
A Guide To Our Worship

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Please feel free to take a copy of this book.

The Huguenot Cross (depicted in the image on the cover of this book and in our stained glass), was the symbol of the French Protestants. The empty cross signifies the risen Lord; the circle behind the cross signifies the crown of thorns; the four hearts signify the four Gospels; the twelve purple circles signify the twelve apostles, the dove signifies the Holy Spirit descending from His heavenly throne, and the sunrays signify the resurrection.

This worship guide was developed to inform and assist worshippers at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Nacogdoches, TX

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Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church¹

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. —Romans 12:1-2

Introduction

Welcome to Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. We are honored to have you visit with us and hope that you will be blessed for having worshipped with us before the Throne of God. Our desire is that all Christians will unite in worshipping the triune God of Scripture in spirit and in truth, both in the midst of this congregation and throughout the world. Worship is the self-conscious, wholehearted activity of ascribing honor and praise to the living and true God for who He is and for what He has done. The weekly Lord's Day worship service is the occasion where God's people assemble publicly to serve Him corporately, as well as the place where God serves His people in a special way.

There is nothing more important in the life of the Church than worship; it is central to who we are as the people of God.

¹ Thanks go to Pastor Jeffrey J. Meyers for his permission to use material from his excellent book, *The Lord's Service: the Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship*.

It is here that we begin each new week, acknowledging that we are the people of God, that He is our God, and that we are dependant upon Him for life and salvation. In public worship we formally practice *together*, we prepare for the week to come by coming before God, praying, singing, hearing God's Word, confessing our sins, remembering His forgiveness, receiving His instruction, giving, confessing our faith, communing with God and with one another, renewing covenant with the Lord, and being sent forth into the world to do all these things over and over again in our daily lives. Worship is not a place for mere spectators but rather a place for the people of God to *participate* in serving Him by proclaiming His worth.

Some of what you see and hear in our worship might be new to you, but most of it is rooted in the rich history of the Christian Church and, when understood, offers depth and meaning. Since worship is so central to our Christian calling, understanding what we are doing and why we are doing it is essential if we are to grow in this aspect of our spiritual life. God made us for worship; we depend on it, and God is pleased when it is offered up with sincere hearts. It is important for us to realize that God Himself has given us instructions as to how He desires to be worshipped; we are not left to worship Him in our own way. As members of the Body of Christ, we live and function in the community of God's people and are called by Him to offer, not only ourselves privately and individually, but also publicly and corporately. We are "members of one another," sharing a common life and uniting in a common worship.

We are thankful for the countless numbers of Christian churches throughout history, throughout the world, and in our own community who, week-after-week, offer up faith-

ful worship to God, and we are blessed to count ourselves as part of this great host of worshippers. While differences exist between churches, and we all have much to learn from one another, we continue to strive, by the grace of God, to mature in our call to worship Him.

We Believe:

1. That Lord's Day worship is our highest privilege, our greatest duty, and our deepest joy.² God has created us for just this purpose: to worship Him, and to be transformed by Him as we worship.³

2. That in worship the people of God are engaged by the Spirit and drawn into the Father's presence as living sacrifices in union with the Risen Christ.⁴ In Lord's Day worship, God renews His covenant relationship with His people by serving them and them serving Him.⁵ He draws near to us to draw us near to Him.⁶

3. That in Lord's Day worship, we are gathered together in the presence of the living God among a glorious assembly consisting of angels, the church militant on earth, and the church triumphant in heaven.⁷

4. That each week in worship, through the Lord's service to us and our service to Him, our Triune Creator and Redeemer gives us the covenant gifts of glory, knowledge, and life, in and through the assurance of our forgiveness,

2 Ex. 20:8-11, Heb. 4:9; Heb. 10:25, Deut. 26:10, Ps. 29:2, Ps. 27:4, Ps. 65:4, Ps. 73:25; Heb. 4:16

3 Isa. 43:21; 1 Cor. 6:20, Rev. 4:11, Rom. 12:1-2; Jn. 4:23

4 Lam. 3:41; Ps. 25:1; 28:2; Eph. 2:12-22, Rom. 12:1-2; Heb. 12:18-25; Heb. 8:5; Rev. 4:1

5 Is. 66:20-22, Lk. 22:19; Lev. 1-5

6 Deut. 4:7; Rev. 3:20, Ex. 24:12; 2 Cor. 6:16b-18; Heb. 10:19 with Heb. 9:11,12

7 Rev. 9-12, Heb. 12:22-24, Eph. 2:6

the preaching of the Word, and the partaking of the Lord's Supper.⁸ While bestowing these gifts upon us in worship, at the same time, He graciously accepts our praise and thanksgiving of Him.⁹ In re-orienting us around His covenant,¹⁰ He empowers and calls us to live in terms of His new creation.¹¹

5. That God uses our worship to change us and the world.¹² We are transformed by the grace of God's presence,¹³ and leave worship with a renewed sense of, and commitment to, mission,¹⁴ discipleship,¹⁵ and community.¹⁶ Biblical worship results in changed lives, Spirit-empowerment, and impacts the world for Christ. Furthermore, God is pleased to hear and answer our prayers, particularly those that ascend in the Lord's Day worship of the Church.¹⁷ He hears our prayers for the nations and in answering us makes manifest His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.¹⁸

6. That worship should be informed and governed by the Bible in its entirety.¹⁹ In constructing our liturgies, we are to pay particular attention to those portions of God's Word that are specifically given to inform us of what God desires in worship. These portions include, but are not limited to, descriptions of patriarchal worship, Levitical

8 Rom. 3:23; 8:30; Jn. 17:22; Rom. 1:21-23; Jn. 17:17; Jn. 17:2,3; Ro. 2:7-10; 1Jn. 2:20, 27; Ps. 115, Rev. 21:11, Jn. 6:53-58, 1Pet. 1:23

9 Ps. 51:17, Ezek. 20:40-41

10 Ps. 50:5; Mt. 26:28; Heb 8:6; 12:24

11 Mt. 28:16-20; Jn. 20:19-23

12 Ps. 22:25-27, Gen. 22:9-18

13 Rom. 12:1,2; 2 Cor. 3:18

14 Mt. 28:19a

15 Mt. 28:19b, 20a

16 Is. 55:12, Rom. 15:13-14; Mt. 28:20b

17 1Kg. 8:26-53, Mt. 18:19-20; Rev. 8:3-6

18 Mt. 9:38, Mt. 6:9-10

19 2 Tim 3:16-17; Isa. 8:20; Ex. 20:4-6; Heb. 8:5

worship,²⁰ and Tabernacle of David worship,²¹ which all point toward the glorious advent of Jesus Christ, whose self-offering and victorious resurrection accomplished our salvation.²² This final work of our Savior provides the basis for the resultant transformation of worship spoken of by the Apostles in the New Covenant.²³ We are, of course, prohibited from returning to the practices of animal sacrifices, for this would deny our faith in the perfect and complete sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7. That these portions of the Bible give us a divine pattern and sequence of worship,²⁴ and provide us a detailed understanding of the benefits of Christ, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.²⁵ These benefits include purification from our sins,²⁶ transformation of our persons,²⁷ acceptance of our work and tribute,²⁸ and peace with God and men.²⁹ Through Biblical worship, the Lord assures us of the forgiveness of our sins,³⁰ the Holy Spirit's ongoing work of renewal in our lives,³¹ the requirement and acceptability of vocation,³² and the promise of the increase and maturation of Christian community.³³

20 Lev. 1-7

21 1 Chr. 16:1 ff; 1 Chr. 25; 2 Sam. 6; 2 Chr. 15:14,15; 23:18; 29:25-30; 35:15; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:45,46; Acts 15:16,17

22 Jn. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; Rev. 1:5; Heb. 9:11-14

23 Acts 15:16,17; Heb. 7:12, Heb. 8:5; 10:19-22; 9:23, 24

24 Lev. 9:22

25 Jn. 1:29

26 Lev. 4,5; Heb. 9:26; 10:12

27 Lev 1; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 4:16; Gal. 6:15

28 Lev. 2; Eccl. 9:7

29 Lev. 3; Rom. 5:1

30 Lev. 4,5; Col. 1:14

31 Lev. 1; Rom. 12:1,2

32 Lev. 2; 2 Thess. 3:10-12; Rom. 15:27; 1 Cor. 9:13,14

33 Lev. 3; 1 Cor. 10:17; Eph. 4:11-13; Jn. 17:20

8. That these portions of the Bible also teach us that each of these glorious aspects of worship are to be set in the context of beautiful music that is maturing in both voice and instrument, to the praise of Christ the King.³⁴

9. That the proper implementation in love of the above requires a practical understanding of all that Scripture teaches, including an understanding of lesser and greater matters, Christian forbearance with our brothers, liberty in worship which is not self-willed, an avoidance of an over-scrupulous zeal, and a desire to maintain a Biblical catholicity as we build on the work of the historic church.³⁵

The Church Building

Worship takes place everywhere: in heaven and on earth; in the human heart; in grand cathedrals; in small chapels; in modern, classic and country churches; in rented rooms, in our homes; around our tables; and in countless other places. One of the key places that God calls for worship is in our local churches on the first day of each week. A church building provides a geographic location for the local church to congregate for instruction, fellowship, and communion with God and with other Christians. While we are often limited in our physical facilities (due to limited resources), nevertheless, we are grateful for physical facilities that God does provide, as it offers a presence in the community, along with permanence, beauty and functionality.

