

WESLEYAN COVENANT SERVICE - 1998

Adapted from John Wesley

by Jeren Rowel

Call to worship: [leader] "come, let us join ourselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant which will never be forgotten."

We come together early in this new year to join in a covenant service. Our purpose is to be reminded of our deep need of God's grace.

Every person must recognize their sinful condition and remember that they cannot experience forgiveness outside the grace of God.

Then we must acknowledge that our need of his grace is deeper than forgiveness for wrong acts, but goes to the cleansing work of his spirit a the very core of our beings.

So we embrace, tonight, an opportunity for a fresh experience of his grace. Let rededicate ourselves to the covenant relationship provided for us through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Songs of worship [worship leader]

Historical Background

[leader]: This service comes to us through John Wesley, the forefather of our theological tradition.

For him what it meant to be a mature disciple of Christ was the joining of believers in a covenant "to serve God with all our heart and with all our soul."

He urged his Methodist followers to renew, "at every point, our covenant, that the Lord should be our God."

On August 11, 1775, Wesley refers to an occasion when he conducted a service that provided opportunity for persons to make or renew that covenant with God. Listen to this account from his daily journal:

"I mentioned to the congregation another means of increasing serious religion, which had been frequently practiced by our foreFathers, namely, the joining in a covenant to serve God with all our heart and with all our soul.

I explained this for several mornings and on Friday many of us kept a fast to the Lord, beseeching him to give us wisdom and strength, to make a promise unto the Lord our God and keep it.

On Monday, August 11, I explained once more the nature of such an engagement, and the manner of doing it acceptably to God.

At six in the evening we met for that purpose. After I had recited the tenor of the covenant proposed all those who desired to give testimony of their entrance into this covenant stood up, to the number of about 1,800 persons.

Such a night I scarce ever saw before. Surely the fruit of it shall remain forever."

It is important that we recognize our continuing need for confession. We have tended to connect confession only to the moment of turning to Christ for the first time.

But scripture validates, and Wesley affirmed, even the Christian's need for a periodic prayer of confession as well. In Wesley's own words: "the most holy among us is subject to a thousand infirmities which spring from our fallenness.

Our shortcomings and human failings need the atoning blood of Christ as well as our 'properly so-called' sins. According to the apostle Paul, all of us must live daily recognizing our need of the cleansing work of Christ.

Tonight we recognize again not only our great need of the grace of God, but our need to express our community covenant and our personal covenant – that in 1998 we will love and serve the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Solo:

Scripture: Matthew 1:1-17

Meditation: [leader]

Hymn 84 "Grace Greater Than Our Sin"

Responsive readings:

Confession

Pastor: this is coming to Christ as our priest. And by this we now renounce our own righteousness. Do you deeply sense your need of God's grace in Christ?

People: we acknowledge a deep sense of our need. We see ourselves as sinners in need of a savior. The spirit of God has awakened us; for we have cried out, "Lord where are we?"

Is there no hope of escaping out of this wretched state? We are but dead, if we continue as we are. What may we do to be saved?"

Pastor: being made aware of our sin and its danger, we look for help and deliverance, but we often look everywhere else before looking unto Christ.

Nothing will bring us to Christ but absolute necessity. We try to forsake our sins through prayers, and sermons, and sacraments, searching for salvation.

But all of these, though they are needed in their places, cannot save in and of themselves. Our determination cannot help us; in fact, it may reflect the source of our sin.

Ritual alone cannot help; these are but empty vessels. They tell us, "You knock at a wrong door; salvation is not in us."

Can we now utterly despair of our own goodness, or do we trust in anything but Christ?

Supplication

People: Lord, be merciful to us. What shall we do? We dare not abide as we are, and we are weary of trying to do it alone.

Our praying alone will not help us. Our hearing alone will not help us. If we give everything we have to the poor, or give up our bodies to be burned, all this would not save our souls. Woe is us. What shall we do?

Pastor: we must let our sins go. We must let our 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 trust Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, and has provided everything needed for our forgiveness?

All: Lord Jesus, here we are, lost creatures, and enemies to God, under his wrath and curse. Lord, undertake for us, reconcile us to God, and save our souls.

