

## WESLEY'S COVENANT SERVICE: A RELATIONAL PRACTICE CONNECTING BIBLICAL DOCTRINE WITH COMMUNAL FORMATION

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### *John Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service*

John Wesley's "Directions for Renewing Our Covenant with God", first published in 1780<sup>1</sup>, contains his instructions for a Covenant Service adapted from the writings of Puritan Richard Alleine<sup>2</sup> and intended for use in Methodist worship as "a means of increasing serious religion."<sup>3</sup> Central to the Service is the invitation for total commitment of one's life to God, reflective of Wesley's holistic spirituality. Frank Whaling, in his introduction to the *Classics of Western Spirituality* volume on John and Charles Wesley<sup>4</sup>, cites the Covenant Service in a list of ten key deposits of spirituality inherited from the Wesleys, second only to Charles' hymns. That Whaling and others would give it such priority in discussions of Wesleyan spirituality may be due to the way in which it embodied the heart or core of the spirituality of the Wesleys—"utter dedication of the total life to God," "the complete giving to God of the whole self."<sup>5</sup> Davies goes so far as to claim that the Covenant Service "expresses better, probably, than any other Methodist practice, the Methodist ethos."<sup>6</sup>

The Service evolved from initial urgings toward covenanting expressed in John Wesley's sermons<sup>7</sup>, to the first formal Covenant Service held in the French Church at Spitalfields on

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<sup>1</sup> The text can be found in David Tripp, *The Renewal of the Covenant in the Methodist Tradition*, London: Epworth Press, 1969 (Appendix II, 177-188). The numbered and lettered paragraphs referred to throughout this paper correspond to Tripp's text and will be referenced simply as *Directions*. The same text, without the letters, can be found in Frank Whaling, Introduction to "John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises" in *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, New York: Paulist Press, 1981, 134-145.

<sup>2</sup> Marion Jackson, in "An Analysis of the Source of John Wesley's 'Directions for Renewing Our Covenant With God'", *Methodist History*, 30:3 (April, 1992), 176-184, argues that, while the writings of Richard's son-in-law, Joseph Alleine, also influenced Wesley (he included both in his *Christian Library*), it was Richard, especially in the *Vindiciae Pietatis*, that Wesley relied on in composing his Covenant Service for the Methodists.

<sup>3</sup> *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, Vol. 9*, "The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design, Rupert Davies (ed.), Nashville: Abingdon, 1989, 461.

<sup>4</sup> Whaling, 62.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 59, 69.

<sup>6</sup> Rupert Davies, "The Methodist Covenant Service", *Theology*, 64:487 (January, 1961), 62-68.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Baker, in "The Beginnings of the Methodist Covenant Service", *London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, 180 (July 1955), 215-220, cites several references to these sermons, beginning with a Christmas morning service in 1747.

August 11, 1755.<sup>8</sup> The fruit of that initial service, described by Wesley as fruit that “shall remain forever”<sup>9</sup>, led him to conduct Covenant Services throughout Britain as he traveled to visit his various Societies. By 1762 a pattern emerged of conducting the Covenant Service on annual basis on New Year’s Day and by 1782 this shifted to the first Sunday in January.<sup>10</sup> Wesley’s 1780 “Directions for Renewing Our Covenant with God” provided the first official printed content for the Service although, as Baker points out, they “remained a form for spiritual guidance rather than an Order of Service.”<sup>11</sup> The *Directions* appeared in several editions with minor modifications between 1781 and the 1830s and, subsequently underwent more significant revision as the Service developed into a more full-fledged rite. Right up to and including our own time, it has been adapted for use in varied Methodist and Methodist-related worship contexts.<sup>12</sup> More broadly, it is now conceived of as a genuine liturgical composition with relevance for the entire Christian Church.<sup>13</sup>

Some form of the Service is still practiced annually in many churches that identify with the Wesleyan tradition. In spite of its popular contemporary usage, however, scholarly examination of the Service since the seminal studies of the mid-twentieth century has been minimal.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps it is time to take another look at this Service in light of recent developments in theology. The purpose of this paper is to do just that: re-examine the Covenant Service through the lenses of contemporary biblical studies and practical theology in order to evaluate its potential to function as a contemporary Christian practice. Beginning with the understanding of “practice” in recent theological literature, and utilizing the biblical concept of “covenant”, we

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<sup>8</sup> Whaling, 68. See also William Parkes, “Watchnight, Covenant Service, and the Love-Feast in Early British Methodism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 32 (Fall 1997), 35-58, especially footnote 49.

<sup>9</sup> Baker, 216, citing Wesley’s *Journal* record.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 219. Cf. Tripp: “There is a sense in which all Covenant Services look back to the *Directions*, not for phraseology or even order, but for essential devotional content.” (57)

<sup>12</sup> Parkes notes that the 1780 service remained in use for over a hundred years (see also Davies, 65), but that “surviving copies used by preachers consistently display much deletion and changing of words. This was always in the direction of a discernable softening of much of the awesome language of the original.” (57) Tripp (chapters 3-4, pp. 36-107) provides the most thorough historical record of the development and usage of Service rubrics following Wesley’s death, i.e., the adding of features and deleting (or at least abridging) of others to make the *Directions* “more suitable for congregational use.” (63) Modern adaptations can be found in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: UM Publishing House, 1992, 288-295); in the Appendix of Whaling, 379-387 (“A Service for Such as Would Make or Renew Their Covenant With God”, British Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1922); in *Wesley Hymns*, edited by Ken Bible (Kansas City: Lillenas Publishing, 1982, A-1 – A-10); at the Northwest Nazarene University Wesley Center website: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/covenant/WESLEY~1.htm> (Jeren Rowel, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Tripp, chapter 7: “The Renewal of the Covenant as a Catholic Phenomenon” (144-149)

<sup>14</sup> The former would include Baker (1955), Davies (1961), and Tripp (1969). The latter are Jackson (1992) and Parkes (1997).

ask the following questions: (1) Does biblical covenant meet the criteria of Christian practice? (2) Does Wesley's Covenant Service meet the criteria of biblical covenant? (3) Does Wesley's Covenant Service meet the criteria of Christian practice? Before seeking to answer these questions, we will establish the criteria for evaluation by defining the terms "practice" and "covenant" in their specifically Christian and biblical contexts.