The building is not an end in itself, but is a means to an end, which is the offering of worship to the God made manifest in Jesus Christ. Therefore, everything about it must be shaped by its function as the place where Christians worship.

³⁴ 1 Chr. 15:16, 25:6,7; Ps. 98:4-6; 144:9; 150; Rev. 5:8; 14:2,3; 15:2,3

³⁵ Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:2

Since worship is primary, church architecture is meant to serve that worship, not to be a monument to itself. Church architecture, therefore, reflects both the way Christians worship and the way the building shapes worship—or, not uncommonly, misshapes it.

Every church building functions in the process of evangelization, either by making people feel welcomed or by repelling them. It is never neutral territory. The essence of hospitality is to bring people together so that they want to meet, know each other, and act together with a common purpose. Many factors enter into this, e.g., floor plan, location of the furniture, lighting, acoustics, instruments, color, and more. Each of these has meaning and conveys meaning in worship.

The Liturgy

The word “liturgy” comes from the Greek word for “public service.” In the context of the Christian Church it has reference to a prescribed form for public religious worship. Not every church uses the word “liturgy,” but every church has its own liturgy: i.e., it *orders* its worship service according to some rationale. It would be difficult not to have some kind of liturgy. Some order of worship will be displayed during the Sunday worship service. In this church we have sought to develop a liturgy that is reflective of both biblical theology and historical precedent. Moreover, the form of our service points to our high view of God, the Church, and the act of worship.

The Order of Worship

In worship, God draws near to His people and we draw near to Him. In the Old Testament, God set forth a specific pattern for this process in the sacrifices and offerings He

required. The three main types of sacrifices were: a Purification Offering (cleansing), an Ascension Offering (consecration), and a Peace Offering (communion). These three types of sacrifices are always offered in the same order in the Old Testament, and thus our order of worship follows this three-fold pattern.

Prelude

As the church musicians begin to play, this indicates that it is time for the congregation to be seated and to prepare for worship. This is a good time to look over the order of worship and become familiar with the particular plans and readings for the day's service. This is also a good time to pray and prepare your heart for worship.

PART ONE: Purification: Our Entrance into the Presence of God

The Processional

The processional marks the formal beginning of the worship service. The church musicians play a hymn and the minister and elders enter into the sanctuary. The processional is symbolic of the people of God gathering at the foot of Mt. Zion as they prepare to ascend the mountain to worship the King.

Call to Worship

God Himself calls us to worship. He *summons* us to assemble. We do not just decide to gather and then ask Him to be present. This is the *Lord's Day*. While it is true that God is present everywhere, nevertheless, He is present in a special sense when His covenant people gather for public worship. The church is the place where He comes together with His covenant people around the Word and the sacraments.

The external voice of the call to worship will normally be that of the minister or elder, and the congregation, rising up, responds to the call that comes from outside of us as it represents the very voice of God. The call will come from some portion of the Word of God that contains a clear call to worship, authoritatively summoning the congregation into God's presence—e.g., “*O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker*” (Psalm 95:6). The congregation responds to the call of God, again from the Word of God—“*For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand*” (Psalm 95:7).

The Salutation

The minister or elder announces the words: “In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” (thus recalling the words of our baptism), and the congregation affirms their presence with a hearty “Amen!” Then a salutation is exchanged: “The Lord be with you!”; “And also with you!” This is followed by the first words of thanksgiving: “Thanks be to God!” to which the congregation responds: “Who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”³⁶ The Bible clearly admonishes the faithful: “*Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father through Him.*”³⁷ We solemnly and publicly call God and the world to witness that we are “gathered together” in His Name³⁸ and in that Name alone we offer our prayers, praise and thanksgiving.³⁹

The Collect

This is the opening prayer that “collects-up” [Latin: *collecta*] the petitions of the congregation into one common prayer. As the minister or elder prays, he is leading the congregation in prayer, i.e., the congregation of the Lord is entering into this public prayer. The collect has a particular literary form that usually includes these five parts:

- An address to God (Almighty God);
- An acknowledgement of some aspect of God’s nature or character (“unto Whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from Whom no secrets are hidden”);

36 Ruth 2:4; Judg. 6:12; Lk. 1:28; Jn. 20:19; 2 Thess. 3:16; 2 Tim. 4:22.

37 Col. 3:17; Eph. 2:18; 1 Cor. 12:3

38 Matt. 18:20

39 John 16:23

- The petition itself (“cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit”—several other petitions are added as well);
- The aspiration (“that we may perfectly love You, and worthily magnify Your holy Name”);
- The memorial pleading (“through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray...”).

The Lord’s Prayer

At the conclusion of the collect we are led to a corporate recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, indicating our loyalty and obedience to Christ and His instruction as well as the covenant and corporate nature of our worship. The Lord’s Prayer is also known as “the model prayer,” whereby we are instructed by our Lord in the proper categories for prayer.

The Opening Psalm or Hymn

The entire service moves forward as God speaks and the congregation responds. It is something of a conversation between God and His people. The Lord has called us to worship Him, we have responded in prayer and now we respond in the praise of song.

I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You. —Psalm 22:22

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. ² Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. ³ For the LORD is the great God, and the great King above all gods. ⁴ In His hand are the deep places of the earth; the heights of the hills are His also. ⁵ The sea is His, for He made it; and

His hands formed the dry land. ⁶ Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

—Psalm 95:1-6

Responsive Reading of the Law

As we come into the presence of the Almighty, Holy God, we are made painfully aware of our own sinfulness and guilt. Consider Isaiah's experience: "*Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts*" (Isa. 6:5). The Law is a transcript of the character of God, and the public reading of that Law sets before us a clear standard by which we must judge ourselves as we come into His presence. As we are brought face to face with the Lord of Glory and His righteous Law, we are made conscious of our own unworthiness and our need of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Confession of Sin

Our response to the reading of the Law and coming into the presence of our Holy God is to kneel before Him and confess our sins. Our prayer posture reflects the type of prayer being offered. Bowing or kneeling is an indication of humility before God. Before we presume to worship God, we must remember the clear teaching of the Word of God: "*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear*" (Psalm 66:18). Until we have sincerely confessed our sins before God, our worship will not be acceptable in His sight. Confession of sin in public worship is a corporate prayer—like all the prayers—whether spoken corporately or led by someone else as a representative of the congregation. Moreover, our confession of sin, while including our personal sins, goes beyond that and includes the sins of the Church and even the sins of the world; we intercede on their behalf.

The Absolution and the Assurance of Pardon

After the confession of sin we hear the minister proclaim the Lord's forgiveness to all who have honestly confessed their sins and trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ for their redemption. Again, the Word of God is proclaimed. This is God's Word of assurance to us, and we need it every week. This is one of the central blessings for God's people on the Lord's Day: the opportunity for weekly cleansing and covenant renewal—the assurance of God's grace authoritatively proclaimed by the minister to believers who repent of their sins.

While the minister has no personal power to remit sins, nevertheless, he does have the office that entitles him to proclaim *authoritatively* God's forgiveness to all who truly repent. Tender consciences often need such a weighty pronouncement. Just as the Apostle John can *write* to assure the saints, so the minister may also *proclaim* the forgiveness of sins in Christ to His people: “*I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake*” (1 John 2:12). After reading the Scriptures, the minister proclaims: “I declare to you the entire forgiveness of your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The congregation responds with: “Thanks be to God!”

The Psalm or Hymn of Consecration and Thanksgiving

The congregation now responds to God's gracious forgiveness with a promise of renewed commitment and thanksgiving. The burden of sin has been lifted and we are filled with the joy of the Lord. We are anxious to express our gratitude to God for His goodness and mercy and to declare our intention to serve Him with gladness. “*Rejoice in the LORD,*

O you righteous! For praise from the upright is beautiful. Praise the LORD with the harp; make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully with a shout of joy. For the word of the LORD is right, and all His work is done in truth” (Psalm 33:1-4).

The Giving of Tithes and Offerings

Giving is a part of the corporate worship service. It is not merely an opportunity for *individual* Christians to give their tithes and offerings but is also a corporate act of the Body of Christ. We offer ourselves and the work of our hands (in unison with the whole congregation) to the Lord in gratitude for His mercy and grace in Christ. We are paying our tribute to our Superior. A prayer is offered up to God on behalf of the congregation by one of the deacons as the offering is presented to God. In addition, a petition for God’s blessing upon the offering is also made, calling upon Him to make good use of these gifts for the glory of His Name and the good of His people.

