Special Emphasis: The New Covenant Community

As the Marshall readings indicate, we are able to talk about an overarching New Testament theology as long as we respect the particularities of each author and audience. As we have progressed in our study, part of what I see as the great value of this course is that we must respect the communicative bond between author and audience. The authors are people who have their own training. They have their own upbringing and are shaped by their own world. They also have pastoral responsibilities to particular communities, who they have their own problems, opportunities, ethnic makeup, and social issues. The text that we see before us in the NT reflects that world and at the same time challenges the people of God in that world to be something else. This important movement is something we have to keep in mind. The text functions simultaneously as a window, a picture, and a mirror. In other words we have to keep in mind the world behind the text because that is what shapes author and audience and illuminates the text. The world of the text does not incorporate everything behind the text. The world of the text is very selective. We do not talk about everything that happened on the way to Capernaum. We just talk about the fact that they went to Capernaum. The important part is that when we get to Capernaum Jesus confronts the demon-possessed man. Mark does not tell us everything that happened, but what happened is reflected in the text. The purpose for writing is to shape Christian identity in front of the text. The world in front of the text should be different because of what the writers write. The status quo of this world is not adequate. We do not want you to just hear this in your house church, but we want you to do something about it. This communicative event, whether it is Matthew or Corinthians, is a product of its world. In and of itself it is an artistic world. It is structured artistically and rhetorically a certain way in order to produce something and do something in a relationship. Words are communication and are intended to do something in a relationship. We have to respect the particularity of each New Testament document.

At the same time, the New Testament writers we have seen pick up on a story about the entire world and about the God who made that world. He revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. There are consistent themes and aspects of Christian identity that, despite the situation and social location, must be so if it really is Christian. I think about it this way: I love the movie French Kiss. My favorite moment of that movie is when Kevin Cline and Meg Ryan are in his old room at his parents home on a French vineyard. It is a very touching moment, because he pulls out a box of things he collected as a boy. He asks her to smell the different plants and spices that he bottled. He asks her to tell him what each one is. Then, after she smells those things, he has her taste different wines. She is able to taste the fact that there is rosemary in the soil in this particular part of France. The way I think about the message of the New Testament is that the Gospel is an identifiable thing, like a grapevine. It gets planted in many different soils. The grapes that are produced are not oranges or apples; they are grapes. But they produce different scents and tastes in wines that reflect the character of different soils. New Testament theology is the same sort of thing. Yes, we can construct a New Testament theology. The Gospel is a particular story with its own peculiar identity, like the grapevine. It is identifiable, but we have to appreciate that it is planted in different soils. Those local contingencies impact Gospel ministry if it is real Gospel ministry. That is the challenge that Marshall puts in front of us. How can we on the one hand respect the particularities of these different authors and on the other hand talk about a New Testament theology? It is possible.

Richard Hayes has summarized that possibility in terms of three things that I think are helpful. He says that every New Testament writer talks about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, this New Testament is about Christ and the events of His life and ministry. It is about what it means for all of history. Because it has meaning in history for all of history, the other two things that are consistent flow out of that. That is that this message about Christ forms a Christian community or church. This
New Testament is also about the church or the new covenant community. Hayes says it is about Christ, the church, and what he calls new creation. This message of the New Testament is meaningful for all of history and the world because it is an eschatological message that reaches for a new world. It reaches for the new heavens and new earth. All of the documents in the New Testament are concerned with these three things: Christ, church, and new creation. Richard Hayes gets the credit for that, and his book is The Moral Vision of the New Testament. It is very helpful, because he recognizes that each one of the documents has its own scent and character, but all of them talk about these three things. The world behind the text includes the events of Jesus and the church. The world of the text talks about that in a particular way and with particular metaphors that are concerned with different aspects of the soil. All of that tells us that the world is not the way it is supposed to be. We need to do some work in front of the text to construct this new community and new world. That is the essential message of the New Testament.