You have promised not to refuse us, for we have nowhere else to go. If we had come in our own righteousness, you may well have sent us away; but since we come at the command of the Father, and because of your great love, we know you will not reject us.

We come, Lord. We believe, Lord. We throw ourselves upon your grace and mercy. We cast ourselves upon your blood. On you we will trust, and rest. On you we lay our hope for pardon, for life, and for salvation.

Scripture lesson: 1 John 1:5 - 2:6

Prayer: [leader]

Jesus invited us into this covenant relationship with God. Nowhere is that more evident than when Jesus invites us to pray the prayer we have come to call, "the Lord's prayer."

It is a community prayer. We pray our Father recognizing that he has drawn us to himself as a people.

It expresses our desire together to see God's kingdom revealed among us - and so let us pray together:

"Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

Commitment

Pastor: we now yield ourselves to the Lord. As his servants, we must give up the dominion and control of ourselves to Christ.

"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness,

But rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law but under grace."

All: we are yours, Lord. We reverence you. We dedicate ourselves to your service.

Pastor: in so giving ourselves to the Lord, we affirm that we will heartily embrace what he has appointed us to do, both corporately and personally.

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 interest; 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 a blessing and praising God.

These are the sweet works of a Christian. But then there are other works, wherein to please Christ is to deny ourselves.

Find what it is that Christ expects of you and then give yourselves totally to his will, without bargaining and without reservation.

All: make us what you will, Lord, and send us where we are to go. Let us be vessels of silver or gold, or vessels of wood or stone; as long as we are vessels of honor we are content.

If we are not the head, or the eye, or the ear, one of the nobler and more honorable instruments, then let us be the hands, or the feet, as one of the lowest and least esteemed of all the servants of our Lord.

Pastor: Lord, place us in your kingdom in the roles you have designed for us.

People: Lord, make all of us your servants.

Pastor: in exalted places, or humble places.

People: let us be full; let us be empty.

Pastor: let us have all things; let us have nothing.

People: we freely and gladly embrace our places in your kingdom.

Hymn 486 "I Surrender All"

Offering:

Covenant Requirements

Pastor: beloved, the commitment to Christ we have just expressed is the essence of discipleship. When we have laid all our hopes upon Christ, casting ourselves wholly upon the merits of his righteousness; when we have with understanding, given ourselves to him; then we are Christians indeed, and not until then. His people are a willing people. He will be all in all, or he will be nothing.

The Covenant

Pastor: and now let us confirm our commitment by a solemn covenant to him.

What would it take for us to make a covenant with God? What would it mean for us to commit ourselves to his plan for our lives in 1996?

First, it would mean the forgiveness of our sins and the constant realization of our continual need of the grace of God in our lives.

Second, it would mean a resolve in our own lives to live as disciples of our Lord, forgoing our own selfish motivations and living in our world as servant to others in the name of God.

Finally, it would mean not trusting in our own strength and abilities, but anchoring in the source of our strength and abilities . . . God himself.

God is here in a very real way. His presence is here to give evidence of his promises to us. Can you trust him? Let us pray together.

[cue testimonies: "what do you want God to do for you spiritually in 1998?"]

Directed prayer:

-thanks for what he offers

-show you the barriers to allowing him to be in control.

-show you the freedom of letting him be fully in control of your life.

-commit it to him.

Testimonies of grace

Invitation to the table: [leader]

Hymn: "Come Let Us Use The Grace Divine"

The Lord's Supper

Pronouncement of forgiveness: [leader]

Benediction

All: and now receive glory, o God, from your children. Thank you for the privilege of calling you Father.

And glory be to the son, who has loved us and washed our sins in his own blood, and has now become our savior and redeemer.

And glory to the spirit, who by his mighty power has turned our hearts from sin to God. You, God, have now become our covenant-friend, and through your unlimited grace we are your covenant-servants.

Pastor: and now may the covenant we have made on earth be sealed in heaven. And may God enable you to live faithfully before him. The peace of the Christ be with you all. Amen

Closing hymn 554 "It Is Well With My Soul"