PART TWO: Consecration and Assent

The Scripture Readings

The Bible comes to us in an audible way in the community of God's people. The public reading and hearing of God's Word is thus central to Christian worship. Among other things, it helps prevent biblical ignorance in the next generation. The whole Word of God is brought to bear upon us and we are called to submit ourselves by faith to the authority of God's Word; God speaks and we listen. Most of the Bible was written to be read aloud in the congregation; and thus, hearing the Word is an important part of how we come to assimilate it into our lives. At the conclusion of each reading, the minister declares: "The Word of the Lord!" The congregation responds with: "Thanks be to God!"

The Psalm or Hymn of Preparation

A Psalm or hymn is now sung by the congregation in preparation for receiving the sermon. The content of the song should reflect the general theme of the sermon that is to be delivered to the congregation. This should help focus our attention on what we are about to hear and prepare us for the message.

The Prayer for Illumination

This prayer should be centered on anticipation and preparation for receiving the sermon. It should call the congregation to focus our attention on the fact that we are about to hear the Word of God through the servant of Christ and that we

must have hearts and minds eager to receive that Word, along with feet that are ready to obey. The minister should call upon God to send His Holy Spirit to enlighten the minds of His people, and to convict, instruct and comfort them.

The Sermon and Text

We should remember that the entire worship service is *sermonic*, not just the sermon. We read, sing, pray, and recite the Word of God from the opening of the service to the very end. The sermon itself is very important, but *it is not the all-important event*. It is one important part of the many other important parts of worship.

A sermon ought to be the time when Christ speaks in a personal way to His bride through the ordained minister:

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

—Ephesians 4:11-13

We sit down and listen to our Husband speak to us through His appointed representative: “*That He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word*” (Eph. 5:26).

The minister has studied and prepared his sermon so as to instruct God’s people.⁴⁰ This means that the sermon is not primarily evangelistic, at least not in the narrow sense. Anytime the Word of God is being preach, the gospel (i.e. the

⁴⁰ 2 Tim. 2:15

“good news”) is being declared; “...teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). The sermon is the time when the minister ought to explain the Word of God and bring it to bear upon the life of the congregation. It is the time for the people of God to be instructed from the Bible and to be exhorted by it. The goal of the sermon is to point to Christ—Who He is and what He has done.

The Prayer of Consecration

The minister will lead the congregation in a prayer, asking God to enable His people to believe and obey His word.

The *Gloria Patri*

This is a response to having heard from God—God speaks and we respond. Here we ascribe all glory to the Triune God.⁴¹ The singing of the *Gloria Patri* serves as a transition to the Lord’s Supper.

The Confession of Faith

The word “Creed” comes from the Latin verb *credo*—the first word in the Latin creeds—and means, “I believe.” In the recitation of one of the historic creeds (or confessions of faith), we proclaim that we are Christians, that this is Christian worship, and that we stand in the historic river of ancient Christianity and the “holy catholic Church.”⁴²

The word “god” means all kinds of things to people these days. The historic creeds proclaim that this is the God we

41 This hymn arises from biblical texts like Romans 16:27; Ephesians 3:21; Philipians 4:20; and Revelation 1:6. From time-to-time other hymns may be substituted for the *Gloria Patri*.

42 The term “holy catholic Church” is not a reference to the “Roman Catholic Church,” but is rather using the word “catholic” to mean “universal.”

worship and serve—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We will be clear, courageous, and precise in our confession of faith. The first commandment demands as much. This is more than an academic or doctrinal statement; it is a declaration of personal faith or trust. The Greek translation of the word *credo* is the word *pisteuo*, which is precisely the word for “faith” in the New Testament.⁴³ The *Apostles’ Creed*, the *Nicene Creed*, and the *Definition of Chalcedon* provide us with the opportunity to recite our trust in the Persons of the Trinity and their work on our behalf.⁴⁴

⁴³ John 3:16, 36; Rom. 10:10

⁴⁴ “Catholic Church,” as used in the creeds, refers to the universal Church.

PART THREE:

Communion and Benediction

The *Sursum Corda*

The *Sursum Corda* [Latin for “Lift up your hearts”], is part of the dialogue of the liturgies of the Christian Church, dating back to the third century. God’s purified people are now invited to come even nearer. Having confessed our sins and received absolution, and having received the Word of the Lord and confessed our faith, we are now prepared for our fellowship meal with God. The minister declares and the congregation replies:

The Lord be with you.

And also with you!

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord!

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give Him thanks and praise.

The Eucharist or Communion

The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper (the sacred or set-apart Supper) is observed every Lord’s Day during our worship service. By partaking in this meal, we proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes, and renew our covenant oath of loyalty to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵ We invite all baptized disciples of Jesus Christ, who are active members of Christ’s

⁴⁵ You will sometimes hear us refer to our worship service as a “covenant renewal service” since we are renewing our commitment to serve Him in the coming new week.

Church *in good standing*,⁴⁶ to partake in this sacrament with us. If you have any doubt about your participation, please speak to one of the elders before or after the service.

The word “eucharist” comes from the Greek word which means “to give thanks.” We have been cleansed and consecrated, but before God sends us out to serve Him in the world, He first sits us down for a meal. He must strengthen and nourish us for the task ahead with bread and wine. Therefore, we are invited to sit down and eat this covenant meal with Jesus and receive from Him, by faith, His own life-giving flesh and blood. This meal is the symbol and picture of God’s intimacy with His people. It is the place of covenant renewal whereby we are refreshed and stirred up in our affections for Christ.

All the senses are engaged: sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. The Gospel is communicated to us in this simple but powerful and public declaration of the saving grace of God! In this meal we are routinely reminded of our Lord’s death, with all of its implications, along with the fact that He is coming again: “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes*” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The Doxology

The Last Supper was followed by the singing of a hymn,⁴⁷ and so we too offer up a song of praise to God for all His blessings that are communicated to us in Christ. Worship is a celebration of life and a tribute to the Giver of life. The bride worships her Husband for the kindness He has shown to her. We corporately lift our hands to the Lord, not as individuals,

⁴⁶ The term “*good standing*” means that a person is currently active in the church that holds their membership and that they are not under any disciplinary process or judgment.

⁴⁷ Matt. 26:30; 14:26.

and not a sign of authority, but rather as an indication of our submission to and dependence upon the Lord—as a child would reach toward his father—offering praise and receiving His blessing.

The Prayer of Commission

A final prayer of thanksgiving is offered on behalf of the congregation as we prepare to end the worship service. It is an acknowledgement that we have been privileged to be in the presence of God and to hear from Him. Moreover, it is a pledge to walk with Him as His people in the week to come.

The *Nunc Dimittis*

The Nunc Dimittis [Latin for: “now you are dismissing”] are the opening words of Simeon’s song of praise on the occasion of the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple.⁴⁸ After seeing Jesus, Simeon joyfully proclaims that he has seen God’s salvation. The congregation now joins in that joyful proclamation.

The Benediction

The whole worship service has been a “dress rehearsal” for life. Now the public service ends and it is time to start living as God commissions us to go back to our families, communities and jobs as His peculiar people. We have gathered around His Great Table, and now we will gather daily around the little tables in our homes and community to carry out continual worship.

The benediction (i.e., the “good word”), is a blessing from God to the congregation. It is not a prayer, so eyes should

⁴⁸ Luke 2:29-32. Various hymns may be used for this departing song.

not be closed but looking forward with attention as God speaks to His people. The minister lifts his hands, (palms toward the congregation, indicating a blessing being given), and pronounces the blessing of God upon His people as they leave the assembly and return to the world as lights shining in the darkness.

The pastoral benediction is seen in several places in the Bible. First, from the Lord's direction to Aaron and his sons: "*This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: 'The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.'* So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them" (Num. 6:22-27). Second, benedictions were given by the Lord Himself: "*And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them*" (Luke 24:50). Third, the writers of the New Testament frequently closed their letters with such benedictions (cf. 1 Tim, 1:17; Eph. 6:23-24; Rom. 15:13; Heb. 13:20-21; Jude 24-25).

The Recessional

The recessional marks the formal ending of the worship service. The minister and elders will proceed from the sanctuary.

Other Information about Worship

The Church Calendar

We keep track of time and seasons of the year by using calendars that provide us opportunities to observe, commemorate, and celebrate certain events or occasions. The changing seasons of the year also provide us with recurring opportunities to celebrate the Christian Faith in worship. The Christian church, following earlier Jewish tradition, has long used the seasons of the year as an opportunity for festivals and holidays, sacred times set aside to worship God as the Lord of life.