### *Defining Christian Practice*

From the very first, Christians have understood their faith to issue in a way of life. Of course, Christians have not and do not agree on all the specifics of this way of life. This is, no doubt, due to the depth and breadth of the Christian way, as well as the challenges of incarnating the Gospel in various historical-social-cultural contexts. And so, some Christians at certain times have emphasized belief as central; others behavior; and still others, the interior life of dispositions. Even when Christian faith is viewed most holistically, i.e. as necessarily involving belief, behavior *and* dispositions, there is often a particular interest in one more than the others. In our day, at least in Protestant theological circles, the interest seems to be turning to the behavioral dimension of faith in what is being heard as a call to take Christian practices more seriously. These practices, mostly traditional, are being reexamined and redescribed through the lenses of contemporary concern with embodiment, community, and spiritual formation.

The focus on practices, rooted in philosophical reflection and social scientific investigation<sup>15</sup>, is not behavioral in a simplistic way. It is more than simply a matter of doing things. Not all Christian behaviors are Christian practices. *What* one does and *how* one does it are important. Drawing from two of the primary sources of recent theological reflection on Christian practices—the books *Practicing Our Faith* and *Practicing Theology*—a Christian practice can be defined by referring to the following criteria<sup>16</sup>: It is (1) a shared activity, belonging to groups of people across generations and engaged in over time, (2) in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ, (3) addressing fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts. It (4) possesses a standard of excellence, (5) connects thinking (doctrine) and acting (life), (6) is rooted in the past, but constantly adapts to changing circumstances, (7) articulates a wisdom that is in the keeping of non-professional-theologian practitioners, and (8) when woven together with other practices, forms a way of life.

Several Christian practices that meet these criteria are described and explicated in the books: Honoring the body, Hospitality, Household economics, Saying yes and saying no, Keeping Sabbath, Testimony, Discernment, Shaping communities, Forgiveness, Healing, Dying well, Singing. The list would grow if one were to consider other, traditional Christian practices such as Eucharist, Scripture reading, and Prayer.

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<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Bass (ed.), *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, Jossey-Bass, 1997, 6; Miroslav Volf & Dorothy Bass (eds.), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Eerdmans, 2002, 5-6, 20.

<sup>16</sup> *Practicing our Faith*, xi, 5-8; *Practicing Theology*, 2-3, 6, 18.

## *Defining Biblical Covenant*

Walter Brueggemann describes covenant as “perhaps the central and defining theological affirmation of the Old Testament.”<sup>17</sup> The discussion of the covenant, particularly in the Old Testament, occupied a significant part of the twentieth century discussions in Old Testament Theology.<sup>18</sup> As a result there is considerable diversity in the way the concept of covenant is understood in biblical studies. Paul R. Williamson discusses the covenant in the Pentateuch under three major headings: 1) The Universal Covenant, 2) the Ancestral Covenants, and 3) the National Covenants.<sup>19</sup> In *The Psalms & the Life of Faith* Brueggemann attempts to steer a course between the “treaty hypothesis” that has been very influential in Old Testament studies of the covenant and the pattern of Eichrodt who subsumed everything in the Old Testament under the rubric of covenant. He describes covenant as “a metaphor, that is, as a way of discerning and articulating reality impressionistically, which permits a variety of nuances, dimensions, and possibilities.”<sup>20</sup> Such diversity of understanding will always make the biblical concept of covenant difficult to define narrowly. However, for the purpose of this paper a narrower focus is necessary. For the purpose of comparing the Wesley Covenant Service with the biblical covenant the universal and ancestral covenants described by Williamson will not be considered and primary focus will be given to Israel’s national covenant with Yahweh that was established at Sinai. The Wesley Covenant Service came about for use in a corporate worship setting and thus the comparison with the Sinai covenant made with Israel’s community of faith is more appropriate than comparison with individual covenants with Abraham or David.

Without embracing all the aspects of the treaty hypothesis of the Sinai covenant the form critical analysis of Mendenhall is helpful for the sake of analysis.<sup>21</sup> Mendenhall identifies the following elements as identifying the form of the Sinai Covenant: 1) Identification and Historical Prologue, 2) Stipulations, 3) Deposit and Public Reading, Witnesses, Blessings and Curses, 4) The Ratification Ceremony, and 5) Formal Procedures for Violation of Covenant.<sup>22</sup> Another description combining formal elements and the function of the biblical covenant can be found in

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 37.

<sup>18</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 418, footnotes 9-12 for the major contributions to the discussion.

<sup>19</sup> Paul R. Williamson, “Covenant,” in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 139-155.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Covenanting as Human Vocation: The Relation of the Bible and Pastoral Care,” in *The Psalms & the Life of Faith*, ed. by Patrick D. Miller, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 150-151.

<sup>21</sup> See the discussion and bibliography in George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, “Covenant,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1179-1202.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1183-1185.

John D. Witvliet who identifies five component of the biblical covenant.<sup>23</sup> The first is that the covenant emphasizes the role of God. Whether in reference to God's saving activities of the past or to promises of God's future activity, the point is that "covenant is action and promise-oriented. God's being, and even God's presence, is featured less than God's action."<sup>24</sup> Second, the covenant "enacts a relationship and confers an identity." By means of the covenant God creates a relationship with Israel and becomes known as the God of Israel.<sup>25</sup> Third, God is the primary actor in the covenant relationship. God initiates covenant. Fourth, "a covenant relationship is completed by faithful and thankful obedience. This obedience does not establish or effect covenant relationship, but is a response to it." This indicates that a covenant "involves an obligation to act in a way that is fitting to the type of relationship established."<sup>26</sup> The final characteristic of the covenant as described by Witvliet is that a covenant is "sealed by ritual ratification."<sup>27</sup> In several cases the ritual ratification included a ritual meal (Exodus 24:11 and also Genesis 31:54). These formal critical and descriptive aspects of the biblical covenant supplied by Witvliet and Mendenhall will provide the basis for both a comparison of the biblical covenant with Wesley's Covenant Service and for answering the question of whether the biblical covenant fit the contemporary description of practices.