Christian Identity: Worship and Witness
There is a way to talk about this such that it can be helpful to our churches. I will never forget my first mission trip. It was to Mexico, and I was in the eighth grade. I grew up in Texas, and we were in the Houston airport while it was pouring down rain. We had not heard anything, but four hours had come and gone since we were supposed to take off for Mexico. I had never flown anywhere before, so it was the first time I had ever been on an airplane. We got an announcement that we would finally get to leave but that something had been wrong with one of the wings. There was a hydraulic problem with the wing. It is funny to me that they did not even bother telling us whether it was the right wing or the left wing. It did not matter. You need both wings if you are going to fly. That is the thing about the new covenant community. There are two really important wings that are like one wing or two sides of the same coin. On the one hand there is the fact that God calls us to fundamentally be a worshiping community. We are to go deeper in our love for God. We are also called to be a witnessing community. We must be a people who grow wider in our love for our neighbor. Those are two things that are fundamental to the New Testament message.

The New Testament is a story about the advance of the reign of God that extends the borders of Eden from Palestine to the known world throughout the Mediterranean basin. It extends from the Jews to the Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Rome. It is a story that reveals the reign of this Lord Jesus in two ways: among this people as they gather to call on His name in worship and outside that people as they tell His story about His glory. They tell the wonders and marvels of the God who called them out of darkness and into the kingdom of His dear Son. Look at Acts 2:42-47. We mentioned the other day that there are a lot of aspects to these two identifying marks that we see here. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” In this we get a window into different aspects of what it means to be a worshiping and witnessing community. We get insight into the fact they are really two sides of the same coin.

First, real worship is ignited by fearful astonishment at God’s revelation of Himself. It says that “everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.” The thing that really ignites our worship is the miracle that we were dead, and God has made us alive. That is seen in a lot of different ways. It is seen in the forgiveness of sins, but it also gets seen when someone who is addicted to alcohol becomes free. It is seen when someone who is unskilled and trapped in poverty gets
trained for a vocation, gets a job, and becomes self-sustaining. There is a notion of the wonder of transformation toward a new creation in all of its aspects of redemption. When we get together we get fired up about that. We get pumped up about that, because it is amazing and life-giving. That is what it is all about. We say, “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!” about that. There is a fearful astonishment at God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus. I love this quote from Annie Dillard. She said, “It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats or velvet hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preserves and signal flares, and they should lash us to our pews for the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense or the waking God may draw us out where we can never return.” I love that because it says it the way it should be. If worship is boring, something is wrong. We are not paying attention or doing our job very well. William Temple said, “Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God, the quickening of conscience by His holiness, the nourishment of the mind by His truth, the purifying of the imagination by His beauty, the opening of the heart to His love, the surrender of the will to His purpose.” The whole person is impacted. The whole community is impacted. Everything is affected, not just what we think but what we feel and do. It is the chief remedy for that self-centeredness that is the source of all sin. Yes, worship is the way to be liberated from sin.

The other side of real worship in terms of fearful astonishment of God’s revelation is if we are really astonished about it we will not only tell God about it, but we will tell everyone. We see this worship service in Revelation 4 and 5, and around the throne of the Lamb every tribe, language, tongue, and nation gathers to worship this God. John Piper has done a great job of connecting worship and mission. He talks about how worship produces mission for mission to end in worship. That is exactly right. All of this goes to Revelation 4 and 5. The story is headed there, and it is a worship service. On the way we have a lot of work and worshipping to do. Worship produces mission that ends in worship. Worship is fueled by the timber of God’s Word and the oxygen of God’s Spirit. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” The centrality of apostolic teaching to the life of the early Christian communities is consistent with the Word of the Lord as the center of genuine engagement with God. Every New Testament writer refers to the Word of the Law and the prophets. This is the Word of God. The Holy Spirit speaks through the Word and shapes its proclamation. It shapes our lives and will shape Christian identity. It is not the Word without the Spirit but the Word and the Spirit together.

The eschatological aspect of the Gospel is that the Spirit has come. This is the age of Spirit and the age of the prophetic Spirit that bears witness to others and shapes us in Christian community. We see some identity markers here about the new covenant community. The new covenant community is the covenant community gathered around Jesus to worship Him. There is no church anywhere in the New Testament that does not do that. When we talk about a New Testament theology, we mean the worship of Jesus. Everyone does that, and it is essential to this new covenant community. The way in which that worship of Jesus is explained, talked about, and proclaimed is from Israel’s Scriptures. It is on the basis of exegesis, empowered by the prophetic Spirit. That is also a central aspect of that worship.