While Jewish celebration revolves around the Exodus from Egypt, the Christian Church year focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus. The sequence of festivals from Advent to Easter Sunday becomes an annual spiritual journey for worshippers as they kneel at the manger, listen on a hillside, walk the streets of Jerusalem, hear the roar of the mob, stand beneath the cross, and witness the resurrection! The rest of the church year provides opportunities to reflect on the meaning of the coming of Jesus and His commission to His people to be a light to the world.

The Christian calendar is organized around two major centers of Sacred Time: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany; and Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, concluding at Pentecost. The rest of the year following Pentecost is known as Ordinary Time, from the word “ordinal,” which simply means counted time (First Sunday after Pentecost, etc.). Ordinary Time is used to focus on the various other aspects of the Faith

Church Colors

Since fabrics have to be of one color or another, the historic Church has taken advantage of this fact and has used color to set the theme of worship. A consensus has developed about the use of particular colors in the western Church: green, purple, white, and red.

Green

Green is the default color. Green is the color of vegetation, therefore it is the color of life. Green is the color for the Season of Epiphany and the Season after Pentecost. These two seasons are also called “Ordinary Time” because the Sundays have no names, just ordinal numbers.

Purple

In antiquity, purple dye was very expensive, so purple came to signify wealth, power, and royalty. Therefore purple is the color for the seasons of Advent and Lent, which celebrate the coming of the King.

White

Angels announced Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:8-15) and His Resurrection (Luke 24:1-8). The New Testament consistently uses white to describe angels and the risen Lord (see Matthew 17:2 and 28:3, Mark 9:3 and 16:5, John 20:12, Acts 1:10, and throughout Revelation.) In the ancient Church, people were given white robes as soon as they emerged from the waters of baptism. Therefore, white is the color for the seasons of Easter and Christmas. White is the color for funerals—since it is the color of the Resurrection, and for weddings—representing purity, regardless of the season.

Red

Red is the color for Pentecost Sunday and for ordinations and installations of church officers because it is the color of fire and therefore also of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:3).

Clerical Clothing

While ministerial robes are not required, nevertheless, there is good reason and biblical precedent for making use of them. Symbols are important means of communication, and there are few things more symbolic than the clothes we wear. Casual or formal dress, tuxedos, uniforms, expensive or cheap—all speak volumes concerning the person, the position or the occasion. Such statements are unavoidable. A minister in an expensive suit, or with a Mickey Mouse tie, or blue jeans and a T-shirt, or a ministerial robe, all say something about what we think of the office of the minister.

It is from the symbolic significance of the robe that we speak of a minister being “defrocked”—to be removed from office is equivalent to having his robe taken away, and thus he is identified as one who no longer holds authority in Christ’s Church. The robe, among other things, therefore helps emphasize the *office* of the ministers and elders and helps *de-emphasize* the *personality* of the men themselves. Special clothing reminds us that the men who conduct the service are not just our good friends, but when they lead the congregation before the throne of God in worship and speak forth His Word to us; they are the *angels*⁴⁹ (or messengers) of the Church, the spokesmen or *ambassadors* of Christ Himself. French Calvinist theologian Richard Paquier notes on this point:

⁴⁹ The ministers in the churches addressed in the book of Revelation are referred to as “angels,” lit. “messengers” (e.g., Rev. 3:1).

Whoever leads in the act of worship does not perform as a private party but as a minister of the church; he is the representative of the community and the spokesman of the Lord. Hence, an especially prescribed vestment, a sort of ecclesiastical “uniform,” is useful for reminding both the faithful and himself that in this act he is not Mr. So-and-so, but a minister of the church in the midst of a multitude of others.

Thus robes remind us that we are submitting to the office not the man, during worship. The purpose of the robe is to cover the man and accent his God-ordained office.

In the early Church, after people were baptized, they were immediately clothed in a white tunic (Latin: a *tunica alba*, or *alb*). For this reason, the alb is a reminder of baptism and a symbol of the resurrection on the Last Day. Anyone who has a leadership role in worship can wear an alb and cincture, whether they are clergy or lay people. Only clergy wear a stole over the alb. Additionally, since Jesus wore a tunic, a person wearing an alb is dressed like Jesus.

Clergy shirts (with tabs or collars) are of Protestant origin. The Rev. Dr. Donald McLeod, a Presbyterian minister, invented the neck-band shirt style. Protestant clergy had been wearing white preaching bands around their necks for quite some time, and McLeod combined them with the detachable collar that was in use at the time. The collar is symbolic of being a bondservant of Christ.

What is the Amen?

The “amen” is a declaration of the truth. It comes from the Hebrew word (*aman*) which means “reliable, firm or

trustworthy.” It forms the root for the Hebrew word “faith.” The Greek word is *amen* (amen). The English word is simply the Greek word (which is the Hebrew word transliterated). It shows faith and confidence in what is being said—it confirms a statement with emphasis.

Dress for Worship

If jeans and a T-shirt is the best we have, then God is pleased to receive us. However, our goal is to elevate worship and to offer God our best, while showing respect to the occasion of worship. Worship attire reflects our understanding of what we are about to do as well as our inward attitude. Appropriate dress for worship should be modest and clean. While each person or family is understandably limited as to what they can offer, nevertheless, we should all seek to offer our best and what is appropriate as we come before the Lord.

Thoughts on Worship Music

With the aim of shaping Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church worship more toward God’s preferences than our personal preferences, the elders continue to think through various questions about music. Like everything else in Christian living, worship music comes to us in the midst of deep cultural struggles between light and darkness. No aspect of our lives, including our judgments about music, stands alone, untouched by theology. Some theology will always shape our personal judgments about music.

When we find ourselves disliking (or liking) a piece of music, we should try to find the assumptions that guide that particular judgment. Then we should ask ourselves if that as-

sumption is biblical. We've absorbed many of our assumptions about beauty from the modern world, a world often hostile to Christianity. Assumptions about simplicity, speed, and time are central to music, and yet these topics are a major source of disagreement between Christians and non-Christians.

Modern Assumptions

One of the key modern assumptions that keeps many Christians from appreciating some great music is the simple idea that “old is bad” and “new is good” (C. S. Lewis calls this “chronological snobbery”). In an evolutionary world this would be true, but in a biblical world it often gets reversed. Sometimes we're told to “*ask for the old paths, where the good way is*” (Jer. 6:16), and sometimes we're told to avoid the old ways (Heb. 3:9, 10). It takes wisdom to discern when to do what, but the modern world is largely dedicated to whatever is the “latest.”

Similarly, modern attitudes often make light of every subject but death. So they can't imagine using solemn sounds for anything but a funeral. They never think of associating joy and solemnity. So much gloriously solemn music is automatically classified as a dirge or funeral music. But Scripture says that other things, like joy and delight in the presence of God, often demand solemnity too. Psalm 92:3 shows God's lovingkindness can be expressed “*upon the harp with a solemn sound*” (cf. Eccl. 7:3, 4). A more biblical sensibility discerns between the types of solemnities. Some solemnity is joyful, some full of awe, and some is mournful.

Of course, personal prejudices can run the other direction too—liking only old music. That's not our conviction at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. We all long for the day

(and hope for it from our own congregation) when we can compose greater music than past eras. Some of that happens in our own day, and for this we are grateful.

Discerning the Beauty

Some of us may have thought through the worldview issues, but we still can't see the beauty in some older pieces. Of course, every era has plenty of inferior work. But, once again, it's possible that modernity has prejudiced us to count only surface-level beauty as real beauty. In other words, we discount things that aren't immediately beautiful to our personal tastes. We tend to want everything to be immediate and automatic, and we cast off whatever doesn't instantly please us. That is one reason why non-Christians treat Scripture lightly; they refuse to look deeply. They can't see the beauty in the story, though it jumps out at those who love God.

We also tend to think that if we're merely regenerate, then we can easily discern between what is beautiful and ugly. But wisdom always takes time and discipline and pruning. Scripture orders us to "*incline your ear to wisdom*" (including musical wisdom) and "*apply your heart to understanding; . . . If you seek her as silver, and search for her as hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord*" (Prov. 2:2-5). Mining takes great labor and exercise. Discerning beauty is like that. It often takes great effort to train ourselves to see profundity.

Rising to the Challenge

Sometimes, though, even if we grasp the complex beauties at work in a piece of music, we get frustrated because of its level of difficulty. Yet here, too, we need patience and discipline. Reading English was once hard, but we overcame

that. Singing shouldn't come easily. Learning to sing glorious music will take years of education. We rob ourselves of wisdom if we judge a hymn or psalm after one singing. We don't even truly know it after only a month of singing. It can require a long period of meditation and work. The worship service itself is an important place for learning new music. After confession and assurance, the focus of worship turns to rebuilding and sanctifying worshipers. Both sermon and song train us up at this time.

