

Sunday Worship at Covenant

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Cherry Hill, NJ

We believe that the life of the believer is summed up in the act of worship of the one true God. Sunday morning corporate worship should be the climax of our weeklong worship as individuals in thoughts, words and deeds (Romans 12:1,2). We believe God centered worship transcends style and trends, is culturally aware, uses the best music of all ages, and is both formative and expressive. Therefore, our worship is neither contemporary nor traditional, but one that firmly grounds us in our Biblical Reformed heritage, yet invites and draws a diversity of cultures as well as the unchurched.

As we seek to develop a Philosophy of Worship, it is helpful to keep these words from Tim Keller in mind.

The Bible simply does not give us enough details to shape an entire worship service. When the Bible calls us to sing God's praises, we are not given the tunes or the rhythm. We are not told how repetitive the lyrics are to be or how emotionally intense the singing should be. When we are commanded to do corporate prayer, we are not told whether those prayers should be written, spoken in unison, or extemporaneous. So to give any concrete form to our worship, we must fill in the blanks that the Bible leaves open. When we do so, we will have to draw on tradition, the needs, capacities, and cultural sensibilities of our people, and our own personal preferences. Though we cannot avoid drawing on our own preferences, they should never be the driving force (cf. Rom. 15:1–3). But if we fail to do the hard work of consulting both tradition and culture, we will—wittingly or unwittingly—choose music just to please ourselves.¹

With that in mind there are several values that must hold in our corporate worship. What follows is not all inclusive, but is intended to be guiding principles that drive why we do what do in our worship services.

1. **God Focused:** The triune God is the most important audience in corporate worship and to whom we come to honor and serve. It is a time where the people of God can both glorify and enjoy Him together in anticipation of the heavenly gathering promised for God's people. As we anticipate the future we rejoice in the present reign of Christ, and the gracious work of the Holy Spirit present with us.
2. **Gospel Saturated:** "Everything we do in worship, therefore, now speaks of sin and forgiveness of Jesus' atonement and resurrection for us. Worship following the fall of Adam should not only be God-Centered, but Christ-Centered and Gospel-Centered. In all our worship the good news that Jesus has died for our sins and risen gloriously from the dead should be central."² We therefore unapologetically communicate both the "Bad News" of a fallen world and the "Good News" of "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24) where through repentance and faith in Christ we come into a right relationship to

¹ Tim Keller "Evangelistic Worship"

² John Frame "Worship in Spirit and Truth"

God.³ As we “preach the gospel to ourselves”⁴ we are reminded that this is more than a past event, but the active work of the Holy Spirit who continues to save us from our sin’s power in us. This reality enables us to embody the gospel in our relationships and live in gospel community that is marked by generosity, sacrifice, honesty and forgiveness.

3. **Grounded in Scripture:** “The mighty Lord of heaven and earth demands that our worship be governed by his Word.”⁵ Because worship of God is our highest priority it is a matter of life and death that we do not conduct worship based on personal convictions or desires. We believe Scripture is the final authority in faith and life and therefore affirm that “the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself and so is limited by his own revealed will” (WCF 21:1). That means every part of the service must be evaluated through the lens of Scripture and is both formative and expressive.
4. **Means of Grace Dependent:** We believe that God in His grace has given the Church resources to strengthen, encourage and transform us – the ordinary means of grace. They are prayer, the word, and the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. Though we come to worship and give glory to God, we are at the same time graciously blessed by Him. Therefore, we will emphasize the reading, singing, and preaching of the Word, the sanctifying and assuring efficacy of the sacraments, and the importance of prayer.
5. **Highly Participatory:** Worship is not a spectator event and is intended to be dialogical. God’s people gather together as one to worship with mind, heart and voice. Therefore, we will encourage participation through word and song. Our goal is not to be trendy, nor fit a specific genre, but provide music that is Biblically and Theologically grounded coming from different genres and centuries. We will use a variety of musical instruments based on the gifting of the people God brings to us. The songs will be sing-able, formative, expressive, have emotional breadth, and be culturally diverse.
6. **Lightly Liturgical:** As a Reformed church, we are part of long and enduring tradition that places worship as our highest calling. Therefore, we lean heavily on those who have gone before and see the value of creeds, catechisms, responsive readings and other forms that are part of our heritage. However, our services are not highly liturgical following a fixed pattern, nor spontaneous, but seek to follow a liturgical pattern that reenacts the gospel and renews us in grace. Rather than focusing on getting God to bless us, it focuses on the blessings, promises and grace that we already have in Christ. Our basic gospel pattern is: We approach God based on his initiation and invitation, we see our sin and

³ A good summary of the gospel is, “Through the person and work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, God saves sinners by grace, rescuing them from judgment for their sin into fellowship with him now in the church and ultimately in the new heavens and the new earth. To receive this salvation, we must repent and believe the gospel.” - Tim Keller “Gospel Theology.”

⁴ Credit to Martin Luther, made common place by Jack Miller

⁵ John Frame

confess it, we are assured of forgiveness, we hear the good news, and we respond in faith and obedience.

7. **Un-distracting Excellence:** Because God is our primary audience, and Scripture tells us that “we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews. 12:28), and that in our worship “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40), we will pursue excellence in our worship services. “We will try to sing and play and pray and preach in a way that people’s attention will not be diverted from the substance by shoddy ministry nor by excessive finesse, elegance or refinement. Natural, un-distracting excellence will let the truth and beauty of God shine through”⁶

⁶ John Piper “What Is the Philosophy of Worship that Unites Us?”