### *Biblical Covenant Through the Lens of Christian Practice*

(1) *A shared activity, belonging to groups of people across generations and engaged in over time.* This is certainly the case with the Sinai covenant. It was enacted with the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai according to Exodus 19-24. The text gives careful instructions as to the place that the various parties, Moses, Joshua, Aaron, Hur, the elders, and the people were to stand, what actions they were to take, and what verbal responses they were to make. Deuteronomy 5:2-3 explicitly addresses the covenant (renewal) to a new generation of Israelites and provides a template by which covenant renewal could be performed for all future generations. The covenant renewal service of Joshua 24 involves a later generation participating as a group in the covenant.<sup>28</sup> Mendenhall and Herion see significant reflection of the Sinai covenant in the New Testament.<sup>29</sup> In particular the Eucharist can be understood as a covenant renewal service<sup>30</sup> which demonstrates the character of the covenant being a shared activity belonging to groups of people across generations.

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<sup>23</sup> John D. Witvliet, "Prospects for Covenant Theology in Ecumenical Discussions of the Eucharist," *Worship* 71:2 (March 1997), 98-123.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 106.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-107.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

<sup>28</sup> See Jerome F.D. Creach, *Joshua*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003), 120-122, for a discussion of the similarities and differences between this Shechem covenant and the Sinai covenant with regard to the relationship of both to the Hittite treaty forms.

<sup>29</sup> Mendenhall, 1199.

<sup>30</sup> Witvliet, 100-103, 111-112.

(2) *In response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.* The Old Testament covenant forms do not present themselves in the light of Jesus Christ. However, Witvliet's first and third components emphasize the activity of God. The biblical covenant is a response to the activity of God.

(3) *Addressing fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts.* Witvliet's second component that a covenant "enacts a relationship and confers an identity" along with the fifth that a covenant is sealed by a ritual ratification indicates clearly that the Sinai (and Shechem) covenants meet this criterion of a practice.

(4) *Possesses a standard of excellence.* This means that a practice can be assessed to determine whether it is functioning effectively or poorly. The covenant stipulations found in general form in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 in the Ten Commandments, as well as the more detailed stipulations in the subsequent chapters provide specific criteria by which the effectiveness of the covenant was evaluated. Further, the covenant consequences, spelled out in greatest detail in Deuteronomy 27 and 28 provide a means of what we might call enforcement of the standard of excellence.

(5) *Connects thinking (doctrine) and acting (life).* At the risk of imposing modern distinctions on an ancient concept this characteristic fits the biblical covenant. The historical prologue of the biblical covenant referred to God's saving activity from the past. Though Witvliet characterizes the focus of the covenant to be on God's action, it is a call to think about God's action. The very covenant form which begins with references to God's saving acts of the past invites reflection about the meaning of those actions. Further, the second formal element of Mendenhall's description of the covenant refers to the stipulations of the covenant. Witvliet describes this as "faithful and thankful obedience" required by the covenant relationship. Thus the covenant invites both thinking about the meaning of God's saving acts for Israel and acting in specified ways by way of response. The provisions for deposit and public reading of the covenant also suggest an attempt to bring together thinking and acting with regard to Israel's covenant relationship with God.

(6) *Rooted in the past, but constantly adapts to changing circumstances.* The importance of the historical prologue in the Sinai covenant reviewing God's saving acts in the past is sufficient evidence that the covenant was rooted in the past. The development from the Book of the Covenant in Exodus to its most detailed form in Deuteronomy is evidence of its ability to adapt constantly to changing circumstances. The later Deuteronomy is dated the more clearly one sees adaptation through time. Covenant renewal events such as that described in Joshua 24 also indicate the adapting of the covenant to a new context.

(7) *Articulates a wisdom that is in the keeping of non-professional-theologian practitioners.* This characteristic does not appear in the lists of the form-critical elements of the covenant. However, the wide-spread use of covenant language and practice in the Old Testament in a range of contexts suggest that this is exactly what happened. It may be that covenant was such a diffuse cultural concept in the Ancient Near East that it had a life in many contexts quite separate from the use of the term to describe the relationship between God and Israel established at Sinai. However, it is unlikely that covenant language in a variety of contexts in Israel was completely unconnected to the understanding of the Sinai covenant. The prophets

have been described by Douglas Stuart as “covenant enforcement mediators.”<sup>31</sup> This indicates that despite the uneven frequency of appearances of the word “covenant” in the prophets, the concept was on the mind of most of them. Their messages evaluated a variety of social and religious practices in light of the covenant. While one might describe some of the prophets as theologians rather than practitioners, it is doubtful that all of them would have agreed with such categorization. The discussion of Mendenhall and Herion regarding covenant language in the context of eating, drinking and marriage certainly moves that language out of the arena of theologians and into the arena of “practitioners.”<sup>32</sup>

(8) *When woven together with other practices, forms a way of life.* The Sinai covenant did not operate in isolation from other religious and ceremonial practices in the life of Israel. Though alluded to in Exodus 20-23 and Deuteronomy 6-26, Leviticus and Numbers more clearly outline the cultic life of Israel. The covenant practices were woven into the larger fabric of life that included the great religious festivals which were also agricultural festivals. G.W. Buchanan discusses the inter-relationships between the covenant and Israelite understandings of life and death, suffering, ethics, wisdom, eschatology, and numbers consequences of the rituals outlined in the cultic life of Israel.<sup>33</sup> Clearly the covenant met this requirement of a practice.

Though we should be alert to the danger of imposing modern descriptions of practices on ancient cultural constructs it appears that the biblical covenant can be understood as a practice. The implications of that for contemporary use of the covenant are important. To simply treat covenant as an abstract concept from the Old Testament in particular and the Bible in general, as is often done in biblical studies separates thinking from action and fails to appreciate sufficiently the biblical concept as practice.

### *Covenant Renewal Through the Lens of Biblical Covenant*

In light of the formal descriptions of the biblical covenant what can be said about Wesley’s Covenant Service in relation to the biblical structures?<sup>34</sup> The first formal characteristic of the Sinai covenant identified by Mendenhall and Herion was identification and historical prologue. Though these elements were distinct in suzerainty treaties of the Ancient Near East they were fused together in Exodus 20:2 and Deuteronomy 5:6. The elaborate introductions of the “great kings” who conquered peoples and imposed covenant treaties on them stand in stark contrast to the simple identification of Yahweh as the God of Israel who brought a people out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Thus God is identified by his saving act of the Exodus in the Biblical covenant.

