

Covenant Renewal: Explaining Coram Deo's Philosophy of Worship

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Introduction and Thesis

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to defend the thesis that *the purpose of worship is covenant renewal*; and second, to suggest how that thesis should inform what we do in gathered worship. Essentially, the question I am answering is, “*Why* do we gather for worship?” Most followers of Christ do not have a thoughtful answer to this question. What we do in worship is defined more by “what we’ve always done” than by a good biblical/theological understanding of why God’s people come together. This paper is an attempt to rectify that imbalance and to chart a course for the gathered worship of the Coram Deo Church Community.

Perhaps a “historical prologue” will help to set the context for this writing. I first began considering the issues in this paper while serving as one of the preaching pastors in the Axxess worship service at Christ Community Church. The seeds of these ideas were hashed out in community with my colleagues Joe Darago and Jared Jensen. Wanting to have a clear vision for how to lead the people under our care, we began to consider what exactly worship was and how to best structure a gathered worship experience. We noticed two strands of influence on our thinking – a normative strand (based on our reasoning through Scripture) and an existential strand (based on our own experiences). Normatively, we began to observe that Scripture itself – especially the Old Testament – seemed to propose a coherent pattern for worship. And existentially, there were times when we walked away from a worship service deeply moved and convinced that God had met us there. So we began asking, “Why did that happen? Was it simply the whim of the Almighty to meet us more deeply this week than He did last week, or did we do something differently to spur a deeper experience of God’s blessing?” These two lines of thinking converged around the concept of covenant renewal.

As the primary worship leader for Axxess, Jared devoted much of his time to Scriptural and historical study of the meaning and purpose of worship. He pointed me to a book called *The Lord's Service*, written by Jeffrey Meyers, a Presbyterian pastor in St. Louis.¹ Though I don't agree with everything Meyers puts forth in this work, it has been a defining book in my own understanding of worship. Meyers essentially took all the strands of biblical truth that were floating around in our minds and organized them into a consistent, systematic theology of worship around the theme of *covenant renewal*. His perspective is not new at all; in fact, it goes back to the heart of the Reformation. But few modern authors have done as well as Meyers in outlining what covenant renewal worship is and why it should be recovered by churches today.

In this paper, I will draw from Meyers' work, clarifying and distilling his major lines of argument for a broader audience and adding insights and analysis of my own. Vigorous thinking about covenant renewal worship seems to have been confined to very conservative, liturgical, Presbyterian circles. It is my hope to make these concepts accessible to those outside those circles; and most importantly, to shape a theology of worship for Coram Deo, the community of worshippers which God has called me to lead.

¹ Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003).

Why Do We Gather? Four Wrong Answers

To construct a coherent philosophy of worship, we must first answer the question: Why do the people of God come together? Why do we “go to church?” At least four answers to this question are commonly proposed. As we will see, each one fails to provide a truly comprehensive biblical framework for worship. None of these popular answers is entirely wrong; but none is entirely right, either!

Worship as Evangelism. Some churches, especially those aligned with the seeker-driven movement, suggest that the purpose of worship is evangelism (or mission). In response to this view, we can affirm that a full-bodied, biblical worship service will have a strong evangelistic component! But we must also state that mission and worship are different things in Scripture. Worship is what the church does when it enters into the presence of God. Mission is something the church does when she goes out from God’s presence to proclaim to the world that Jesus is Savior and Lord. The purpose of the *church* is mission; but the purpose of *worship* is not. As John Piper says, “Missions exists because worship does not.”

Worship as Education. When education is seen as the purpose of worship, everything else in the worship service serves as “pre-game warm-up” for the main event – the sermon. Years of this emphasis have created disciples of Jesus who have studied every book of the Bible, yet are not being transformed by the gospel. Again, it is important to affirm the crucial importance of strong, biblical teaching. But teaching is not the sole focus of worship.

Worship as Experience. Other churches would suggest that the purpose of worship is to *experience* God’s presence. Though genuine worship will certainly leave the worshipper with a feeling of awe and majesty and joy, the Bible does not evaluate worship by the experience it brings. Rather, “the biblical language of worship has people doing things before God (offering [Ps 4:5], prostrating [Is 49:7], confessing [Ps 32:5], kneeling [Ps 95:6], singing [Ps 95:1], bringing gifts in their hands [Ex 34:20]). In addition to this, worship is evaluated not according to the affect it might have on the worshipers, but whether it is ‘acceptable’ to God or not (Gen 4:3-7; Ex 32; Is 1; Rom 12:1-2; 14:17-18; Heb 12:28-39; 13:16).”²

