

The John Wesley Covenant Service

“Come, let us join ourselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant which will never be forgotten.”

Jeremiah 50:5, RSV

PREFACE

In his journal entry for August 6, 1755, Wesley wrote: “I mentioned to the congregation another means of increasing serious religion, which has been frequently practiced by our forefathers and attended with eminent blessing; namely, the joining in a covenant to serve God with all our heart and with all our soul.”

Wesley’s first formal Covenant Service was held in the French Church at Spitalfields on August 11, 1755, when he recited the words of “that blessed man, Richard Alleine.” At the close of that service “all the people stood up, in testimony of assent, to the number of about 1800 persons. Such a night I scarce ever saw before. Surely the fruit of it shall remain forever.”

*The Covenant Service was published as a pamphlet by Wesley in 1780 and was used without alteration for nearly a century. The repeated revisions made later have left but the smallest remnants of the original. It is believed that the restoration of large portions of Wesley’s service will bring deeper meaning to the renewing of our covenant with God. It has been abridged and edited especially to this hymnal [*Hymns of Faith and Life*, published by Light and Life Press and Wesley Press, 1976] to provide for greater congregational participation. With few exceptions the dignity and the striking phraseology of Wesley’s language, including his numerous scriptural allusions, have been preserved.*

The service should be a reminder of our condition as sinners, our solemn obligation to reaffirm our covenant relationship with God, and an opportunity for a fresh experience of the reality of God’s promises and presence.

A Covenant Service, following John Wesley’s traditional practice, is especially appropriate for watch night or for the first Sunday of the new year and is designed for a complete service of worship.

— The Editors

THE SERVICE

HYMN #95 “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”

Pastor:

Let us pray.

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee and worthily magnify Thy holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LORD’S PRAYER

Pastor:

My dear friends: Get these three principles fixed in your hearts: that things eternal are much more substantial than things temporal; that things not seen are as certain as the things that are seen; that upon your present choice depends your eternal lot. Choose Christ and His ways, and you are blessed forever; refuse, and you are undone forever.

And then, beloved, make your choice. Turn either to the right hand or to the left; Christ with His yoke, His cross, and His crown; or the devil with his wealth, his pleasure, and curse. Then ask yourselves, “Soul, you see what is before you; what will you do? Which will you have, either the crown or the curse? If you choose the crown, remember that the day you take this, you must be content to submit to the cross and yoke, the service and sufferings of Christ, which are linked to it. What do you say? Had you rather take the gains and pleasures of sin and risk the curse? Or will you yield yourself a servant to Christ and so make sure the crown?”

Do not delay the matter. If you are unresolved, you are resolved: if you remain undetermined for Christ, you are determined for the devil. Therefore follow your hearts from day to day; let them not rest till the matter be brought to an issue, and see that you make a good choice.

Next, embark with Christ. Adventure yourselves with Him. Cast yourselves upon His righteousness. You are exiles from the presence of God and fallen into a land of robbers and murderers. Your sins are robbers, your pleasures are robbers, your companions in sin are robbers and thieves. If you stay where you are, you perish. Christ offers, if you will venture with Him, to bring you to God. Will you say now to Him, “Lord Jesus, wilt Thou undertake for me? Wilt Thou bring me to God and bring me into the land of promise? With Thee I will venture myself. I cast myself upon thee, upon Thy blood, upon thy righteousness.”

This is coming to Christ as your priest. And by this you now renounce your own righteousness.

Do you deeply sense your sins and misery without Christ?

CONFESSION

Congregation:

We acknowledge a deep sense of sin and misery. We see ourselves as sinners in need of a Savior. The spirit of God has awakened us; a kind of awakening, as it were, in hell. We cry,

“Lord, what am I! What mean these legions round about me? These chains and fetters that are upon me?”

“Lord, where am I! Is there no hope of escaping out of this wretched state? I am but dead, if I continue as I am. What may I do to be saved?”

Pastor:

Being made sensible of his sin and his danger, a sinner will look for help and deliverance, but he will look everywhere else before he looks unto Christ. Nothing will bring a sinner to Christ but absolute necessity. He will try to forsake his sins. He will go to prayers, and sermons, and sacraments and search out if there be salvation in them. But all these, though they be useful in their places, are of no help. His duties cannot help him; these may be reckoned among his sins. Ordinances cannot help; these are but empty cisterns. They all tell him, “You knock at a wrong door; salvation is not in us.”

Do you now utterly despair of your own goodness, or do you trust in anything but Christ?

SUPPLICATION

Congregation:

Lord, be merciful to me. What shall I do?

Abide as I am I dare not, and how to help myself I know not. My praying will not help me. My hearing will not help me. If I give all my goods to the poor, if I should give my body to be burned, all this would not save my soul. Woe is me. What shall I do?

