribute Offering.

To sum up: Our worship consists of 5 basic elements which unfold in a particular order, as follows:

The Call to Worship

The Cleansing

The Consecration

The Communion

The Commission

Each of these contains various parts:

The Call to Worship

Readings, primarily from the Psalms

A particular, covenantal, form of prayer called the Collect

Singing of a psalm (or sometimes a hymn)

The Cleansing

Reading of the Law (God's standard of right and wrong)

Individual (silent) and then corporate confession of sin

Absolution (pronouncement that God has forgiven his people)

*Sursum Corda* (Lifting up the heart) – Song of gratitude

### The Consecration

Singing Psalms and hymns of praise

Hearing the Word (usually readings from the Prophets and the Gospels)

Doctrinal instruction (catechism)

Instruction from the Word (sermon)

Tribute Offering (dedication of tithes and offerings)

Congregational prayer

Smoke ascending from the altar is said, in Revelation 8:3-4, to be the prayers of God's people (*cf.* Rev 5:8).

### The Communion

Responsive reading focused on rejoicing

Summary of the Law (because now the Law is our comfort)

Confession of Faith

Enjoyment of the ritual meal (bread and wine)

Songs of praise

### The Commission

Benediction (God's blessing placed on his people)

Singing of the Doxology

This is the pattern of worship that we have adopted for Lord's Day services at Covenant Bible Church in Chugiak.

## Questions and Answers about CBC's worship practices

### How does worship begin at Covenant Bible Church?

As our people gather, they greet one another, visit and enjoy each other's company. However, when the Prelude begins, they find their seats, stop visiting and prepare to be called into the presence of God in his heavenly throne room.

### Why doesn't the congregation remain seated for the whole service?

We believe that God has created and redeemed the whole man. The Bible teaches that God is not merely the God of our spirits or souls (our inner self), but that he has redeemed us, body and soul. Our physical beings are not irrelevant, so physical posture is not irrelevant. Sitting, standing and kneeling are appropriate postures for different parts of the Lord's Service. For example, the Bible clearly reveals that standing is an appropriate posture for people to hear and listen to God's Word (Dt 27:12-13; Neh 9:3; *cf.* John 3:29) and to bless the name of God (Neh 9:5). Likewise, the Bible indicates kneeling is a proper posture for times of prayer, especially prayers of repentance (Ezra 9:5ff). Sitting is a proper posture for a meal (Lk 22:14; 24:30).

Therefore, during the worship service, we stand to hear the reading of God's Word. We kneel to confess our sins and stand again to hear the pronouncement of God's forgiveness. When we come to the Lord's Table, we are seated at rest to enjoy the triumphal, covenant meal together.

### Why does the congregation raise its hands during the *Sursum Corda*?

The *Sursum Corda* is sung just after the absolution. It is a song of praise, modeled after the one recorded for us in Revelation 4:8. Having experienced the forgiving words of God, based on God's covenant promises, the congregation is urged to "lift up your hearts." Then, in unison, we all raise our hands to heaven and sing robustly a song of adoration to the Most High God.

### **Why does Covenant Bible Church use set prayers and readings? Doesn't the lack of spontaneity stifle the Spirit of God?**

We believe that the Holy Spirit works in and among his people continually as they devote themselves to God and learn from his holy Word. Spontaneity does not necessarily equate to spirituality. God's Spirit can guide a man just as readily in his study as he can while in the midst of the congregation. In fact, most churches believe this or their pastor would not spend any time preparing his sermon. If I stand up in worship and make up a prayer as I go along, why would that be any more likely to be a Spirit-guided prayer than if I diligently labor the day before to write a prayer that will be appropriate to a particular part of corporate worship while trusting God to guide me as I prepare the prayer ahead of time? It would seem that the person insisting on spontaneous prayer is the one more likely to be limiting the work of the Holy Spirit.

The same principle applies to corporate readings and responses during worship. The pastor and elders work hard to prepare the spoken and sung elements of worship so that they accurately reflect the teachings of God's Word and are appropriate to the various segments of the Lord's Service. The words of the leader and the congregational responses are drawn from the Scriptures, so that the congregation is worshipping God with language that God has given to his people. If Jesus is truly the Word of God, and man is designed to think God's thoughts after him and worship God in spirit and in truth (*see* John 4:23, 24), then it is most appropriate for God's people to use the language of Scripture as much as possible during the Covenant Renewal service on the Lord's Day. Moreover, having the readings and the prayers written out and placed in the hands of the congregation before worship starts, allows the congregation to speak with one divinely-directed voice in praise and adoration of our holy and merciful God.