Worship as Exaltation. This view proposes that worship is about the people of God exalting him, lifting him up, praising him. It assumes that we come together primarily to *give* something (our praise) to God. But Scripture is clear that God “is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:25). We do not come to serve God, but to be served by him! Meyers writes: “We are created beings. Dependent creatures. Beings who must continually *receive* both our life and redemption from God... Opening one’s self up to the need for God’s service is the first movement in our ‘worship,’ indeed, the presupposition of all corporate worship.”³

Meyers offers an excellent concluding summary: “All four of these dimensions... have their proper place in the worship service. But the overall purpose of a biblical worship service should not be *reduced* to any one of them.”⁴

² Meyers, *The Lord’s Service*, 28.

³ Meyers, *The Lord’s Service*, 30.

⁴ *Ibid*, 31.

I have proposed that to construct a philosophy of worship, we must first answer the question, “Why do we gather?” But I must confess at this point that I’m leading you on. Because before we can answer the question of why we gather, we must answer the question, “Who are *we*?” Unless we biblically understand our identity as the people of God, we can’t possibly grasp the purpose for coming together. And the question of *who we are*, though seemingly simplistic on the surface, is actually one of the most profound questions in Scripture.

A minor pastoral exhortation is called for here. Most of us, if asked, “What does it mean that we are the people of God?” would answer something like, “It means that we have trusted in Jesus,” or, “It means that God loves us,” or perhaps even, “It means that we’re God’s elect, whom he has redeemed out of a fallen world.” These answers, though true, are painfully shallow. They are divorced from redemptive history.

In fact, what it means that we are the people of God is that we are the new Israel! The people of God go all the way back to Genesis, not just to Jesus. Paul tells us that “through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:6). So the question of “who we are” is tied to the question of who the people of Israel were, and what their relationship with God was like, and what it means that we are heirs of the covenant promises made to our Jewish forefathers (Gal. 3:29). Some of the most profound biblical truth about who we are – and about why we gather to worship – is found in the pages of the Old Testament. So we’ll start our inquiry in the New Testament and then quickly work our way back into the Old.

Who Are We?

Perhaps the most succinct statement about the identity of the New Testament church is given in 1 Peter 2:8-9:

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

I believe the doctrine of this verse can be summarized in the following phrase: the church is *God’s peculiar people who exist to make him known*. The four phrases *chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, people for God’s own possession* are four different ways of highlighting the church’s nature as God’s peculiar people. The result clause *that you may proclaim...* declares the reason why God has called us: so that we might make him known.

A quick check of the margin in a cross-reference Bible will show that in verse 8, Peter is applying four Old Testament images to the church. The theological significance of this should not be missed! In Peter’s mind, the church is now what the nation of Israel used to be – a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession. These metaphors no longer refer to the Israelites; they now refer to the people of God in Christ, both Jew and Gentile. *The church is God’s peculiar people* – his chosen ones.

The Greek word that is translated “church” is *ekklesia*, which literally means, “the called-out ones.” The church is called *out of* the world and *into* God’s mission. We are unique; not

everyone is called by God into special relationship with him. The similarity to Old Testament Israel should be evident. Consider God's words to Israel in Deuteronomy 7:6:

For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

So, based on 1 Peter 2:8-9 and on the Greek word *ekklesia*, we may answer the question "Who are we?" by concluding that the church is a peculiar people – God's elect, his chosen ones.⁵ But that definition is still somewhat vague. Does the Bible explain exactly *how* our relationship to God is unique?

Yes. In Ephesians 1:3-4, we read:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.

Notice that Paul here says that God "chose us in Him" – that is, in Christ. So our relationship to God is unique because it is based *in Christ*. It is our union with Christ that makes us unique. We are not simply the people of God; we are the people of God *in Christ*.

But our relationship with God in Christ is not just any sort of relationship; it is a *covenant* relationship. According to Hebrews 9:15 (see also Hebrews 8:6 and 12:24), Christ is the mediator of a new covenant:

For this reason [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

To be "in Christ" is to be involved in a covenant with God. Therefore, to fully and finally answer the question, "Who are we?" we may say that the church is *the new covenant people of God*.

Let's summarize the steps in the biblical argument. According to 1 Peter 2:8-9, we are the *chosen (peculiar) people of God*. According to Ephesians 1:3-4, the thing that makes us peculiar is that we are chosen *in Christ*. And according to Hebrews 9:15, being in Christ means that we are members of a new covenant. Therefore, our relationship with God is a *covenant relationship*.