Whenever we are weaker in some good thing, we should aim to rise to the challenge to become more proficient. Depending upon where one is, it may mean studying more music, joining a choir, reading more musical history, taking instrument lessons. We have many grand hopes for such things within Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. But whatever it takes, we should all aim to apply ourselves to grow in our worship—"Sing out the honor of His name; Make His praise glorious" (Ps. 66:2).

Little Children and the Worship of God

As God's people, we should rejoice over hearing infant noises in our midst. This is an indication of His covenant blessings and of His gift of life. God thereby adds to our number and advances His kingdom through the generations.

There is nothing more important for a child to learn than the worship of God, both privately and corporately. This is one of the chief obligations of all God's creatures. As we teach our children to walk and talk, at the same time we should diligently teach them the Scriptures and how they should worship God when they "*sit in their house,*" when they "*walk in the way,*" when they "*lie down,*" or when they "*rise up,*" (Deut 6:6-7).

Training Children for Worship

When children are brought into the corporate worship service, it is essential that parents be conscious of the fact that it is not enough for them simply to be present, but that they must also be trained in the proper way to worship. We want our children to be active participants in our worship service. Parents should model this for their children and should encourage them to participate if they are able. Likewise, children should be taught to sit still and be quiet out of respect for others at the appropriate times during the worship service, and they should also learn that the reason for this is the honor and worship of God. Moreover, parents also have an obligation toward the other worshipers and toward God Himself not to allow their children to distract from worship. It is the parents' responsibility to teach, discipline, and maintain control of their child in the worship service. The goal is to train the child to exercise self-control and learn how to worship. Parents must clearly establish the rules of behavior for their children as well as help them understand the reason they are in the worship service. During this training process, children will inevitably cross the lines and need further teaching, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

Parents with very young infants, and those with children in the process of being trained, should sit near an exit and be prepared to quietly exit the sanctuary if their child begins to cry or otherwise becomes distracting to others. An occasional whimper or coo is normal and usually does not require much more than being picked up and rocked or patted on the back. However, if this fails to quiet the child, parents should, out of courtesy and respect for others and for worship, take their child out of the assembly until they have been quieted.

Toddlers pose a different challenge for parents. They should have been trained at this point to understand what “no” means and should be expected to sit through a service quietly. Failure to do so should be treated as any other willful disobedience (i.e., sin), and the appropriate discipline should be enforced. We all understand that they are “little children,” but we must remember that our responsibility as parents is to bring them to maturity by teaching them what is expected and insisting that they obey. If a child is cranky because he has been sick, is cutting teeth, or has some other legitimate reason for not feeling well, then perhaps he is not equipped to be present with the congregation that day. However, even tired or sick children should not be allowed to sin.

Parents should keep in mind that “toddler worship” is going to look different from adult worship. They may hold the hymnbook upside down, or say Amen at the wrong place. Moreover, this will vary from child to child and they will not all learn in the same way or at the same pace. The important thing is that they are learning how to worship. Many parents “share” their order of worship and hymnals with their children (even those who cannot read) to help them feel like they are participating in the worship service. This has proven to be an effective means for occupying little people’s minds.

Clearly, little children should be a part of the corporate worship. They are ready to participate with the congregation as soon as parents assume the responsibility to teach, train and discipline their children for worship. Certainly, there are exceptions where it is either unwise or inappropriate for very young children to be present in a congregational meeting. In such cases, while parents are still responsible for the care of their children, a volunteer nursery may prove of genuine Christian service to meet these temporary needs.

Some practical suggestions for the parents of toddlers are:

1. Be sure you have made the rules of behavior clear to your children concerning what is expected of them during the worship service (e.g., no talking, making other noises, wiggling, rustling papers, turning around in their seats, etc.)
2. Teach them what worship is for, using terms appropriate to their age. Have “practice” for public worship during your family worship at home—teaching them to be quiet when the Bible is read, to listen to the preacher, and to sing psalms and hymns. If you have regular, orderly worship at home, you should have no problem at public worship on the Lord’s Day.
3. Parents know what their children’s needs are. Some kids need to burn off a little energy (e.g. running and playing), while others do better if they do not get wound up before or between services. In either case, parents are responsible for helping their children be prepared for worship, and children have a duty to obey their parents and conduct themselves in a respectful manner.
4. Take them to the restroom and to get a drink before or between services.
5. If your child breaks your rules during the worship service and a minor correction does not bring about conformity, then parents should take the child out, discipline him and bring him back in. Simply taking a child out of the worship service or taking him to the nursery without discipline is rarely effective for training. Your child will simply learn that his bad

behavior enables him to manipulate you for his own gain.

6. When parents consistently teach their children that they mean what they say and will consistently discipline them when they do not obey, they will be more inclined to heed their parents' whispered correction during their worship service.

When parents take seriously their responsibility to train their children to participate in the corporate worship of God—respecting the needs of the others present—then their little ones will be a delight to everyone—especially the Lord. Likewise, the patience, prayers and help given these parents and children by the rest of the congregation will facilitate the preparation of covenant children for the worship service. This labor will be well worth the effort as another generation of children is equipped to faithfully serve and worship our glorious God.

What to Expect at a CREC Church¹

CREC stands for the “Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches.”

Church Membership:

Because we live in a casual and breezy age, many Christians are unfamiliar with the idea of a covenanted church membership. CREC churches usually have a formal membership roster, and for some this may require a brief explanation.

The biblical basis for this is found in Hebrews 13:7,17. Verse 7 speaks of Christian “*rulers*,” who have taught the Word of God, and who have lived lives worthy of imitation. Now obviously, in order to obey someone, you have to know who they are. To hear them you have to be within earshot, and to imitate them, you have to know them and their families. So for members of the congregation, it is necessary to know the roster of their elders—otherwise obedience to them is an incoherent duty, impossible to fulfill. In addition to this idea of submission and obedience, verse 17 shows us the specific responsibilities that extend in the other direction. Those who have the rule watch out for individual souls, and they do so as ones who must give account. One of the things that those who will give an account must do is actually count. If a father goes out to the park with the kids, when he returns, and mom asks him if he has all of them with him, she will

¹ The following material was written by Pastor Douglas Wilson of Christ Church in Moscow, ID.

not be satisfied with “more or less” for an answer. Verse 17 requires some kind of membership roster. “*Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds*” (Prov. 27:23)

While attachment to a particular congregation is important, it is not important in the same fixed way that a marriage is, for example. A man might lawfully leave a congregation to take a job in another part of the country, but it would not be lawful for him to desert his family for that same job. Because the CREC is not sectarian, we also think it is legitimate for someone to transfer from one church to another in the same community—if the attitude is not schismatic, then the action certainly is not. Church membership is simply a way for members and elders both to take some form of orderly responsibility. For us, it is not a matter of ownership (the “*lording over*” prohibited to elders in 1 Pet. 5:3) or isolation from other believers (the partisan spirit prohibited to followers in 1 Cor. 3:4).

Reverence and Worship

Many worship services in modern churches tend to be informal. The model is often that of a concert or entertainment event, with a very “come as you are” attitude toward visitors. Consequently, when someone joins one of our churches Sunday morning for worship, often the most obvious difference in our worship approach (which is evident to them in the first five minutes) is the concern for reverence and dignity, and what comes across as “formality.” The more common approach has often been called “seeker sensitive,” and some might be excused for thinking that our approach is actually closer to “seeker hostile.”

Probably the biggest issue for someone who is unaccustomed to this kind of worship is the question of insincerity. Many of us have been taught that if it is “scripted,” then it must be insincere. If our worship services have a “bulletin” with all the elements of the worship service laid out beforehand, then what has happened to the possibility of the Spirit leading us in the course of the service? If a service is hypocritical and insincere, then that is obviously not the Holy Spirit’s work—on that we certainly can agree.

But we don’t think this way about other activities that must be planned out beforehand. If you had the privilege of seeing a Marine Corps precision drill team, would you wonder if they “really meant it?” If you took your wife to see a performance of the Nutcracker at Christmas time, would you walk out shaking your heads at all the insincerity because the music was exactly the same as last year?

The reason we approach worship this way is because we believe that God requires a cultivation of reverence from us. “*Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire*” (Heb. 12:28-29, ESV). This is what we are seeking to do. We see here in this passage that worship can be unacceptable to God, and two of the things that would make it unacceptable would be a spirit of irreverence and an attitude inconsistent with awe. Sadly, that is often what can happen with informal worship services.

As far as the “scriptedness” is concerned, we would point to where the apostle Paul rejoiced in the “good order” of the Colossian church (Col. 2:5). The word there is a military one, which could be rendered as regimentation—like the drill team we mentioned just a moment ago. At the same time, we want

to avoid the sins condemned by Jesus when He warned us about flowing robes (Mark 12:38), wide phylacteries (Matt. 23:5), lengthy prayers (Matt. 23:14), fancy religious titles (Matt. 23:7), and other forms of ecclesiastical showboating. But preparation to offer God what He requires is not the same thing as over-decorating what He did not require.