Pastor:

You must let your sins go. You must let your righteousness go. Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. He came to seek and to save them that are lost.

Friends, will you now adventure on Christ? You have this threefold assurance:

First, God’s ordination. Christ is He whom God the Father hath appointed and sent into the world to save sinners. This is He whom God the Father has sealed as the Savior who is redeeming and reconciling the world

to himself.

Second, God's command. This is His commandment, that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ.

Third, the promise of God. "Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious; and he that believeth on him, shall not be confounded."

Now, having this threefold assurance of God's ordination, command, and promise, you may now be bold to adventure on Christ and to apply yourselves to Him.

Pastor and Congregation:

Lord, Jesus, here I am, a lost creature, an enemy to God, under His wrath and curse. Wilt Thou, Lord, undertake for me, reconcile me to God, and save my soul? Do not, Lord, refuse me, for if Thou refuse me, to whom then shall I go?

If I had come in my own name, Thou mightest well have put me back; but since I come as the command of the Father, reject me not. Lord, help me. Lord, save me.

I come, Lord. I believe, Lord. I throw myself upon Thy grace and mercy. I cast myself upon Thy blood. Do not refuse me. I have not whither else to go. Here I will stay. On Thee I will trust, and rest, and venture myself. On Thee I lay my hope for pardon, for life, for salvation. If I perish, I perish on Thy shoulders. If I sink, I sink in Thy vessel. If I die, I die at Thy door. Bid me not go away, for I will not go.

COMMITMENT

Pastor:

Yield yourselves now to the Lord. As his servants, give up the dominion and government of yourselves to Christ. "Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin, but yield yourselves to God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." "To whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey." Yield yourselves so to the Lord that you may henceforth be the Lord's.

Those that yield themselves to sin and the world, their hearts say, "Sin, I am yours; World, I am yours; Riches, I am yours; Pleasures, I am yours."

Rather, with the psalmist, we say to the Lord:

Pastor and Congregation:

I am Thine, I reverence Thee. I dedicate myself to Thy service.

Pastor:

In so giving yourselves to the Lord, you affirm that you will be heartily contented that He appoint you to your work.

Let Him appoint you to your work. Christ has many services to be done; some are more easy and honorable, others more difficult and menial.

Some are suitable to our inclinations and interests; others are contrary to both. In some we may please Christ and please ourselves, as when he requires us to feed and clothe ourselves. Indeed, there are some spiritual duties that are more pleasing than others; as to rejoice in the Lord, to be blessing and praising of God. These are the sweet works of a Christian. But then there are other works, wherein we cannot please Christ but by denying ourselves, as in bearing and forbearing, reproving men for their sins, withdrawing from their company; witnessing against their wickedness; confessing Christ and His name, when it will cost us shame and reproach; sailing against the wind, swimming against the tide, parting with our liberties and accommodations for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

See what it is that Christ expects and then yield yourselves to His whole will. Do not think of making your own terms with Christ; that will never be allowed you. Let us now approach Christ in prayer.

Pastor and Congregation:

Lord Jesus, if Thou wilt receive me into Thy house, if Thou wilt but own me as Thy servant, I will not stand upon terms. Impose on me what condition Thou plearest; write down Thy own articles; command me what Thou wilt; let me be Thy servant.

Make me what Thou wilt, Lord, and set me where Thou wilt. Let me be a vessel of silver or gold, or a vessel of wood or stone; so I be a vessel of honor, I am content. If I be not the head, or the eye, or the ear, one of the nobler and more honorable instruments Thou wilt employ, let me be the hand, or the foot, as one of the lowest and least esteemed of all the servants of my Lord.

Lord, put me to what Thou wilt; rank me with whom Thou wilt.

Put me to doing; put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for Thee, or laid aside for Thee, exalted for Thee, or trodden underfoot for Thee.

Let me be full; let me be empty.

Let me have all things; let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily resign all to Thy pleasure and disposal.

HYMN #455 “Take My Life and Let It Be Consecrated”

Pastor:

Beloved, such a commitment to Christ as you have now made is that wherein the essence of Christianity lies. When you have chosen God to be your portion and happiness; when you have laid all your hopes upon Christ, casting yourself wholly upon the merits of His righteousness; when you have understandingly and heartily resigned and given up yourselves to Him; then you are Christians indeed, and never till then. Christ will be the Savior of none but of His servants. He is the Author of eternal salvation to those who obey Him. Christ will have no servants but by consent. His people are a willing people, and Christ will accept of no consent but in full to all that He requires. He will be all in all, or He will be nothing.

THE COVENANT

And now, let us confirm our commitment by a solemn covenant, beginning with the singing of a covenant hymn.