Though there are numerous references to God, to Christ, and to the Holy Spirit in Wesley’s *Directions* there are specific phrases in which Christ is identified with a title that

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<sup>31</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 167.

<sup>32</sup> Mendenhall, 1194-1195.

<sup>33</sup> George Wesley Buchanan, *The Consequences of the Covenant*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, Vol. XX, (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1970).

<sup>34</sup> See footnote 1.

reflects some part of his saving work. For example, early in the *Directions* Christ is identified as Priest, “This is closing with Christ as your Priest.”<sup>35</sup> This title follows a few lines after the promises declare that Christ offers to bring the worshipper home and to God. This promise leads to the suggested prayer, “Lord Jesus, will you undertake for me?” Clearly in this section Christ is being identified as Priest with a promise of his saving action.

The following section describes the work of Christ as Savior by attempting to create a deep sense of sin in the covenanter, “No man will regard a Savior, that doth not see himself a sinner.”<sup>36</sup> Near the end of the section Christ is specifically addressed as the Savior of Sinners, “Do not, Lord, refuse me, for if you refuse me, to whom then shall I go? Are you not he, and he alone, whom God the Father has sealed, the Savior of Sinners?”<sup>37</sup> Through this section the focus is on the covenanter as a sinner who tries all means of salvation other than Christ until turning to Christ.

The following section of the covenant service deals with yielding oneself to Christ as his servant. Within this section Christ is identified as King and sovereign Lord.<sup>38</sup> Thus Christ is identified as Lord in terms of the covenanter’s action of yielding himself or herself as a servant of Christ.

Thus the identification element of the covenant is clearly contained in Wesley’s *Directions*. Elements that would correspond to the historical prologue of the Sinai covenant are not frequent in the *Directions*. Wesley does use the Biblical image of the exile and God’s bringing the exile home.<sup>39</sup> However, Witvliet treats the historical prologue as referring to a combination of God’s past actions and promises and this combination is amply evident in the *Directions*. The following promises appear: Christ “will bring you home,”<sup>40</sup> the quotation of John 16:8 that Christ will convince the world of sin,<sup>41</sup> Christ will appoint the covenanter to his or her work,<sup>42</sup> Christ will appoint the covenanter to his or her station,<sup>43</sup> and the very day on which God’s people commit to keep the commandments of God, the Lord “engageth to keep his promise with them.”<sup>44</sup> These examples could be multiplied.

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<sup>35</sup> *Directions*, IIIb.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* III d.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, III m.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, IV i.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, III a.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, IV c.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, IV h.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, V b.

The importance of the historical prologue as found in Exodus 20:2 and Deuteronomy 1:5-4:44; 5:6 is not the form but the acknowledgment of God's saving activity on behalf of Israel.<sup>45</sup> The soteriological purpose of the historical prologue is clearly present in Wesley's *Directions*.

It is clear that Wesley's *Directions* demonstrate the Sinai covenant characteristic of identification and historical prologue with reference to God or Christ. The identification and historical prologue element is clearer in the adaptation of the Covenant Service found in the present *United Methodist Book of Worship*.<sup>46</sup> God is addressed as "Searcher of all our hearts,"<sup>47</sup> "our Covenant Friend,"<sup>48</sup> "righteous God,"<sup>49</sup> and "mighty God, the Lord Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."<sup>50</sup> God is described in terms of his past salvific actions as the God who "formed us as a people and claimed us for your own,"<sup>51</sup> who has "been gracious to us through all the years of our lives,"<sup>52</sup> and who "redeemed us, and called us to a high calling in Christ Jesus."<sup>53</sup> Whether in the *Directions* or in an adaptation for worship today, the identification and historical element of the Sinai covenant is present in Wesley's covenant service.

The second element in the Sinai covenant form was the stipulations. Stipulations appear throughout the *Directions*. The major headings take the form of commands issued to the covenanter: "Make your Choice,"<sup>54</sup> "Embark with Christ,"<sup>55</sup> "Resign and deliver up yourselves to God in Christ,"<sup>56</sup> and "Confirm and compleat [*sic*] all this by solemn Covenant."<sup>57</sup> The Sinai pattern of general and detailed stipulations is reflected in the *Directions* also. If the major headings just listed are considered general stipulations, each section contains a number of more detailed or more specific commands. Under the section, "Make your Choice," appear more specific commands, "Turn either to the right-hand or to the left," "lay both parts before you," "put yourselves to it," "follow your heart from day to day, let them not rest," and "see that you make a good choice."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Witvliet, 116.

<sup>46</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 288-295. Hereafter referred to as *UMBW*.

<sup>47</sup> *UMBW*, 289.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>54</sup> *Directions*, IIa.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, IIIa.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, IVa.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Va.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, IIa and IIb.

Under the section, “Embark with Christ,” the following specific commands appear: “Adventure yourselves with him” and “cast yourselves upon his Righteousness.”<sup>59</sup> The section, “Resign and deliver yourselves to God in Christ,” begins with the specific commands, “Yield yourselves to the Lord,” “give up the dominion and government of yourselves to Christ,” and “be devoted to his fear.”<sup>60</sup> Further commands in this section include: “See what is that Christ to expect,” “yield yourselves to his whole will,” and “Go to Christ.”<sup>61</sup> The final major section, “Confirm and compleat all this by solemn Covenant,” contains the following commands, “Give yourselves to the Lord,” “bind yourselves to him,”<sup>62</sup> “set apart some time,” “compose your spirits into the most serious frame,” “Lay hold on the Covenant of God,” “Rely upon his promise of giving grace,” “Trust not to your own strength,” “Resolve to be faithful,” “resolve in his strength never to go back,” “fall down on your knees,” and “open your hearts to the Lord.”<sup>63</sup> Clearly the biblical aspect of stipulations plays a significant role in Wesley’s *Directions*. While specific stipulations play a significant role in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* form of the covenant service, they are less frequent, or appear in indirect form, as is the case in the 1998 adaptation by Jeren Rowel.<sup>64</sup>

The third characteristic of the Sinai covenant form was deposit and provision for public readings. Precisely corresponding elements are not found in the texts of the *Directions*, *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, nor Rowel’s *Wesleyan Covenant Service*. However, very nature of the *Directions* as instructions for making covenant with God imply the periodic use of the service. Wesley’s practice showed this to be his intention. From 1755 he increasingly promoted the use of a covenant service. It came to be held on January 1 in London. Beginning in 1778 the preferred date for the service moved to the first Sunday in January.<sup>65</sup> The introduction to the covenant service in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*,<sup>66</sup> reviews Wesley’s practice and recommends the contemporary use of the service at a New Year’s Eve Watch Night Service, or one of the Sundays After the Epiphany, during Lent, on a church anniversary, during a revival or a preaching mission. Rowel’s service contains a “Historical Background” section near the beginning of the service which reviews Wesley’s practice and recognizes the service as a renewal of both community and personal covenants for the year in question.<sup>67</sup> Thus in both Wesley’s *Directions* and in subsequent adaptations of the covenant service the idea of periodic readings is an important element.