Posture in Worship

Churches can generally be categorized as “truth oriented” or as “feelings oriented.” It would be fair to rank our churches as among the former, but one of the temptations faced by such truth oriented churches is that of sliding into thinking that this means “brain oriented” churches. But the truth is for the whole man. The truth includes propositions to be believed, but is not limited to that. Jesus is the Truth. The truth therefore exercises authority over the whole body, and not just over our brains. Too many Reformed churches think that God gave us our bodies so that we might have a carrying case to help us get our brains to church. We want to lean against this tendency.

So in our churches, you will perhaps encounter some different postures of the body that may be unusual for you, depending on your background. For example, among these postures we might include kneeling or raising the hands in praise. If you grew up in a charismatic church where raising the hands was common, it is not likely that you knelt in any part of the service. And if you grew up in a liturgical church where you knelt, then it is likely there was no raising of the hands. We do both, but not because we want to be confusing.

In CREC churches, there are four basic symbolic postures. We kneel during the confession of sin. We stand while the

Scriptures are being read. We sit during the Lord's Supper. And we raise our hands together in the doxology and closing hymn.

In Scripture, kneeling is a posture of humility before God (Ps. 95:6). Standing is an indication of respect, the kind of respect we want to show while God's Word is being read (Neh. 9:3). Sitting is an appropriate posture for sitting at the Lord's Table (Luke 22:30). We are kings and priests on the earth, and this is where we take counsel together. And we want to lift holy hands together in doxological praise at the conclusion of the service (1 Tim. 2:8). This raising of the hands is a bit different than it is in charismatic churches, where it serves as an expression of individual or private devotion. When we do it, it is all together, and it serves as an expression of corporate praise.

In short, we want to present our bodies to the Lord in worship, and we want to remind ourselves that we are doing so. This presentation of our bodies is part of our spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1-2).

Covenant Renewal

While the structure of a typical CREC worship service has a lot in common with what visitors might call a "traditional worship service"—enough so as to simply be a variation on such services—there are certain elements about that stand out, and which probably will draw some questions.

The first is the common practice of identifying our worship services with the phrase "covenant renewal." By this we do not mean that our covenant with God has only a set amount of time on it, and that it might expire like a lease if we do not renew it. Our covenant with God is eternal and will not expire. But it is also alive, and is designed to grow

and flourish. As sexual communion renews marriage, or as a meal renews the body, so also the worship of God renews our covenant with Him.

The second element of covenant renewal that calls for explanation is the pattern or structure of worship. Our services are “bookended” by the opening and closing. When the minister declares the “call to worship,” the service is convened or established. At the conclusion of the service, when he commissions the congregation by means of the benediction, the people of God are sent out into the world to be salt and light, having been renewed in their walk with God.

The “innards” of the service follow a three-fold structure, which are confession, consecration, and communion. In the Old Testament, there were three distinct kinds of sacrifices—the guilt offering, the ascension offering (often translated as whole burnt offering), and the peace offering. The guilt offering was intended to address a particular sin on the part of the worshipper. The ascension offering was an offering of “entire dedication.” The whole sacrificed animal ascended to God in the column of smoke as an offering to Him. The peace offering was one which the worshipper was privileged to partake of, as a covenant meal. Whenever those three offerings are mentioned together in the Old Testament, they are listed in that order, which makes good sense. You deal with the guilt first, you dedicate all to God, and then you have communion with God. This is why our covenant renewal services follow the structure they do, absent the sacrificed animals. Jesus Christ died once for all, in order to be the fulfillment of the entire sacrificial system—He was not just the guilt offering.

So this is why our worship services, once God is invoked, contain these three elements. First we confess our sins, and

receive the assurance of pardon. Second, we dedicate ourselves to God (Scripture reading, sermon, offertory, etc.). And then last, we observe the Lord's Supper. Once that is all done, we receive the benediction, we go out into a lost world that needs to hear about Jesus Christ.

Weekly Communion

Our practice of weekly communion comes out of our understanding of covenant renewal worship. The natural progression moves from confession to consecration, and from consecration to communion. We want this progression to occur every time we worship God.

The heart of biblical worship is organized around Word and sacrament. But we do not understand this as a fortuitous “pairing,” as though Word and sacrament were like salt and pepper, or ham and eggs. Rather, we see it as one thing leading naturally to another—it is more like cooking and eating. With this understanding, we would see a liturgical service without a sermon as an example of an ecclesiastical “raw foods” movement. The food is not prepared as it ought to be. And traditions that have robust preaching, but no opportunity to commune with the Lord in His Supper, are akin to watching cooking shows with a master chef. You learn things, but don't get to eat anything.

And so it is that our services culminate every week with an observance of the Supper. Understood the right way, this does not in any way minimize the importance of biblically-grounded exegetical sermons. A worship service is not a zero sum game, where more time for the Supper is less time for the sermon. They are not in competition, any more than cooking or eating are in a completion. We are seeking to structure our

services in such a way as to honor the sermons, which we do by eating and drinking them.

Some in our Reformed tradition have wondered about weekly communion because to them it “seems Catholic.” But at the time of the Reformation, it was the Reformers who were pressing for much more frequent communion, which they accomplished with varying degrees of success. For example, John Calvin strongly urged weekly communion, and we are finally in a position to honor and follow his counsel.

Cultural Engagement

It is commonly known that people who worship together over an extended period of time tend to view the outside world in similar ways, and this is also true of CREC churches. Given the important role that political and cultural issues have in our era, it may be helpful to make a few comments. Cultural and political engagement on the part of Christian churches is a good thing (conservative as opposed to progressive), but that should not be mistaken for partisanship (Republican as opposed to Democrat, etc.). The first reason for this distinction is principled—the role of the church is to be prophetic, and not to be “a constituency” to be flattered, cajoled, or manipulated by any political party. The second reason is that a number of our churches are located in places like Poland, Russia, Japan, and Canada, and the partisan issues there are quite different than they are here in America. For example, commitment to the dignity of human life is a constant among us while commitment to a particular political party would have to vary according to the circumstances on the ground.

That said, this is the sort of thing you can expect to find in our churches. On a string of basic social issues (abortion,

homosexual marriage, women in combat) you will find CREC churches uniformly hostile to the leftist agenda. For these reasons (and a number of others) finding a CREC elder who voted for a leftist candidate for president would be as rare as a comet. With regard to economic issues, there is a broad antipathy toward socialism in all its forms and guises. Statist collectivism is one of the great idols of our age, and our churches are overwhelmingly opposed to it. On questions related to American foreign policy (e.g. the war in Iraq), you will find a diverse range of opinions, but they will generally vary between support based on conservative Christian principles as distinguished from concern or opposition based on conservative Christian principles.

At the same time, if you grew up in a conservative evangelical or fundamentalist home, you can expect to find a good deal more liberty on questions of alcohol or pipes and cigars than you are perhaps used to seeing from conservatives. This should not be understood as an exception to our commitment to liberty, but rather an expression of it.

Whenever words like “conservative” or “progressive” are used, it is always worthwhile to ask what we think we are conserving, and what we think we are progressing toward. In our churches we are trying to conserve the cultural gains made by the Holy Spirit in the development of the first Christendom. Because those gains were real, we are real conservatives. Where our concerns overlap with those of more secular conservatives, this is a function of them receiving the gift without acknowledging the Giver—but the gift was real, for all that. There is a completely different sense in which we do look forward to what the Holy Spirit will do to our culture as we progress toward the future (and so someone could call

us “progressives” in that sense). But leftist progressives are utopians, and their vision for the future largely consists of chasing their little pink dinosaurs. Their vision is unreal, and what the Holy Spirit will actually do is nothing like what they are describing. And this is why it would be misleading to call us progressives of any stripe.

We are real conservatives because we really are conserving something. We are not progressives....because we are actually going somewhere.

The Church as a Conversationalist

In the medieval church, there was a sharp distinction between the worshiping clergy and the spectators found in the laity. The “action” was up front, behind what was called the rood screen, and the people of God assembled to watch—well, mostly to listen. They were permitted to be in the presence of something big, they were around when the mystery happened. But for all intents and purposes, they were shut out, and the experts did the heavy lifting. The Protestant emphasis on the priesthood of all believers changed all that for centuries.

But unfortunately, a very similar sharp division has been creeping back in recent decades—now in the form of professional entertainers up front, and the audience out in the seats. Many who attend church do not expect to be asked to “do” anything. This did not happen all at once; it happened by degrees, but it has gotten to the point where some congregations don’t even sing much anymore.

