

THE COVENANT MEAL AND COVENANT RENEWAL CEREMONY

TEXT: SELECTED PASSAGES

July 25, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

Why do we go to church?

Some go to church out of habit and tradition. In America, it is a cultural custom for many to attend church twice a year on Christmas and Easter.

Others attend for social networking within their niche market groups (high school, college, singles, career and young adults, divorce, recovery groups, etc...). Others attend (endure) church for the sake of their children, wanting them to be nurtured with moral instruction and positive influences.

Still, others attend out of a desire to build community and enjoy fellowship. However, when we look at the Scriptures, we are presented with a wholly different emphasis as to why we go to church.

We gather each week for public worship on the Lord's Day because we have been summoned. This is what the word church (ἐκκλησία) means: "called out."

The church is an assembly of believers called out of the world by God. We gather each Lord's Day not out of habit, custom or felt needs but primarily because we have been called out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

Our coming together each week is a response to His summoning and gracious calling. The church consists of those who have been graciously chosen and called out of this present evil age, brought to life, redeemed, justified, are in the process of being sanctified and will one day be glorified.

The gospel, then, creates the church. The gospel gives the church her identity. And the gospel alone preserves the church.

In Acts 20:32, in his farewell address the Ephesian elders, says, "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace (i.e., the gospel of salvation by grace), which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Thus, when we think of the "worship service" the primary emphasis in our minds should fall on God's action rather than ours. You may be thinking: Why are we summoned, gathered together?

We gather as a church primarily to receive rather than give. There is a place to give but the receiving must come first. We gather each week first in order to receive God's gifts, to be assured of His covenant love and faithfulness to us.

The corporate worship of the church is where we come each week to hear and be assured that God has walked alone through the severed halves of the animals for us (i.e., the Abrahamic Covenant; Gen. 15:).

We come to hear over and over again that Jesus has born the curse for us, that we are reconciled to God, that we are no longer His enemies condemned under His wrath and that He now comes to us in peace instead of judgment.

And so the primary emphasis of the corporate gathering of God's people is to fall on God's activity. The corporate worship service is where God works for and serves His people.

The emphasis is not primarily on what we come to do (though we do work) but rather what God has promised to do for us, which in turn elicits our response of gratitude.

It is in this context that Bible teachers speak of the corporate worship service as a "covenant renewal ceremony" (cf., Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, p. 19).

LESSON:

I. THE COVENANT RENEWAL CEREMONY

The concept of covenant is central to a biblical understanding of worship. In the Bible, there are two types of covenants:

1. Conditional covenants (based on man's merit and faithfulness, e.g., the Mosaic Covenant)
2. Unconditional covenants (based on God's grace and faithfulness, e.g., the Abrahamic Covenant).

The New Testament gospel is identical to the Abrahamic Covenant because both covenants are unconditional. Unlike the Mosaic Covenant, which was based on man's faithfulness, the Abrahamic Covenant and NT gospel are based on God's grace and faithfulness.

In addition, in all covenants, there are two parties. So, for example in the covenant of grace, the two parties are God and His people but the roles are entirely different.

For example, in the Abrahamic Covenant, which we have been studying in Galatians 3, we learned that God is the one who assumes all of the obligations of the covenant as well as all of its sanctions for its violation.

Abraham was merely a recipient of grace. No obligations were imposed on Abraham. This is not to say that there is no place for works in the covenant of grace. There is most definitely a place for works in an unconditional covenant of grace.

Circumcision, like baptism and the Lord's Supper in the New Covenant, was not an obligation but rather a sign and seal of the covenant. In both the NT gospel and the Abrahamic Covenant, good works are *witnesses to* but never the *basis of* justification (i.e., our right standing before God).

The Scriptures say that when Abraham believed God's promise, he was credited with the perfect righteousness of Christ through faith alone apart from works (cf. Gen. 15:6; Gal. 3:6-14). 22 years later in Genesis 22 in response to God's justifying grace, Abraham obeyed God and offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice (James 2:21-23). The key point to remember is that Abraham's obedience was a response to grace not the basis for receiving it.