The fourth element in the Sinai covenant form was the “Ratification Ceremony.” While one could argue that the entirety of Wesley’s *Directions* correspond to this formal element of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., IIIa.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., IVa.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., IVf and g.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Va.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., Vh, l, m, n, and o.

<sup>64</sup> Wesleyan Covenant Service: Adapted from John Wesley by Jeren Rowel. Found at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/covenant/WESLEY~1.htm>.

<sup>65</sup> Davies, 64.

<sup>66</sup> *UMBW*, 288-289.

<sup>67</sup> Rowel.

covenant, the section entitled, “Confirm and compleat all this by a solemn Covenant” and the “Covenant Prayer” more specifically correspond to the Ratification Ceremony. Wesley calls for a “formal” or outward expression that will give evidence to the “virtual” or inward reality of the covenanter’s commitment. The “formal” paragraph states, “Which is our binding ourselves to the Lord by solemn vow or promise to stand to our choice. And this may be, either only inward in the soul; or outward, and expressed either by words, lifting up of the hands, subscribing the hand, or the like.”<sup>68</sup> Though Baker is uncertain whether Wesley always asked for a physical response from the congregation, he suggests that it is most likely Wesley used the words of 2 Kings 23:3 as motivation to ask the congregation to “stand to the covenant” as physical demonstration of their inward commitment.<sup>69</sup> The “Covenant Prayer” that concludes the *Directions* also suggest outward liturgical actions that would be part of a ratification ceremony. The Covenant Prayer begins with the covenanter describing himself (or herself – presumably) as “prostrating himself at thy door.”<sup>70</sup> Later in the prayer the covenanter is instructed to say, “I do here upon the bended knees of my soul.”<sup>71</sup> This phrase suggests metaphorical language, but given Wesley’s instructions regarding the formal elements of the covenant, the phrase may suggest actual kneeling. Regardless of the specific liturgical actions expected in the *Directions*, it is clear that the final portion of the service is a ratification ceremony.

One of the characteristics of the Ratification Ceremony or Ritual Ratification was the ritual meal as evidenced in Exodus 24:11 and in the Eucharist as the context of covenant renewal in the New Testament. The question of the relationship of the Covenant Service and the Eucharist in Wesley’s practice is not clear. There are no instructions in the *Directions* that suggest the Covenant Service led into a celebration of the Eucharist. Baker and Davies, however, are confident that such was the Wesley’s regular practice<sup>72</sup>

*The United Methodist Book of Worship* adaptation of Wesley’s *Directions* specifically instructs the people to “kneel or bow” for the covenant prayer.<sup>73</sup> The closing rubrics offer the pastor the possibility of celebrating Holy Communion. The rubrics of Rowel’s adaptation do not prescribe outward liturgical actions, but give specific instructions that are recognized as part of the worship traditions of the church – testimonies, songs of worship, responsive readings, scripture readings, confession, litanies, an offering, and the Lord’s Supper concluding with a pronouncement of forgiveness.<sup>74</sup> Clearly, the Sinai covenant element of a ratification ceremony has its analogy in both Wesley’s *Directions* and in contemporary adaptations of the service.

The final form critical element of the Sinai covenant is a section of “Formal Procedures for Violation of the Covenant.” This element does not find as close a corresponding section in Wesley’s service, but there are statements in the *Directions* that point in this direction. In the

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<sup>68</sup> *Directions*, Ve.

<sup>69</sup> Baker, 215.

<sup>70</sup> *Directions*, “Covenant Prayer,” 1.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Baker, 217-218, Davies, 65..

<sup>73</sup> *UMBW*, 292.

<sup>74</sup> Rowel.

opening section, “Make Your Choice,” the covenanter is confronted with the choice between Christ and his crown and the Devil and his curse. The choice is focused with these words, “If you be unresolved, you are resolved; if you remain undetermined for Christ, you are determined for the Devil.”<sup>75</sup> The following section, “Embark wit Christ,” confronts the covenanter with this description of the result of Sin, “The Spirit’s awakening a sleepy Sinner is a kind of awakening in hell. *Lord, what am I? What mean these legions round about me? These chains and fetters that are upon me? What means this black roll before mine eyes, of curses, and wrath, and woes?*”<sup>76</sup>

Though less harsh than the Sinai covenant violation procedures, the Covenant Prayer’s second to last paragraph petitions God to reveal any spiritual violations in the covenanter’s heart in the act of making the covenant. “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, if thou espieest any flaw or falsehood therein, thou wouldst discover it to me, and help me to do it aright.”<sup>77</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship* adaptation of the covenant service contains the same section in the Covenant Prayer, using modernized language.<sup>78</sup> The Rowel adaptation has dropped the element of violation procedures from the service.

Using the form-critical elements of the Sinai covenant proposed by Mendenhall and Herion it is clear that the service envisioned by Wesley’s *Directions for Renewing Our Covenant with God* reflects these elements of the biblical covenant. This was affirmed, though not argued, by Tripp.<sup>79</sup> Though the elements are not always as sharply expressed in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* and Rowel adaptations they are present. It is clear that the Wesley Covenant service fulfills the formal characteristics of the Sinai covenant pattern. More importantly the Wesley Covenant Service reflects the theological understandings of the biblical covenants.

### *Covenant Renewal Through the Lens of Christian Practice*

The Wesley Covenant Service satisfies the eight criteria for Christian practice in the following aspects:

(1) *A shared activity, belonging to groups of people across generations and engaged in over time.* The Wesley Covenant Service was based on the common Puritan practice of personal covenanting. Individual converts were encouraged by their ministers to write out a personal pledge to God expressing their love and commitment to the Christian path. “The genius of Wesley’s service,” writes Baker, “was that it preserved a method of personal covenanting for individuals . . . and at the same time fused this personal dedication into a congregational rite.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Directions*, II a and b.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, III d.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, “Covenant Prayer,” 8.