In the approach taken to worship by CREC churches, the worship service is an active conversation between God and

His people. It is a dialog—not a monologue. We are all part of the body, and we all have something to do. The service is initiated from the front, by the minister. He is there in his role as a “deputy spokesman” on the Lord’s behalf. He is authorized to do this by his ordination, and he is faithful to his ordination to the extent that he sticks to the Scriptures like white on rice. In this role, he summons the people to worship at the beginning, and he declares the benediction at the end. He reads the text for the sermon as the very words of God, and he preaches the sermon as the very oracles of God (1 Pet. 4:11). After the confession of sin, he announces the assurance of pardon in the name of Jesus, and so on.

The people of God respond to all this actively. They sing the psalms and hymns and say amen after them. They say the Creed. They respond to the Scripture reading with “Thanks be to God.” They lift their hands in the Gloria Patri. They deliver a corporate charge or blessing after a baptism. They take the elements of bread and wine weekly. In short, in worship, the body of Christ is called to be a conversationalist. One of the first things that visitors to our congregations notice is that there is so much for them to do. This is intentional. The whole body is called to work together, and worship is that work.

These responses are usually prepared for our congregations in a printed bulletin, and because of this, those who are used to a more spontaneous, “go-with-the-flow” style of worship sometimes react to such a prepared liturgy as “kind of Catholic.” Actually, within limits, it is one of the most Protestant things we do. And in a sort of double irony, the spectator approach favored by many pop-evangelical churches is actually drifting back toward a very old error indeed.

Centrality of Worship

It is fairly common in CREC circles to hear folks speaking about the centrality of worship. This requires some explanation because it is easily misunderstood. Because the church exists in time and in history, that which is “central” to our identity and work has to be understood in terms of our mission and task. A vase of flowers can be “central” on the mantelpiece, but that is not the kind of centrality we are talking about. Worship is central in the same way that the engine under the hood is central to the operation of the car. The engine is not an essential decoration, and neither is it a useless weight of heavy metal that prevents the car from moving down the road.

The task given to the Church by Jesus before He ascended into Heaven was the task of discipling the nations, and this was to consist of inaugurating them into that discipleship by means of baptism, and then to teach them obedience to everything that Jesus taught us (Matt. 28:18-20). This means that the assigned mission of the Church consists of two components—birth and growth. The Church is not supposed to take mission on as a side operation; the Church is mission.

There are two basic ways to miss the point here. One is to abandon or minimize the task of worshiping the triune God on the Lord’s Day in order to “get out there” to evangelize and influence the world in the name of Jesus. This is like taking the engine out so that the car can go faster. The other way is to grant how important the engine is, and to keep it in fine operating order, but mounted on cinder blocks in your garage. In the former error, the engine is not central, and it should be. With the latter error, the engine is central, but the wrong kind of central. An engine that runs must be connected to the car, and a car without an engine is useless.

The ancient prophets envisioned the time of new covenant glory as a time when the worship of God was rightly ordered in every place. “*For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts*” (Mal 1:11).

The transformation of the world will be accomplished as a result of planting faithful churches in every place, so that God’s name will be great throughout all the nations. Because His name has been made great there, a number of other things will be accomplished (of a cultural and political nature), but we do not lobby to accomplish those things directly in the first instance. We know that they must come, however, and we teach the people to expect them. The church is potent precisely because it is not an activist club. At the same time, we avoid the error of some who want to plant churches that are indistinguishable from occult mystery religions, practicing odd, impotent rites behind closed doors. No, the Church is a city on a hill.

Psalm Singing

One marked feature of worship in the CREC is the abundance of psalms. There have been some in the Reformed tradition who have insisted on singing only psalms, but that is not what we are doing. We do not hold to “exclusive psalmody,” but it would be fair to say that we seek to practice common psalmody. While we sing other hymns as well, we do want our dedication to psalms to be overt and evident. Psalms provide the backbone of our musical worship. Why is this?

The apostle Paul tells us to. He says in both Ephesians

and Colossians that they are to address one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). We sometimes take this as an exhortation to allow psalms to be thrown “into the mix,” but it is actually stronger than this.

There are three words used here—psalms, hymns, and odes, and in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), these are the three words that are used as the headings throughout the book of Psalms. So we are not told that we cannot sing *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, but we are told that we don’t have the option of leaving Psalm 124 out of our worship altogether.

If a congregation is disciplined in the singing of psalms, then the uninspired hymns they compose and sing will be psalm-like. For just one example, one of the features of the songs in the songbook God inspired for us is the presence of enemies. You would have to search high and low to find any enemies in most Christian songs written over the last century or two. Instead of singing *The Son of God Goes Forth to War* as the Church Militant, we have gravitated to *Kumbaya* as sung by the Peace Corps. But when the church is singing psalms, we are not surprised to find compositions like *St. Patrick’s Breastplate* or *A Mighty Fortress*. These are not psalms, but they are hymns that sit at the feet of psalms to be instructed and shaped.

When the larger church gave up singing psalms, we were untethered from our God-given baseline. Just as sermons drift away from the truth when they cease to be expository, so also the musical portion of the worship service drifts away from the truth when we don’t have regular musical reminders of what God considers appropriate vocal praise. Because we have refused to ask God to “break their evil arms,” we have

wound up where we now are, singing “Jesus is my girlfriend” music. We are convinced that the way out of this cul de sac is to recover the singing of psalms. And that is what we are trying to do.

Baptism and Christian Education

CREC churches share a deep commitment to the pursuit of Christian education. We are convinced that the world must be understood in a distinctively Christian way, and young saints are to be trained up into that way of thinking about it. The reason the world must be understood in a Christian way is because the world was created by the Christian God. Apart from Him, it cannot be understood properly. But because of the presence of sin in the world, there are a great many obstacles to this proper understanding. It does not come easily. Education is all about learning how to take your rightful place in the world, and this is something too important to leave to our young people to figure out for themselves. Discipleship does not begin when a child reaches the age of 18. The Christian faith is not like one of those rides at Disneyland, where you have to be a certain height to participate.

Some of our churches are closely associated with solid Christian schools, and some have more parishioners with connections with the homeschooling community. Some of our churches have members that use both forms of education, but we are overwhelmingly committed to the need for genuine Christian education. This is the principle. The particular method for providing that education is up to the parents, but our churches in their teaching authority emphasize the principle. This is what is entailed in bringing children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). This should be thought of as more of a cultural expectation, and not as

a “legalistic requirement.” We know that there are difficult circumstances where Christian education is impossible (e.g. where children are assigned to a government school as a result of a court order in a divorce case). Nevertheless, Christian education is something we are striving to provide for all our covenant children .

We consider this to be part of our life together. In our congregations, when a child is baptized, the congregation is presented with a question that has the force of an oath. “Do you as a congregation undertake the responsibility of assisting these parents in the Christian nurture of this child? If so, then signify by saying amen.”

A Corporate Amen

Another thing that is common in CREC churches is the corporate amen. There are other verbal responses that our congregations give, but amen is the most common. For other examples, after the Scripture reading, the reader says something like “The Word of the Lord,” and the congregation responds with “Thanks be to God.” And at the call to worship, the minister will begin with a greeting that varies, depending on the church year, and the congregation responds together.

But the most common response is amen. This is something our congregations say when welcoming a new member. They are asked if they receive the new members into the congregation, and they are asked if they renew their membership vows as they do. Amen is the response. Something similar happens when a child is baptized. The congregation is asked if they promise to assist the parents in the Christian nurture of the child, and they respond with amen. And, of course, the most common use of amen is at the conclusion of psalms and hymns, when everyone says amen together.

In Scripture, amen serves with the force of an oath. It is a solemn and robust affirmation of the truth of what has just been said. The force of it should be understood as something like “absolutely yes,” or “may it ever be.” It serves as a fitting conclusion. “*The children of thy elect sister greet thee. Amen*” (2 Jn. 13). It serves as an anchor point for praise given to God. “*To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen*” (1 Pet. 5:11). It is an appropriate response when the people have offered up a blessing of God. “*And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground*” (Neh. 8:6).

We can see the importance of the word in how Paul uses it to describe the Lord Jesus Himself. “*For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us*” (2 Cor. 1:20).

In the New Testament, we see the expectation that this will be a customary part of the worship service. “*Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest?*” (1 Cor. 14:16). Consequently, we want to provide numerous opportunities where worshipers can learn how to say amen, and do so with understanding.

Wine in Communion

Most people come to our churches from the broader evangelical world. If you grew up Roman Catholic or Lutheran, you are accustomed to the use of wine in communion. But if you come to one of our services from an evangelical background, the use of wine can be quite a surprise. And because, as mentioned earlier, we usually observe communion weekly,

this is an adjustment you have to deal with every week.

We do this because we are convinced that Jesus used wine when He first established the meal, and we believe that we do not have the authority to alter what He established. The Jews used wine in their Passover meals, and Jesus established this sacrament in the context of that meal. The “*cup of blessing*” that Paul refers to (1 Cor. 10:16) was the third cup in the Passover meal, and it was a cup of wine. Indeed, in an age without refrigeration, it would not have been possible to keep and maintain what we think of as grape juice.