At this point the non-theological reader may be overwhelmed, wondering, "Why is all this biblical reasoning necessary? What's the point?" Perhaps this reveals something about the doctrinal shallowness of our generation. If it takes more than two or three verses to prove a biblical point, most of us get tired and lose interest! And yet the fact that *we are the new covenant people of God* is a massive theological truth that unlocks the unity of the Bible and makes sense of the Old Testament. The concept of *covenant* is one of the most foundational

⁵ See also Romans 8:33, 11:7; Col. 3:12; 2 Thess 2:13; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1-2.

ideas in all of Scripture. In fact, apart from it, we will not properly understand God's interactions with His people.

The Old Testament Theme of Covenant Relationship

Covenant is a strange word to our ears because it is outside the lexicon of our normal usage. But in the world of the Ancient Near East – the world in which the Old Testament was written – it was a globally understood word, much like “democracy” or “terrorism” or “Coca-Cola” are in our day. The word “covenant” (*berith* in Hebrew) appears over 280 times in the Old Testament. Covenants were the normal way that nations and kingdoms related to one another. More powerful kings would make covenant treaties with less powerful kings, promising them protection and provision in return for their loyalty and support.⁶

To a people steeped in this Ancient Near Eastern tradition, God chose to reveal himself as the Covenant Lord. In fact, archaeological and biblical study over the past century has led most biblical scholars to conclude that covenant is the overarching paradigm through which we should read the Old Testament. God is the Divine King who enters into covenantal relationships with his people. As O. Palmer Robertson suggests, “No period in the history of redemption... stands outside the realm of God's covenantal dealings with his people.”⁷

In case you're confused, it might help to think of a covenant as *a specific and formal relationship*. Marriage is one example of this type of relationship among humans. It has a definitive form and content – and so does a covenant relationship with God. Though God's relationship with his people grows over time, it always has a covenantal structure. At each successive stage of the Old Testament, God establishes his covenant with someone:

With Noah: *“Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth.”* God said, *“This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations; I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth.”* (Gen. 9:9-13)

With Abraham: *“I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”* God said further to Abraham, *“Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.”* (Gen. 17:7-9)

With Moses: *“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the*

⁶ See 1 Kings 20:26-34 for an example of one of these covenants.

⁷ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 17.

peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel. (Exod. 19:4-6)

With David: “I have made a covenant with My chosen; I have sworn to David My servant, I will establish your seed forever And build up your throne to all generations.” (Psalm 89:3-4)

The Promise of a New Covenant in Christ: “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jer. 31:31-33)

In addition, scholars make a strong case that God’s relationship with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was covenantal in nature.⁸ So covenant provides an overarching grid, or hermeneutic, through which we can understand all of God’s relationships with his people in Scripture.

The most striking element of biblical covenants is that they all follow a general pattern:

- Divine Benevolence - God takes the initiative, graciously revealing Himself and “establishing his covenant”
- Human Responsibility – God declares the terms of the covenant
- Blessings and Curses – God promises blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience
- Signs and Seals – God gives a physical sign to confirm the covenant

To see this pattern at work, let’s examine one of the representative covenants given above: God’s covenant with Abraham, recorded in Genesis 17.

- Divine Benevolence (Genesis 17:7-8): *I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.*
- Human Responsibility (Genesis 17:9-10): *God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.”*
- Blessings and Curses (Genesis 17:14): *An uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.*

⁸ For example, see Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 17-25.

- Signs and Seals (Genesis 17:11): ...*You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the **sign** of the covenant between Me and you.*

In summary, God interacts with his people by entering into a formal relationship called a covenant. And that formal relationship follows the specific pattern of divine benevolence, human responsibility, blessings and curses, and signs and seals.

These are not just Old Testament truths. As the new covenant people of God, we have experienced the divine benevolence of union with Christ and forgiveness of sins and adoption into God's family. We have also accepted the responsibilities of living as followers of Jesus, faithfully obeying his commands and living for his glory. We are promised God's presence and blessing when we obey (1 John 1:5-9), and his discipline and cursing when we disobey (Heb. 3:12-15; 12:5-11). And we have been given baptism and the Lord's Supper as covenant signs and seals (Rom 6:4; 1 Cor 11:23-26).

At this point, I will trust that the reader is convinced that covenants are 1) important in Scripture and 2) definitive of God's relationships with his people.⁹ To this point, I have not shown why any of this is relevant to worship. This omission is intentional, because we must first *understand* our relationship to God before we can intelligently celebrate that relationship! The proper celebration of our relationship to God (worship) depends upon the nature of that relationship (covenant). If it is true that the nature of our relationship to God is covenantal, then our worship should reflect that reality. Biblical worship is a renewal of our covenant with God.