The work of God’s Word and Spirit is to reveal the life of God to and through His people by enlightening, igniting, purifying, and energizing them to form Christ’s body in the world. This is important because it is not just to reveal the life of God to His people. It is as a worshipping and witnessing community to reveal God’s life through His people. We saw in Ephesians this extraordinary statement that “the manifold wisdom of God would be made clear to the heavenly principalities and powers through the church.” God’s Word and Spirit are other identifying marks of the new covenant community. It is the community that worships Jesus in repentance and faith. It is also the community that is shaped by the Word and the Spirit of God. It is the Pentecostal community, or the place where the Spirit dwells. It is the place where the Word is proclaimed.
**Authentic witnesses** cannot stop telling what they have seen and what they have heard. This worship of Jesus is because of this awe-inspiring revelation of Jesus in our lives through the Word and spirit. Once we have seen that happen we have to tell about it. That is what we tell. We tell about what we have seen and heard. When Paul is so heart-broken, astonished, and mad at the Galatians he says to them, “I am bewildered by you. Did you experience the power of God on the basis of taking on the marks of circumcision? No! You experienced it because Jesus was proclaimed as having been crucified, and the Spirit did wonders in your midst.” This new covenant community tells about what they have seen and heard that Jesus has done. We see this in Acts 4 with Peter and John. Their boldness for witness is insane. They are threatened and will be thrown in jail. Their stuff will be taken away from them. Peter will be threatened with death later, but you cannot shut them up! You cannot threaten them or intimidate them enough. Once you have seen what Jesus has done, you have got to say something about it. You cannot be quiet about it. You just cannot. All of the New Testament documents indicate that. As we have been going further in the New Testament and see the threat of persecution and the suffering of the community grow, no one backs down. Paul and Peter say that it is actually through the suffering that we start declaring the message, because it shows the cross of Jesus. It shows in our bodies the death and resurrection of Jesus. Worshiping and witnessing are two sides of the same coin. That is what Jesus has done for us and in us. It is astonishment at what He did in history, and because of these things we cannot be quiet about it. That means that if we are quiet about it something is wrong. That is abnormal, and it does not follow the New Testament pattern. Something is wrong. Real worship rises in the incense of praise and prayer. It says that “they devoted themselves to prayer, praising God, and enjoying the favor of all of the people.” We cannot shut up about it.

The two sides of the same coin are that in worship there is praise because of the revelation of Jesus, and in witness there is proclamation because of the revelation of Jesus. We just cannot be quiet about it. In worship it looks like prayer and praise. In witness that looks like proclamation and productive kingdom activity that reveals God’s wisdom and justice. Cultural mandate is connected to evangelism. Our praying demonstrates our understanding of the Gospel. Look at Colossians 4. How well we understand or do not understand and how well we live out a Gospel life is revealed poignantly by our prayers or lack thereof. Colossians 4:2 has the same sort of language of Acts 2, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

Prayerlessness reveals either despair or self-reliance. Our self-reliance denies the Gospel by denying we need anything from God. As we keep watch in prayer, we see how utterly tenuous, fragile, and dependent we are. We come to realize the desperate extent of our need for God’s mercy, and we plead for it in prayer. What we really ask for in prayer is for the Gospel to be enacted in our lives. The very posture of prayer, being on our knees with our hands open to God and reaching up to Him, is a picture of the Gospel. We say, “I do not have it. I cannot do it. I messed it up. I need you, Dad. You are the source of life, forgiveness, and blessing.” Grace is the word. It is a gift. The very posture of prayer reveals the Gospel. What Paul says to the Colossians is interesting because he says that there is no mission without prayer. Prayer is the energy of mission. It is what opens the doors of people’s hearts, governments, and institutions. It lets people in to tell this story. The new covenant community is a community marked as a praying, praising, and proclaiming community.

Real worship can only take place truthfully by confessing our sin as well as our faith before the God who loves us. We talked about this when we talked about James. Confession of faith is something that marks the community in worship, but confession of sin does this too. Confession of sin and faith is an essential aspect of telling the Gospel. Again we see that worship and witness are two sides of the same
coin. Authentic witnesses are bold in the way they speak to God and others. That is one thing we see in the New Testament documents. These communities are out there on the edge. They are doing it. They are taking risks for the Gospel, and they do not mess around. The way they think about their lives, money, time, and resources is by asking, “How can we stay out there on the edge? How can we stay engaged?” Authentic witnesses are bold in the way they speak to God and others. Notice the prayer of Acts 4, “Lord, consider their threats. Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.” How we need to pray for our brothers and sisters in China, the Sudan, Turkey, and elsewhere! We need to resource them with prayer, money, and in other ways. We need to show solidarity with them. All great Gospel movements have begun and continued in prayer. It is bold, specific, expectant, and risky prayer.