(The congregation will join in singing the following hymn, published by Charles Wesley in 1762 and based on Jeremiah 50:5. Among early Methodists it became popularly known as “the Covenant Hymn.” It should be sung to the tune of Hymn #147, “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing.”)

Come, let us use the grace divine,	The covenant we this moment make
And all, with one accord,	Be ever kept in mind:
In a perpetual covenant join	We will no more our God forsake,
Ourselves to Christ the Lord.	Or cast His words behind.

Give up ourselves,	We never will throw off His fear
through Jesus’ power,	Who hears our solemn vow;
His name to glorify;	And if Thou art well pleased to hear,
And promise, in this sacred hour,	Come down, and meet us now.
For God to live and die.	

**To each the covenant blood apply,
which takes our sins away;
And register our names on high,
and keep us to that day.**

Pastor:

Search your hearts whether you either have already, or can now freely, make this commitment to God in Christ. First, consider what your sins

are and examine whether you can resolve to forego them all. Consider what the laws of Christ are, how holy, strict, and spiritual, and whether you can, upon deliberation, make choice of them all as the rule of your whole life.

Second, compose your spirits into the most serious frame possible, suitable to a transaction of so high importance.

Third, lay hold on the covenant of God and rely upon His promise of giving grace and strength, whereby you may be enabled to perform your promise. Trust not to your own strength but take hold on His strength.

Fourth, resolve to be faithful. Having engaged your hearts, opened your mouths, and subscribed with your hands to the Lord, resolve in His strength never to go back.

Last, being thus prepared, in the most solemn manner possible, as if the Lord were visibly present before your eyes, bow and open your hearts to the Lord.

Pastor and Congregation:

O most holy God, I beseech Thee accept the poor prodigal now prostrating himself at Thy door. I have fallen from Thee by my iniquity and am by nature a son of death and a thousandfold more the child of hell by my wicked practice. But of Thy infinite grace Thou hast promised mercy to me in Christ if I will but turn to Thee with all my heart. Therefore upon the call of Thy gospel, I am now come and, throwing down my weapons, submit myself to Thy mercy.

And because Thou requirest, as the condition of my peace with Thee, that I should put away my idols and be at defiance with all Thy enemies, I here from the bottom of my heart renounce them all. I firmly covenant with Thee not to allow myself in any known sin, but conscientiously to use all the means that I know Thou hast prescribed, for the death and utter destruction of all my corruptions. I humbly affirm before Thy glorious majesty that it is the firm resolution of my heart to forsake all that is dear unto me in this world, rather than to turn from Thee to the ways of sin. I will watch against all its temptations whether of prosperity or adversity, lest they should withdraw my heart from Thee.

And since Thou hast, of Thy boundless mercy, offered graciously to me to be my God through Christ, I call heaven and earth to record this day, that I do here solemnly avouch Thee for the Lord my God. I do here take Thee, the Lord Jehovah, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for my portion and do give up myself, body and soul, for Thy servant, promising and vowing to serve Thee in holiness and righteousness all the days of my life.

And since Thou has appointed the Lord Jesus Christ the only means of coming unto Thee, I do here upon the bended knees of my soul solemnly join myself in a marriage-covenant to Him.

O blessed Jesus, I come to Thee hungry, wretched, miserable, blind, and naked, unworthy to wash the feet of the servants of my Lord, much less to be solemnly married to the King of Glory. But since such is Thy unparalleled love, I do here with all my power accept Thee and take Thee for my Head and Husband, to love, honor, and obey Thee before all others, and this to the death. I renounce my own worthiness and do here avow Thee for the Lord my righteousness. I renounce my own wisdom and do here take Thee for my only guide. I renounce my own will and take Thy will for my law.

And since Thou hast told me I must suffer if I will reign, I do here covenant with Thee to take my lot, as it falls, with Thee and by Thy grace to run all hazards with Thee, purposing that neither life nor death shall part between Thee and me.

Now, Almighty God, Searcher of Hearts, Thou knowest that I make this covenant with Thee this day, without any known guile or reservation, beseeching Thee that if Thou seest any flaw or falsehood therein, Thou wouldst reveal it to me and help me to put it right.

HYMN #298 “Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart”

Pastor and Congregation (standing):

And now, glory be to thee, O God the Father, whom I shall be bold from this day forward to look upon as my God and Father. Glory be to Thee, O God the Son, who hast loved me and washed me from my sins in Thy own blood and art now become my Savior and Redeemer. Glory be to Thee, O God the Holy Ghost, who by Thy almighty power hast turned my heart from sin to God.

O eternal Jehovah, the Lord God Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Thou art now become my Covenant-Friend, and I, through Thy infinite grace, am become Thy Covenant-Servant. And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

COMMUNION

CLOSING PRAYER