Covenant Renewal as the Basis of Old Testament Worship

We have seen that God made specific covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. But these covenants were separated by centuries of everyday life: living, dying, war, peace, famine, prosperity, and worship. How would God remind the average guy living in Israel that he was in a special relationship with God? How would he ensure the faithfulness of his people while they were surrounded by idolatry, paganism, and moral decay? Answer: In the worship regulations of the Old Testament, God ordained a regular covenant renewal ceremony. Just as God's relationship to His people takes the specific form of a *covenant*, worship takes the specific form of *covenant renewal*. Animal sacrifices, incense, priestly garments, and the sprinkling of blood are not the arbitrary whims of a capricious deity. Rather, they are a means of reminding God's people of their unique relationship with him – and of renewing that relationship. Like the covenants themselves, covenant renewal has a specific pattern.

Let's revisit the analogy of marriage. Every Christian wedding ceremony observes a particular order. The bride is escorted down the aisle by her father; she is given away to the groom; solemn vows are repeated; rings are given; the union is sealed with a kiss; and the minister pronounces the couple to be husband and wife. This order is intuitively obvious to all who are present – it's just "the way it should be." It would make no sense to say the vows before the bride is given away, or to have the kiss before the giving of rings. Because marriage is a covenant, it proceeds according to a certain form, or ritual.

⁹ For further study, the two most helpful resources are Robertson's *The Christ of the Covenants* or a more simplified version of the same material entitled *Covenants: God's Way with his People* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1987).

In the same way, there is a biblical order or sequence to our approach to God. Human beings in the Bible don't just come running into the presence of God. They follow a specific ritual. In the Old Testament, this pathway was represented by three types of sacrifices: the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the fellowship (or peace) offering.¹⁰ First, the sin offering was offered, symbolically cleansing the people from sin. Next came the burnt offering, which was burned up entirely to signify the entire dedication of the worshippers to God. Finally, a fellowship or peace offering was offered. As indicated by its name, this symbolized fellowship with God. Having been *cleansed* from sin and *consecrated* to God, the worshipper could now enjoy *communion* and friendship with God.

The narrative of Leviticus 9 is written intentionally to show how this order of worship brings the worshiper into God's gracious presence. After this sequence is followed, God himself comes down, and the people joyfully worship:

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after making the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Then fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat on the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. (Lev. 9:22-24)

In summary, God's relationship with his people is covenantal in nature. Because of the nature of covenant relationship, the format for worship in the Old Testament follows a specific covenant-renewal pattern: *cleansing* from sin, *consecration* to God, and *communion* with God.

Moving Into the New Testament

Unfortunately, many Christians simplistically relegate all this Old Testament teaching to a past era. As I teach on covenant renewal, I inevitably encounter the question: "OK, so I'm convinced all this stuff was there in the Old Testament, but what difference does it make for me as a New Testament Christian?" Besides demonstrating an underlying skepticism toward the unity of Scripture, this question reflects an inability to properly distinguish between *timeless principles* and *cultural practices*. Principles are eternal and abiding; practices are usually temporary. Though the *practices* of animal sacrifice have been abrogated by the advent of Jesus, the *principles* of covenant renewal have not been! The external expression has changed, but the essential reality remains.

To convincingly demonstrate this point, let us simply consider each element of covenant renewal and ask whether it is reiterated in the New Testament.

Covenant: Are we in covenant with God?

Hebrews 8:6: But now [Jesus] has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.

¹⁰ See Leviticus 9 for the clearest biblical description of this pattern.

Cleansing/Confession: Does God still expect us to confess sin before approaching him in worship?

1 John 1:6-9: If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Consecration: Does the New Testament call us to set ourselves apart for God's purposes?

Romans 12:1-2: Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Communion: Does the New Testament hold communion with God – in other words, the dramatic experience of his presence – as the ideal for worship?

Acts 4:31: And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.

Hebrews 10:19-22: Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

It should be evident that the *principles* of covenant renewal worship remain in force in the New Testament era, even though the Old Testament *practices* no longer apply. Since Christ has come, we no longer have to offer blood sacrifices or burnt offerings.¹¹ But the pathway of approach to God – cleansing, consecration, and communion – remains the same.

How This Should Inform our Worship Gatherings

What, then, is a Christian worship service? It is a *weekly covenant renewal*. It is God drawing his chosen people into his special presence, cleansing them of their sins, reminding them of their covenant obligations, and sending them back into his world as his representatives. Because this is the purpose and function of gathered worship, it must follow the covenant renewal pattern.