Finally, we see that real worship is a reenactment of the Gospel in the fellowship and the sacraments. Turn to 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body for we all partake of one loaf.” It is interesting that the word that is translated “participation” in English is exactly the same word as in Acts 2, “they devoted themselves to the fellowship.” The word is koinonia. Is not the cup of thanksgiving a koinonia, or a fellowship in the blood? Is not the bread a koinonia, or fellowship in the body? Real worship happens as we share the table of Christ together. In doing this we communicate that we need each other, and we need Jesus in the same way. That need is not just spiritual; otherwise we would not be using bread. That need is physical as well. We see fellowship explained in Acts 2 and 4 as “they sold their property and gave as someone had need so that there was no need among them.” On the worshiping community side of it, that fellowship is tangible, tasteable, and real. It is not just a theory that we belong together. The mark of the new covenant community in the New Testament is fellowship, and it has physical and economic manifestations. It also has sacramental and cultic manifestations. All these things talk about the same thing: There is one body and one loaf. There is one Savior, and we all belong to Him. Because we belong to Him we belong to each other. This fellowship is a new economy. It is an expression of the kingdom and reign of God over our stuff and our bodies as well as our minds and our belief systems. It is about the lordship of Jesus over everything.

The witness side of this is that this community actually cares about the poor, injustice, racism, and sex trafficking. It has got to intervene and cannot just stand by and watch. There is the expression of fellowship within the body, but there is also an expression of solidarity outside the body that again shows forth Christ’s reign in the world. Worship and witness are two sides of the same coin. The new covenant community is marked as those who worship Jesus, repent and believe in Jesus, are shaped by God’s Word, attest to Him, and are baptized, empowered, and gifted by God’s Spirit. They are those who pray, who cannot stop talking about this Jesus and the revelation of this Jesus in worship through praise and prayer. They cannot stop talking about this Jesus to their neighbors, city council men and women, and employers both in what they do and say. They also show forth the nature of this Jesus in His reign over them in their fellowship and diaconal service to their communities.

We see that in such diverse writers as Peter and Paul. Paul talks about this in terms of the gifts of the Spirit, and so does Peter. The grace that is given to us is to be shared with others. Those who are given the gifts to speak should speak as they speak the very words of God. Those who are given the gifts to serve should serve. In Acts 4 in the way the gifts are described we actually have identification with the two offices of the church. Why is it that we have elders and deacons? It is to keep us on track so that we should have speaking gifts and serving gifts. Those two sets are to be overseen by elders and deacons. “They devoted themselves to the fellowship and the breaking of bread. The love of God manifested in Jesus is what I wish to be the abiding object of my contemplation, not just to speculate it as a doctrine

© Spring 2008, Gregory Perry & Covenant Theological Seminary
but to so feel it in my own interest in it as to have my heart filled with its effects and transformed to its resemblance." I would just add that we also need to show it to other people. Paul says that what matters is not circumcision or uncircumcision. What really matters is faith working itself out in love. That is what matters.

**The two big distinguishing marks are worshiping Jesus and witnessing about Him.** Authentic witnesses embody the Gospel, personally and corporately, by showing and telling. That means that three things are bound together. The three cords that are bound together in witness are evangelism, cultural mandate, and church planting. It means that we have to do a better job of equipping God’s people to know what it looks like that God has sovereignly put them in their jobs. God has sovereignly put them in their families and extended families with all of its problems to bear witness to His goodness, wisdom, mercy, and love. There is something we do not do a very good job of, and I have seen myself do this. We think that because a church member does not show up at all the church functions he is not doing his job. They do not participate in the church programs, so we wonder about them. Maybe what we should do more of as pastors is to go to where they are. We could go to their job, encourage them at their jobs, have lunch with them, see them, and help them gain a vision by honoring them in what they are doing. They could gain a vision for how they reveal God’s image where they are. The cultural mandate is an essential part of evangelism. Church planting is also an essential part of evangelism. Church planting helps start new communities of worship and witness in places that do not have it.

The new covenant community, as Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, James, and Jude talk about it, is marked by Christ. It is marked by a new covenant community of worship and witness that reaches for and works for the new heavens and new earth.