<sup>78</sup> *UMBW*, 294.

<sup>79</sup> Tripp, 158.

<sup>80</sup> Baker, 215. See also Davies, 63: “The only original element in Wesley’s Covenant Service is that he turned into a congregational rite what had previously been a single act of personal or public dedication.”

By creating a service wherein members of the Societies could make both a personal and corporate covenant between themselves and God,<sup>81</sup> Wesley made it a shared activity. Further, the historical record shows that the original Service as outlined in the *Directions* was practiced with regularity by Methodist Societies and eventually Methodist Churches for over a hundred years after its creation in 1780.<sup>82</sup> Even with the eventual modifications and subsequent variants, some form of a Covenant Service has been considered a standard annual Wesleyan practice within most Methodist groups throughout the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first.

(2) *In response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.* Wesley was often accused of being Pelagian and the emphasis on human decision-making in the Covenant Service certainly gives the impression that the worshipper's movement toward God is the make-or-break feature of the covenant.<sup>83</sup> The critical importance of choice is thrust upon the person from the very opening paragraph of the Service where the third principle is: ". . . upon your present choice depends your eternal lot. Choose Christ and his ways, and you are blessed for ever; refuse, and you are undone for ever."<sup>84</sup> Further, the major headings of the *Directions* are written as instructions for what the worshipper is to do: "Make your Choice", "Embark with Christ", "Resign and deliver up yourselves to God in Christ", "Confirm and complete all this by solemn Covenant"<sup>85</sup> Wesley is clear, however, that these initiatives of the worshipper are responses to the prior initiative of a gracious God. The first two principles of the opening paragraph point to the realities prior to any human response: ". . . Things eternal are much more considerable than Things temporal; that Things not seen are as certain as the Things that are seen."<sup>86</sup> An act of personal commitment is demanded because of a recognition that one is not, in and of oneself, capable of forging covenantal connection to God, but that through Jesus Christ one is: "There are two things which must necessarily be supposed, in order to a sinner's coming to Christ. 1. A deep sense of his Sin and Misery. 2. An utter despair of himself, and all things else besides Christ."<sup>87</sup> Hence, Wesley urges worshippers to "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, to the strength of your own resolutions, but take hold on his strength."<sup>88</sup> Because God's gracious presence and activity in the world is probably assumed by Wesley, language explicating it is underutilized in the *Directions*. Perhaps that is why later versions of the Covenant Service add sections called "Adoration" and

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<sup>81</sup> Jackson, 177.

<sup>82</sup> Davies, 65; Parkes, 57.

<sup>83</sup> Tripp's summary of the major critiques of the Covenant Service from within Methodism includes the charge that it "interprets the Christian religion too exclusively in terms of individual devotion and service, to the neglect of God's provision for our salvation which alone makes such devotion and service possible." (156)

<sup>84</sup> *Directions*, Ia.

<sup>85</sup> *Directions*, II, III, IV, V.

<sup>86</sup> *Directions*, Ia.

<sup>87</sup> *Directions*, IIIc.

<sup>88</sup> *Directions*, Vm.

“Thanksgiving” prior to the traditional “Confession” and “Covenant Prayer”.<sup>89</sup> Davies, in responding to critics of the Service claims:

“Above all, the Service is incomprehensible unless it starts from complete reliance on the Covenant of God, his grace, his mercy, and his promises, which are referred to again and again as the sole ground of our approach to him. . . . There is nothing even remotely subjective about the Covenant Service: the experience of the worshipper, his opinions and his programs, do not come into the picture; God’s work, God’s Word, God’s grace, God’s Covenant, are in the centre—it is our part only to respond and to yield ourselves.”<sup>90</sup>

Another way that the Covenant Service functions as response to God’s active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ is as a service of regular *renewal* of covenant. Wesley picked up on the notion of Richard Alleine that his son-in-law Joseph’s covenant “for new converts can also be used as a renewal or for those in the church who have not had a conversion experience.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, there is a sense in which believers are invited to be continually responsive to God, i.e., not to assume that last year’s response is sufficient for God’s activity in the coming year. Each Covenant Service was a new opportunity “for believers to ‘build each other up’ and the convicted to encounter transforming grace.”<sup>92</sup>

(3) *Addressing fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts.* Wesley created the Service because he perceived a need for “increasing serious religion” among the Societies.<sup>93</sup> Parkes speculates that with “[t]he awakening . . . in its seventeenth year . . . Wesley may have considered that, while the breadth of the work was ever increasing, something was lacking in regard to its depth. Disciplined discipleship had to be evoked.”<sup>94</sup> Was this simply Wesley’s agenda, or are there fundamental human needs warranting such a serious approach? Jackson suggests that “He met the need of a churchless band of people for outward spiritual expression.”<sup>95</sup> Perhaps even more fundamental is the broader claim that “There is a resurgence in the use of the Covenant Service today, because we, like those in Wesley’s societies, need something—a new commitment to a holy God.”<sup>96</sup> The fundamental human need, then, is covenantal relationship with God. The Covenant Service can be considered a Christian practice because it addresses this need through the concrete human acts of (in Wesley’s day) preparation through prayer and fasting, attending the Service, listening to the instructions and challenges, and “signif[ying] . . . acceptance either by standing (the normal procedure), by raising their hands, or by both.”<sup>97</sup> At the conclusion of the Covenant Prayer, there typically is

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<sup>89</sup> Whaling, 382-384;

<sup>90</sup> Davies, 67.

<sup>91</sup> Jackson, 179.

<sup>92</sup> Parkes, 36.

<sup>93</sup> *WJW*, 461.

<sup>94</sup> Parkes, 54.

<sup>95</sup> Jackson, 177.

<sup>96</sup> Jackson, 184.