Many of us who were raised in the formless worship of modern evangelicalism will chafe at the idea that worship should have a specific pattern. But indeed, this is what the Bible indicates! The principles of covenant renewal must inform our worship gatherings. The *form* of worship is as important as its *content*. We may not simply worship in any way we want; the Bible must be our authority in matters of worship form, just as it is in matters of morality or mission.

¹¹ Cf. Hebrews 7:26-28.

In historic Christianity, this fact was a given. Most traditional Christian churches use *liturgy* – from a Greek word meaning “a public service” – to provide a predictable and consistent structure for the worship service. If you’ve ever been to a traditional Lutheran or Anglican worship service or even a Catholic mass, you’ve seen how liturgy works. The service is scripted according to a definite pattern.

Over time, as liberal theology drained away the historic orthodox convictions of traditional churches, the liturgy became little more than a vacuous structure, devoid of any devotion to Christ or commitment to His mission. In response, the evangelical movement arose. In its passion to avoid the “deadness” of traditional church liturgies, evangelicalism went rabidly anti-liturgical, opting instead for a free-form sort of worship service. Evangelicals still have prayer, preaching, and music, but not in any scripted way. Though it began with the best of intentions, the result has been less than desirable. Evangelicalism has produced a generation of Christians who have a vague sense that corporate worship is important, but have no idea why, or what (if any) form it should take, or whether there is even a biblical pattern for how the church should approach its Lord.

Recognizing the biblical pattern of covenant renewal allows us to remedy this imbalance. It helps us to structure a worship service that maintains an appropriate degree of Spirit-led freedom while at the same time conforming to the biblical pathway of approach to God. Our covenant renewal ceremony will differ from those in the Old Testament in one important way: it will explicitly exalt Christ as the mediator of the new covenant and the centerpiece of all worship. With this in mind, we may lay out a basic format or order of worship:

- *Call to Worship:* God calls us to gather as his people. We come together because He has called us, not because it’s a good idea or it makes us feel good. The call to worship is generally a Scripture reading or Psalm which directs our focus to God as the initiator of our salvation and our Covenant Lord.
- *Confession/Cleansing:* As we enter the presence of a holy God, we are mindful of our sin and idolatry. The first step toward worship is to confess our sin personally and corporately and to experience the forgiveness that is ours through union with Christ. This time culminates with the minister or worship leader declaring our absolution through Scripture or liturgy.
- *Consecration:* Believers in the Old Testament were set apart to God by sacrifices offered in keeping with the Mosaic law. In the New Testament age, we are set apart to God through our union with Christ and our obedience to his Word. So the vehicle for consecration in Christian worship is the reading and preaching of the Word.
- *Communion:* Having approached God according to the biblical pattern, the Christian worship service culminates in the most intimate expression of communion with God: the ritual meal of the Lord’s Supper, in which we are nourished by his body and blood and “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). The Lord’s Supper also functions as the perpetual sign and seal of our covenant with God, reminding us that we are His people and He is our covenant Lord.
- *Blessing/Benediction:* As Old Testament believers left the presence of God, the priests blessed them and proclaimed God’s favor over their lives. In the New Testament era, the minister is charged with this same responsibility: speaking God’s blessing over His people and sending them back into the world to live life before His face. Having entered God’s presence and renewed their covenant with Him, we are now sent out to build His kingdom and live for His glory.

Worship at Coram Deo

The weekly worship gathering of the Coram Deo community will seek to follow this pattern of worship. We will begin with a Scriptural or musical call to worship. We will move to a place of confession and cleansing, leaving time and space to deal with sin and experience God's forgiveness in Christ. The teaching of Scripture will occupy a central role as we seek to be set apart for God's purposes through obedience to his word. We will observe the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis as a covenant sign and as a means of communion with our Savior. Finally, each worship service will conclude with a benediction, expressing God's blessing and reminding us of our responsibilities as his "sent ones."

This paper has sought to defend the thesis that the purpose of worship is covenant renewal and to suggest how that thesis should inform our worship gatherings. Having given a biblical answer to the question of why we gather for worship, it is my prayer that readers of this paper will be able to come together for worship with a greater sense of purpose and expectancy and reverence. We are God's covenant people. He has called us to enter his presence every week so that he might renew his covenant with us and remind us of who we are and whose we are. May our approach to him – and our theology of worship – be enriched and enlivened as we embrace the covenantal structure of our redemption!