



A BRIEF THEOLOGY  
AND PHILOSOPHY OF

# Worship

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AT CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH

# There is nothing more important in life than worship.

We all worship something or someone. The only question is whether we will worship the right One in the right way.

In the broadest sense, all of life is an act of worship to God (Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 10:31). He alone is worthy to receive glory and honor and power (Rev. 4:11). We want to please God in all we do.

More specifically, we want our worship services to be pleasing to God. Our corporate worship on Sunday should inspire and instruct our all-of-life worship Monday through Saturday. To gather with God's people on the Lord's Day to worship at God's throne under the authority of God's word is our solemn duty and joyful privilege.

It's with that supreme goal in mind that we hold to a number of convictions and commitments when it comes to corporate worship. The list in this pamphlet is far from comprehensive or complete. Rather, it is meant to provide a brief summary of the most important principles undergirding our theology and philosophy of worship.



## 1. For the glory of God

Worship is ultimately for Him. He is the most important audience at every service. Corporate worship is meant to be an anticipation of the heavenly gathering of God's people. The grand scenes of heavenly worship in Revelation are both present and future. We too should direct all our attention to the throne. We too should sing of Christ's work. We too should be earnest and uncompromising in our devotion to God. Our weekly gatherings—whether small or large, beautiful or forgettable—are meant to be a sweet foretaste of the heavenly worship we will one day experience for ages unending.

## 2. Focused on the gospel of Christ

The gospel—Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—is what makes worship possible. The gospel is what we proclaim in worship. The gospel is what we sing in worship. The gospel is what calls a people together in worship, inspires a people to praise in worship, and sends a people out in a life of worship.

Every Sunday is another opportunity to sing about the cross, glory in our Redeemer, and marvel at the good news that is Christ for us and in us. Jesus Christ is at the center of all biblical thinking about worship. He is the mediator between God and man. His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross is the propitiation for our sins. He is the procurer of salvation and blessing for the nations. He is the new temple in which and around which all true believers gather. Christ draws us to himself in worship, and through him a new relationship with the Father is made possible.

While our corporate worship is not specifically focused on unbelievers (as if they were the audience we need to please most), our focus on Christ means that we certainly want the gospel presented credibly and intelligently to non-Christians. We are privileged to have visitors every Sunday, some of whom are not converted. One of our prayers each week is that unbelievers would hear Christ's call to faith and repentance, and that God would seek and save those who are lost.

## 3. Biblical

The whole service teaches God's people, so everything—the prayers, the songs, the preaching—must be biblical. In corporate worship we read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible in the sacraments. Every element in the service must be evaluated based on God's revelation in the Scriptures: are we singing, saying, and hearing what is true? Because of this conviction, we also affirm that “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself and so limited by his own revealed will” (WCF 21.1). This “regulative principle” should not be the source of endless conflict and idle speculation, but an opportunity for God's people to find unity and freedom in worshipping God as he wants to be worshiped.

## 4. Edifying to God's people

Corporate worship is set apart from all-of-life worship in its focus on edification. Because of this focus, there are many activities that are appropriate for the Christian in all of life that aren't appropriate in a worship service. There are many art forms that can be practiced and performed to the glory of God which would nevertheless not be suitable for corporate worship. Paul's principle in 1 Corinthians 14 is that corporate worship must strive for maximum shared intelligibility. This means, among other things, that the worship service will not only be Word-centered, but also heavy on words.

## 5. Ordinary means of grace

God can work in many ways, but he has committed to being with us and transforming us through certain "means of grace." He communes with us through prayer, through the word, and through the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism. Our services emphasize these ordinary means whereby God promises to give us more grace. We come to worship to give God glory, but even more so to meet with him and receive a blessing from his hand (Num. 6:24-26).

The central act in the worship service is the preaching of God's word. We believe this is best accomplished through the careful, Spirit-filled exposition of Scripture. Normally, this means working verse by verse through a book of the Bible. No matter the approach, every sermon should flow manifestly from Scripture and proclaim the gospel of God. Through all this, we hope that every worshiper will want to cry out, "Surely the Lord is in this place" (Gen. 28:16).

## 6. Congregational singing

Choosing the appropriate musical composition and lyrical content for corporate worship is a task which requires careful attention to musical principles and even closer attention to theological fidelity. We believe there are new songs to be sung to Jesus. We also believe there is a great heritage of church music that we should embrace. We have no problem projecting words on a screen. But we also believe in the abiding value of using and learning from a good hymnal. Our services use music from different genres and different centuries. We use a variety of instruments, everything from the guitar to the cello to the trumpet to the organ. In all this, the most important sound is that of the congregation singing.

## 7. Thoughtfully and flexibly liturgical

Almost every church has an order of service and a familiar pattern of doing things, which means almost every church has a liturgy. The best liturgies don't draw attention to themselves, but facilitate worship that is rich, rooted, and biblical. A traditional Reformed service has four parts: praise, renewal, proclamation, response (others may label and number the parts slightly differently, but the basic pattern holds). We see this overarching pattern in the covenant renewal ceremonies of Scripture and in various divine encounters. In Isaiah 6, for example, Isaiah comes before God and praises him; then he confesses sin

and seeks renewal; God then speaks his word to Isaiah; and finally, Isaiah responds with commitment to God.

This Isaiah “liturgy” reflects a gospel pattern: we approach God in awe, we see our sin, we hear the good news, and we respond in faith and obedience. Our services do not look the same every week, but neither are we trying to invent something new every Sunday. Within these four “acts” (praise, renewal, proclamation, response) can be found basic liturgical elements like a prayer of confession and assurance of pardon, a long pastoral prayer, Scripture readings, and flexible forms used for baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

## 8. Reformed

The Church has been thinking about how to worship for centuries. We want to learn from our spiritual ancestors and build on their models. To that end, we regularly employ the Ten Commandments, creeds, confessions, catechisms, responsive readings, doxologies, and other forms that have been common in church history. We want our services to be comprised of more than an opening worship set, a sermon, and a closing song. We want our worship to be winsomely Reformed, rooted in history and true to the Scriptures. An important part of this Reformed heritage is the commitment to setting apart the Lord’s Day with morning and evening worship.

## 9. Prayerful

Our services include many different prayers. Normally you will find a prayer of confession, because we sin every week and need gospel mercy every week. We usually have a longer pastoral (or intercessory) prayer, which is an important time to pray for the needs of our church family and for the world. Other prayers are common too: a prayer of adoration at the beginning of the service, a prayer of illumination before the sermon, and a brief prayer after the sermon. God’s people will never know that they must pray, or see that they can pray, or learn how to pray if prayer is not a significant part of what we do when we gather for worship.

## 10. Undistracting excellence

In corporate worship, the focus should be on the gospel and the all-surpassing glory of Jesus Christ. If the guitars are out of tune, and the sound system screeches, and the preacher fumbles over his sentences, and those leading up front make everyone else feel nervous, then our focus will be in the wrong place. Because doing things decently and in order is helpful to others and pleasing to God, we should seek to “do worship” with excellence (1 Corinthians 14:40).

But it must be undistracting excellence. If the guitarist goes off on some fantastic riff, and the sound system includes sub-woofers under every seat, and the preacher waxes overly eloquent, and those leading up front make everyone else feel they are enjoying a performance, then our focus will be equally in the wrong place. The goal is to lead in such a way that we are neither so clumsy nor so clever that the glory of God is forgotten.