<sup>97</sup> Baker, 217.

the singing of a hymn and the partaking in the Lord's Supper—very concrete acts. Worshippers were even encouraged to write out a personal covenant to keep “as a memorial of the solemn transactions that have passed between God and you, that you may have recourse to it in doubts and temptations.”<sup>98</sup>

(4) *Possesses a standard of excellence.* This was so much a characteristic of the Covenant Service that its critics accused Wesley of requiring more of worshippers than God did. The standard of excellence was complete dedication and devotion of one's entire life to God:

“Beloved, such a close with Christ as you have here been exhorted to, is that wherein the essence of Christianity lies; when you have chosen the incorruptible crown, that is, when you have chosen God to be your portion and happiness; when you have adventured, and laid up your whole interest, and all your hopes with Christ, casting yourself wholly upon the Merits of his Righteousness; when you have understandingly and heartily resigned and given up yourselves to him, resolving for ever to be at his command, and at his disposal; then you are Christians indeed, and never till then. Christ will be the Saviour of none but his Servants; he is the Author of eternal salvation to those that 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.”<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps this is why the Service, at least in the beginning years, was not promoted for the public.

“Like the Love Feast, the Covenant Service was essentially ‘for members only’. Both during Wesley's lifetime and for long afterwards, attendance was restricted to those who could show the doorkeepers either their current class-ticket or a note of admission signed by Wesley (or in later years by one of the preachers). . . Conversion was not a condition of membership, however, but simply ‘a desire to flee from the wrath to come’.”<sup>100</sup>

The issue of exclusiveness and the potential of creating different classes of Christians are legacies of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection and encouragement of believers to “go on to perfection.” Tripp cites a comment by K. Tibbets that

“ . . . we have to choose whether the Covenant Service is to be a ‘main’ service in which all the members join, or whether it is to be an additional exercise for the more spiritually minded. The recent tendency has been towards the former, and that is probably right, but, if that is to be its place, it would seem to be unrealistic to hanker after a return to the ‘more personal and heart-searching quality of the original.’”<sup>101</sup>

This suggests that the standard of excellence is experienced ambivalently by the tradition.

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<sup>98</sup> *Directions*, Final Rubric.

<sup>99</sup> *Directions*, IVj.

<sup>100</sup> Baker, 218.

<sup>101</sup> Tripp, 162, cited from “The Revision of the Methodist Book of Offices” *London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, 1962, 270-276 [272-273]).

(5) *Connects thinking (doctrine) and acting (life)*. The text of the *Directions* is heavily laden with Scripture passages and doctrinal statements. The latter include affirmations about the character of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the nature and consequences of sin, and respective places of divine grace and human responsibility in the economy of salvation. The connection between doctrine and living, thinking and acting is embodied in the act of praying the Covenant Prayer. This action is the logical outflow of the theological claims set out in the *Directions*. Further, this action is a corporate, embodied action. Much like the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, there is an enactment of doctrine.<sup>102</sup>

(6) *Rooted in the past, but constantly adapts to changing circumstances*. Baker rightly points out that Wesley's Covenant Service "was not an original idea, but an inspired adaptation".<sup>103</sup> Numerous sources of covenantal theology and practice merged in the mind and heart of John Wesley as he formed what is now one of the hallmarks of Methodism. These sources include the Scriptures, Puritanism (especially the practice of personal covenanting), High Church Anglicanism, Wesley's family (especially his mother, Susanna), and Moravianism.<sup>104</sup> The original editions of the *Directions*, then, were themselves rooted in the past *and* adapted to changing circumstances. Parkes points out, for example, that

"Emendations were frequently made to the text and surviving copies used by preachers consistently display much deletion and changing of words. This was always in the direction of a discernable softening of much of the awesome language of the original, and an obvious desire to shorten the pre-sacramental service by reducing the ten-part Covenant Prayer."<sup>105</sup>

Baker notes that even though

". . . there is little doubt that the usage and phraseology of the Covenant Service remained basically the same for one hundred and eighty years, until its drastic revision for the *Book of Offices* authorized in 1936 . . . , the spiritual challenge of the original *Directions* and Covenant had increasingly been regarded as strong meat, and the present form is certainly more palatable to modern taste."<sup>106</sup>

This adaptability of the Covenant Service as a Christian practice is attributable, at least in part, to the seminal character of the initial *Directions* as just that—directions for preparing for a service of covenant without much specific detail as to the content and order of the service.<sup>107</sup> The

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<sup>102</sup> According to Parkes, "The covenant of grace was operative from baptism; it [the Covenant Service] was therefore a reinforcement of baptismal ~ vows. It was also a renewal of all the limitless promises arising from the new birth, for baptism without regeneration had no permanent validity."(54-55)

<sup>103</sup> Baker, 215.

<sup>104</sup> Tripp, chapter one (5-10).

<sup>105</sup> Parkes, 57.

<sup>106</sup> Baker, 220.

<sup>107</sup> Baker, 219.

ongoing development of the rite or liturgy of the Covenant Service, even to this day, is testimony to its viability as Christian practice.

(7) *Articulates a wisdom that is in the keeping of non-professional-theologian practitioners.* One might legitimately raise the question: To what extent has the Covenant Service been imposed on Methodists and to what extent has it been embraced by ordinary Methodists as a vital witness to their living faith? The early positive response and high attendance at the Services Wesley conducted suggest that they articulated a wisdom that belonged to the people.<sup>108</sup> In fact, it could be argued that the entire Methodist movement articulated a wisdom of non-professional-theologian practitioners as even the leadership were relatively uneducated lay preachers. The core message of the Service—complete surrender of one’s entire life to God—is applicable to all Christians, regardless of their station in life. In fact, these words from the Directions signal that the practice is for “whosoever will come”:

“And this giving yourselves to him, must be such, as supposes that you be heartily contended: 1. That he appoint you your Work. 2. That he appoint you your Station. . . . That he shall appoint you your station and condition; whether it be higher or lower, a prosperous or afflicted state: be content that Christ should both choose your work, and choose your condition: that he should have the command of you, and the disposal of you.”<sup>109</sup>

This wisdom is best exemplified in the prayer,

“I put myself wholly into thy hands: 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 under foot 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.”<sup>110</sup>

(8) *When woven together with other practices, forms a way of life.* Baker reminds us that “From the beginning Wesley took great pains to prepare his followers adequately for this new type of religious exercise. Three or four days of explanation and exhortation preceded the first Covenant Service in London.”<sup>111</sup> Parkes notes that

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<sup>108</sup> Wesley’s *Journal* for August 11, 1755 records of the first Covenant Service at Spitalfields: “After I had recited the tenor of the covenant proposed, in the words of the blessed man, Richard Alleine, all the people stood up, in testimony of assent, to the number of about eighteen hundred persons.” (cited in Baker, 216) Attendance was so large at times that Wesley was faced with the logistical challenges of finding space large enough to accommodate the gathering of the Societies and securing the assistance of enough ministers that the service, which included the receiving of Communion, did not last too long (see Baker, 218).