One of the ways we know that the wine in the Bible was alcoholic is through the constant reminders not to drink too much of it (Eph. 5:18). If biblical wine were simply grape juice, these moral exhortations make no sense. The master of the wedding feast at Cana was not amazed that the best grape juice had been saved for last, after all the third rate grape juice had dulled everybody’s senses (John 2:10).

Some might feel that including alcoholic drink in a sacramental meal is somehow disrespectful. But this is actually a modern version of letting the traditions of men (which can exert a powerful influence) set aside the Word of God—which Jesus said not to do (Mark 7:9). In the Old Testament, tithing money was to be used to buy shekar or strong drink (Deut. 14:22-26). In the New, the word for wine is *oinos*, and is clearly alcoholic as multiple contexts make clear.

There is one more point worth emphasizing. The wine we use in communion should be like the gospel—and that is potent. As with anything potent, abuses are possible (e.g. “*shall we sin that grace may abound?*”), but the possibility of abuse should not be allowed to replace the authority of Scripture. We want in the first place to be biblical people. This means we do not want a grape juice gospel, but rather a gospel with a kick.

Musical Style in Worship

Apart from offering praise to God, the music of a worship service also has the important role of setting the tone of the service. Scripture teaches that music sets the mood. A particular kind of music is for mourning, and another is for dancing (Luke 7:32). When the prodigal son returned, and the elder brother came in from the field, he was able to hear the music of the jazz quartet his father had hired way out in the driveway (Luke 15:25). When Saul was afflicted, a particular kind of music was able to lighten his spirits (1 Sam. 16:16). Music in Scripture is supposed to set the tone. It does not just “go along with” a particular demeanor; it is one of the principal means of creating it.

In our CREC churches, we are trying to set a tone of reverence. This runs contrary to the spirit of the age, which wants an informal, breezy, and casual approach to church. The problem is that God commands us to approach Him in worship with reverence and godly fear (Heb. 12:28). Our God is a consuming fire. This fear is a not a craven fear, the kind that has to do with punishment. It is the kind of fear that is consistent with boldness. We approach the throne of grace with boldness. We are told to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). In order to do this, a particular kind of music is necessary.

We sing the way we do in church, not because we believe that other forms of music are wrong or bad, but rather because we believe they are not fitting for this kind of occasion. A particular kind of music is fine for a kindergartner’s birthday party, but not for worship. A particular kind of rock music is great for driving a big rig on the freeway, but not for worship. A particular kind of jazz is just what you want

for the background music of your dinner party, but not for worship. Of course, reverent does not mean “joyless,” and singing dirges at God’s funeral is the very opposite of reverence. The key is that we are striving to sing the kind of music that accompanies the nature of the service.

One other point should be made, and that is that reverence is to be located in the words and music, and not just in the words. Too many Christians have accepted the false notion that God has not revealed Himself musically in the glories of natural revelation. Music is no more “neutral” than anything else in creation.

Singing in Parts

Another notable thing about our worship services in the CREC is that we are interested in learning how to sing “in parts.” It is a testimony to the damage that has been done in the realm of church music over the last few decades that many young Christians don’t even know what that means. This has largely come about as the result of two things—guitar accompaniment in worship and singing from overhead projectors.

In the older psalters and hymnals, there are usually four parts written out—the soprano, the alto, the tenor, and the bass, but on overhead projectors, usually the lyrics are the only thing available. This means that the congregation is forced into singing melody only, and sometimes there can be some trouble finding that. And while it is of course possible to sing harmony to guitar accompaniment, these parts are not usually written out (the way they are for piano) and are therefore not readily available for worshipers.

There are two basic reasons why we want to learn how to sing in parts this way. The first is that higher levels of

musicianship (on the part of the whole congregation) give us more scope when it comes to glorifying God. We sing to Him because He is worthy (Rev. 4:11), and if He is worthy, then we should offer the best we can give him. We should seek to worship Him with skill (Ps. 33:3), as much skill as we have. And this is not something that is beyond the reach of ordinary people—the mere existence of so many hymnals and psalters with all four parts written out is a testimony to former times when there was a much higher level of musical literacy in Christian congregations.

The second reason is that this is a glorious way to testify to our Trinitarian faith. Musical harmony is one of the best illustrations available for unity in diversity and diversity in unity. Many voices coming together as one provide an embodiment of love, which is to say, an embodiment of triune life.

And actually, there is a third reason as well. Singing this way is beautiful, and immensely rewarding to those who are privileged to participate in it.

Having said all this, we should hasten to add that we don't believe that our congregations have "arrived," not by a long shot. This is a hard thing to do, and our congregations struggle with these and related musical issues. All we are saying here is that we think such a struggle is worth it.

The Public Reading of Scripture

Another practice that is common in CREC churches is that of listening to Scriptures read aloud. This is distinct from the reading of the text for the sermon—it is simply a time in the service where the Word of God is recognized as central and foundational to our lives. We usually have at least one reading from the Old Testament, and one from the New. It

is common for us to stand (as a way of showing honor) as the Scriptures are read. When the reading is concluded, the reader will say “The Word of the Lord,” and the congregation responds together with “Thanks be to God.”

Because we believe that worship should be “according to Scripture,” this means that if ever we are asked about a particular element of our worship service, we will be able to answer the questions by citing a passage of Scripture. It is no different here. “*Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching*” (1 Tim. 4:13, ESV). This public reading of Scripture is distinct from the public exposition of it.

It might be guessed that this was done in the first century because published Bibles were rare, and the only way the parishioners could “read” the Scriptures was by hearing it read. We, on the other hand, have a stack of Bibles at home. This is a reasonable comment, but we don’t want to be found as those who have a stack of Bibles at home, gathering dust. We believe that Christians will honor individually and in families what they honor together, collectively in worship. In other words, when the Scriptures are given a place of honor in the public worship of God, it is more likely that individuals will actually give themselves to the reading of Scripture with the copies they have at home (2 Tim. 3:15).

Expositional Sermon

There is an old joke among preachers that sermonettes are for Christianettes. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. The Scriptures are our life. Believing what we do about the absolute authority of the Bible, it only makes sense that the

sermon would be important to our worship. But we also have to note that sermons are not just important because of the propositional content from the Bible that they relay, but that sermons are also an important event in their own right. It is through the foolishness of preaching that those who believe may come to salvation (1 Cor. 1:21). Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the preached word (Rom. 10:14). Under-valuing the importance of preaching is to under-value the importance of human souls.

As a general rule, sermons in the CREC are expository. This means that messages work through a book of the Bible, passage by passage. It is also important to note that Old Testament books are not neglected in this—they are not the Word of God emeritus, or put out to pasture. They, together with the New Testament, are the minister’s tool chest (2 Tim. 3:16).

This is not to say that all the messages will be expositional, working through books of the Bible. But most of them will be. Some of the messages will be keyed to the church year, expounding what the Reformers called the “evangelical feast days,” marking events like Christ’s birth, or resurrection, or ascension into Heaven. At other times, there may be a series of topical sermons, addressing a particular need that a congregation might have. But for the most part, sermons are anchored in particular books of the Bible.

One other point should be made. Once the exposition of a text has been declared, it is crucial that the minister goes on to apply the principles involved in the text to the lives of the people before him. This is the point of application, and sermons that are not applied are just exercises in self-deception (Jas. 1:22-24).

Child Communion

At the very center of the strong family emphasis that you will find in our churches, you will also find our practice of communing our children at the Lord's Table. This is unusual in Protestant churches, and in some places it is even controversial. A few words of explanation here would probably be helpful.

Children have their unique challenges in their walk with Christ, as we all do, but an additional challenge is that as a class they are routinely treated as spiritual "outsiders." Even in churches that baptize infants, it is often the case that a credible profession of faith is required before a child is admitted to the Lord's Supper. But in our churches, the Lord's Table is not protected with a profession of faith; the Lord's Table is regarded as a profession of faith.

It is true that little children do not yet know how to make this profession; it is our assigned task to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord so that they learn how to do it. We teach them to make this profession by making it together with them every week. In our view it is analogous to bringing them home from the hospital right after they were born, and speaking to them in English . . . even though they don't know English yet. That is quite true, but the fact that we do this is why they grow up to speak it fluently. We want our children to grow up speaking communion with Christ as their native language.

We are (all of us) saved through the gift of faith, from first to last, and it is no different with our children. As with all communicant members of the visible church, it is possible for a child who grows up this way to turn away from Christ. When such a sad event happens, they are to be disciplined as

any other member would be. But in the meantime, the apostle Paul compares the entire congregation to one loaf of bread (1 Cor. 10:17). And it is our conviction that all who are bread should get bread.