What does all of this talk about conditional and unconditional covenants have to do with our understanding of why we go to church? How does this covenantal framework shape our understanding of why we gather together as a church each week?

The gathering of the church in corporate worship is dialogical (a dialogue): God speaks and we respond. In the covenant of grace, God speaks and serves and we respond in faith, repentance and obedience.

Thus, when the gospel (covenant of grace) is central in our thinking about why we gather for corporate worship and why we go to church, the primary emphasis should fall on God's activity.

We gather to worship because God has summoned us to the place where He works for and serves His people.

Nowhere is the emphasis more powerfully and clearly seen than in the faithful observance of the Lord's Supper.

II. THE COVENANTAL MEAL

The Lord's Supper is a covenantal meal in which God renews (ratifies, assures) His covenant promises to His people. In the Lord's Supper, God confirms, assures and ratifies His promises to us.

In response to His service to us, we respond with thankful hearts and offer our good works of service, gifts, offerings, prayers, thanksgiving, etc...

The point to keep in mind is that our actions do not renew God's promises or ratify His covenant blessings, His actions do!

In Genesis 15, God makes some amazing, almost-too-good-too-be-true promises to Abraham. So wonderful are God's promises that Abraham in 15:8 asks God, "...how may I know that I will possess it?"

But, even here we see that it is God's gracious actions toward Abraham that assures Abraham of the promises. All Abraham does is sleep (Gen. 15:12)!

Why is it important that God's actions and not ours confirm His promises?

Because like Abraham, we look at our lives and wonder, "How may I know that I will possess it? How can I know that I really am justified? Is it really true? Is God's favor really over my life? How may I know that I will possess an eternal inheritance?"

This is where the sacraments come in. The sacraments are the answer to Abraham's question, which is also our question.

The church is summoned by Christ to gather around His table and receive the assurance of His favor toward them. The Lord's Supper, writes Michael Horton, "is a perpetual ratification of God's peace treaty with His people," (A Better Way, p. 119).

The proper role of the sacraments is to confirm, pledge, assure, certify and ratify the promises given to us in the gospel.

The Lord's Supper, then, is more than just a mere memorial. It is far more than our pledge of loyalty. It is first and foremost a pledge of God's faithfulness to us. It is a means of grace, a perpetual ratification of God's peace treaty with His people, that assures us that God comes to us in peace and not judgment.

This is so important because of our frequent failures in seeking to live the Christian life. Because of the nature of sanctification, our awareness of God's gracious presence in our life is not always certain.

Because God comes also in judgment, we need ongoing assurance that He comes to us in peace and that He remains gracious toward us. One of the chief qualifications necessary to live an obedient holy life is to have the assurance that God truly loves you through Christ.

However, when you have a guilty conscience that consistently accuses and convicts you of your ongoing failures, you lose the assurance that God through Christ comes to you in peace. You begin to think that God is your enemy.

You begin to believe that His justice stands over you in judgment and condemnation because of your sins. When you think this way as a Christian, both sin and satan have great power over you.

You will begin to move away from God. You cannot love God or people if you think you are under the curse and condemnation of God. A guilty conscience will steer you away from pursuing holiness, loving God and people.

The author of Hebrews, however, says the good news is that Christ died in order to cleanse our guilty consciences so that we might live unto God.

Hebrews 9:14 states, "how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God."

Walter Marshall wrote,

"You cannot love God if you are under the continual, secret suspicion that he is really your enemy! You cannot love God if you secretly think He condemns and hates you. This kind of slavish fear will compel you to some hypocritical obedience- such as what Pharaoh did when he let the Israelites go against his will. However, you will never truly love God if you are compelled only by fear. Your love for God must be won and drawn out by your understanding of God's love and goodness towards you- just as John testifies in 1 John 4:18-19: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear consists in torment; the one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love Him, because He first loved us." You simply cannot love God unless you know and understand how much He loves you," (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 31).

This then is why the Lord's Supper is crucial because it is a perpetual pledge of God's faithfulness to us. The accent of the Lord's Supper falls on God's activity rather than ours. We are merely recipients at His table. He is both Lord and Servant; we are recipients and responders.

