

## The Church's Heavenly Worship

Throughout Scripture, we see special ceremonies in which God instituted or renewed a covenant. All of these covenant ceremonies follow the same basic pattern, which is reflected in our Lord's Day worship liturgy:

- **God Calls:** God is sovereign and gracious. He always takes the initiative to bless.
- **God Cleanses:** God always provides a way for sinners to be in fellowship with him.
- **God Consecrates:** God sets boundaries and gives instructions to maintain fellowship.
- **God Communes:** God always seals a covenant with a communion meal that unifies.
- **God Commissions:** God provides instruction and blessings for the future.

Even though Jesus' death and resurrection has fulfilled and transformed the contents of our worship, God has not changed the way that his people are to approach him. One of the unique aspects of Christian worship under the New Covenant is that we no longer send an animal up to heaven (in the form of smoke) as our representative. The animal always represented the worshiper, but now we present our bodies in worship as living sacrifices (Acts 2:3; Rom. 12:1-2). Having been united to Christ and his sacrificial offering, we now enter into the heavenly sanctuary in worship (Heb. 12:18ff.). Jesus has opened a new and living way for us into the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 10:19ff.) so that we can approach the very throne of God to hear God's word, to offer our prayers, to commune with our heavenly Father, and to receive his blessing and commission.

Having been summoned by our Lord to enter his holy presence, we assemble at the foot of the mountain. We confess our unworthiness to enter the presence of our holy God and seek a renewal of the cleansing that God promised us in baptism (Ps. 24; Rom. 6; 1 Jn. 1:9). Having been assured that we are clean, we are ready to enter into the presence of God. With faith in God's promise, we now begin our ascent by the Spirit into His heavenly presence.

The congregation is invited to raise their hands as we sing the Doxology after the assurance of forgiveness to signify our corporate ascent into the heavenly presence of God. The raising of our hands symbolizes the lifting up of our hearts and the offering of our bodies as living sacrifices to our heavenly Father in union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The lifting of hands in some form (like folding your hands in front of your chest) is commanded by Scripture for prayer and praise in God's presence (Neh. 8:6; Ps. 28:2; Ps. 63:4; Ps. 134:2; Ps. 141:2; 1 Tim. 2:8).

Following the ancient liturgies of the church, we use a quote from Lamentations 3:41 to symbolize the congregation's entrance into the throne room of heaven: "We lift up our heart and hands toward God in heaven." The Latin phrase for this is *sursum corda* ("lift up your hearts"). While some liturgical traditions place the *sursum corda* immediately before the Lord's Supper, Scripture indicates that the entire worship service takes place in God's heavenly sanctuary (see the book of Revelation, which illustrates this liturgical sequence).

God desires to be worshiped with songs of praise (Ps. 100), and so we sing as we enter God's presence. Whenever someone in the Bible has been given a glimpse into heaven, they always hear the angels around God's throne singing some version of the same song: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Is. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). This song is traditionally called the *sanctus*, which is simply the Latin word for "holy".

**NOTE:** The pastor also lifts his hands toward the people when pronouncing the assurance of pardon and the closing benediction (Lev. 9:22; Lk. 24:50). The congregation need not lift their hands for these parts of the service.