<sup>109</sup> *Directions*, IVb,h.

<sup>110</sup> *Directions*, IVh.

<sup>111</sup> Baker, 216.

“Preparation for the first Covenant was meticulous. . . It was by explanation and catechizing in depth. Full-length preparatory services were a common feature, especially in places where they were to engage in their first Covenant. Fasting and prayer, the appeal to historical continuity, and the generating of expectancy were all significant for Wesley.”<sup>112</sup>

Further, the Covenant Service was intended for the Societies and Classes, i.e., groups of people who were already committed to a way of life that entailed numerous individual and communal practices such as prayer, scripture reading, fasting, weekly meetings, taking collections for the poor. In fact, the covenant that was renewed in the Service was the covenant already reflected and lived out in the entire Methodist connectional system. The connection of the Service with the Lord’s Supper has already been noted.<sup>113</sup> The weaving together of all these practices makes it clear that, in Wesley’s mind, the giving of one’s entire life over to God was not simply an event, but indeed, was to be a way of life.

### *Analysis and Conclusion*

Based on the above reviews, we see two areas in which contemporary use of the Covenant Service could be adjusted to maximize its impact as a viable, biblically-based Christian practice.

First, the planning for and conducting of the Service needs to more intentionally ritualize the foundational themes of grace that undergird the radical demands for commitment and surrender. Such liturgical reformulation would help address two of the key critiques of the Service noted by Tripp:

“1. Covenanting with God in this way either springs from or leads to spiritual pride and hypocrisy, by making too much of individual religious zeal. 2. It interprets the Christian religion too exclusively in terms of individual devotion and service, to the neglect of God’s provision for our salvation which alone makes such devotion and service possible.”<sup>114</sup>

Witvliet warns of dangers arising from an overuse of the covenant motif. The first is that covenant language can degenerate into a contractual theology.<sup>115</sup> The same danger exists for the use of Wesley’s covenant renewal service. To resist this tendency the Covenant Service and the preparations for it that are done congregationally need to focus on the biblical concept that God is the initiator of covenant. Wesley’s *Directions* do focus on the gracious activity of God, but that emphasis tends to be in the first part of the service with the serious language of the individual’s covenanting reserved for the final portion of the service. Though this order is logically and psychologically grounded constant attention should be given to the priority of

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<sup>112</sup> Parkes, 53.

<sup>113</sup> The Covenant was always “sealed at the Lord’s Table. . . Covenant without Communion was incomplete.” (Baker, 218)

<sup>114</sup> Tripp, 156.

<sup>115</sup> Witvliet, 116.

God's gracious saving activity. Our faithful and thankful obedience in covenant is the appropriate response to God's grace. From a biblical perspective one of the ways to strengthen this commitment to the priority of grace would be to focus on elements in the Covenant Service that identify God in his saving activity. The theological concept behind the historical prologue needs attention in the Wesley service. In the Sinai covenant the historical prologue preceded and introduced the stipulations. The ritual meal concluded the covenant process. To keep the Covenant Service connected to the Eucharist as the seal of God's response to our covenanting would give opportunity for a proper emphasis on God's gracious initiative at the end of the Service.

Second, the planning for and conducting of the Service needs to ensure the crucial communal nature of the event, containing it within the context of a broader commitment to ongoing corporate discipleship practices. The collapse of the Methodist connectional system, i.e., the eventual disconnect from any regular commitment to a Society/Class/Band structure and accountability system, has left the Covenant Service stranded from its original communal context. As such, it is experienced more as an occasional individual *event* rather than a sustained Christian *practice* in the sense that has been discussed above. The seriousness of the disconnect does not seem to be appreciated by those who have analyzed the Covenant Service in the recent past, for their commentary suggests that the moves to soften the language of the Service and make it more amenable to a general Christian public is a good thing. For example, Tripp agrees with Tibbets' assessment that the tendency toward making the Covenant Service "a 'main' service in which all the members join" is "probably right" and that it "has never been seen as asking more of its participants than the devotion incumbent on every Christian."<sup>116</sup> The problem with this view, admirable as it is from the perspective of inclusiveness and ecumenism, is that it justifies another set of criticisms of the Covenant Service with respect to the sacraments, viz., that: 1. It tends to usurp the function of Baptism, or, rather, to ignore the efficacy and finality of this sacrament. 2. It tends similarly to usurp the functions of the Eucharist.<sup>117</sup> Parkes states it this way:

"In Methodist thought the strong association of both sacraments with covenantal theology and typology has raised problems, consciously or otherwise, in assessing the importance of such a singular act as the Covenant Renewal. . . . There may well have been some recognition that the Lord's Supper had built within it such a recognizable motif of covenantal renewal that an added gloss such as the Covenant service could diminish that content."<sup>118</sup>

This is only a problem if one views the Covenant Service as functioning on the same level as Baptism and Eucharist. It was not Wesley's intention that it do so. Rather, the Service was designed to express an extra-level commitment on the part of those who, as baptized and Communion-receiving believers, were committing themselves to complete holiness of heart and life. Certainly baptism implies this and Eucharist invites it; but, developmentally and situationally, not all Christians are able to declare and enact it. Perhaps this is why, even though

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<sup>116</sup> Tripp, 162.

<sup>117</sup> Tripp, 156.

<sup>118</sup> Parkes, 55.

“the imperious majesty of the awesome words of the original form have given way to something considerably more accommodating to the tenor of the twentieth-century spiritual climate[. . .] yet even this accommodation remains too challenging for many. Worship on the first Sunday of a new year is frequently set amidst plentiful empty seats.”<sup>119</sup>

The pattern of Deuteronomy, and of Wesley, suggest that the Covenant Service should take place in a context of focused discipleship with careful preparation for the Service. The restoration of the Covenant Service as part of a larger strategy of discipleship with careful preparation would be an important contribution to that service being able to actually function as a Christian practice in today’s church.

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<sup>119</sup> Parkes, 36.