In the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit seals (guarantees) and testifies to our hearts that all of God's promises find there YES! in Christ. By this assuring work, we respond like Paul and say, "That is why it is through Him (Christ) that we utter our Amen to God for His glory."

By means of the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit confirms, assures, certifies and ratifies that God comes to us in peace and safety rather than condemnation and destruction.

At this point a word of caution is needed.

In 1 Corinthians 11:27-31, Paul gives a strong warning against partaking of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. This warning is certainly to be heeded and taken seriously. However, there is a danger in placing excessive emphasis on it.

We must guard against turning the Lord's Supper from a sign of a covenant of grace into a covenant of law. In other words, we must guard against turning what God has given to us as a gift that is to be received into a work that is to be earned (i.e., turn gospel into a law).

None of us will ever come to the Lord's Table perfect, free from sin. And so in this sense, there is nothing we can do in order to make ourselves "worthy."

We don't climb up to God to get Christ or earn God's favor by anything we do.

Rather, Christ comes down to give Himself to us through the Good News that we hear (“Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ,” Rom. 10:17). He condescends in order to confirm and assure us through the signs and seals that we receive through faith.

Hearing means receiving. We're not givers but rather recipients. There is definitely a time to examine our hearts and do what God commands us. But this is not what makes us “worthy.”

What makes us worthy is what God does, His actions to us: namely, His giving the gift of Christ and all of His benefits to us. As we sit and hear, Christ judges us, convicts us of our sin and then speaks a gracious word of pardon and forgives us.

We are gathered together each week with other hearers to receive, again and again, God's gift, which is nothing less than Christ Himself. We must then guard against turning Christ's sacrament of doing into our sacrament of doing.

During the Reformation, John Calvin was concerned about how some pastors placed excessive emphasis on partaking worthily. In the *Institutes*, he asked the question, “Who is worthy?”

In response he wrote,

“Commonly, when they would prepare men to eat worthily, they have tortured and harassed pitiable consciences in dire ways... They said that those who were in a state of grace ate worthily. They interpreted “in state of grace” to mean to be pure and purged of all sin. such a dogma would debar all the men who ever were or are on earth from the use of this Sacrament. For it is a question of our seeking worthiness by ourselves, we are undone; only despair and deadly ruin remain to us. Although we try with all our strength, we shall make no headway, except that in the end we shall be most unworthy, after we have labored mightily in the pursuit of worthiness.

By its immoderate harshness it deprives and despoils sinners, miserable and afflicted with trembling and grief, of the consolation of this Sacrament; yet in it, all the delights of the gospel were set before them. Surely the devil could find no speedier means of destroying men than by so maddening them that they could not taste and savor this food with which their most gracious Heavenly Father had willed to feed them. In order, therefore, not to rush headlong to such ruin, let us remember that this sacred feast is medicine for the sick, solace for sinners, alms to the poor... Therefore, this is the worthiness- the best and only kind we can bring to God- to offer our vileness and (so to speak) our unworthiness to Him so that His mercy may make us worthy of Him; to despair in ourselves so that we may be comforted in Him; to abase ourselves so that we may be lifted up by Him; to accuse ourselves so that we may be justified by Him,” (4.17.41-42).

Thus, partaking worthily and examining ourselves does not mean making the Lord's Supper work in our own spiritual strength. We do not present our righteousness (works) as if they were the basis for worthily partaking.

This sacrament is for sinners not the self-righteous, the weak not the strong, bad people not good people. Recognizing our unworthiness, as Calvin notes, is the best way to partake worthily.

REFLECTION:

Why then do we go to church?

We go because we have been graciously summoned by Christ to gather around His Word and His table in order to hear and receive the assurance of His favor toward us.

By the Lord's Supper, God confirms, pledges, assures, certifies and ratifies that He comes to us in peace rather than judgment.

This is why we gather every Lord's Day. We assemble because of the summons of Christ who is both our Lord and Servant. He gathers us to renew His covenant promises to us.

And by this covenant renewal ceremony, our identity as the people of God is confirmed, our spiritual focus is renewed and our hearts are driven to love God and serve our neighbor.

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