

City Reformed Worship Principles

Almost everything we do in corporate worship at City Reformed is based on principles hammered out at the founding of the church. But most of this has not been written down, so this essay is an attempt to define our basic principles in writing.

It is legitimate to talk of private worship, which can include private prayer, Bible study, and singing, and even generalized worship, by which we mean that we seek to glorify God in everything that we do. But we affirm that the people of God are called to worship weekly together, as a high calling of God (see, e.g., Ps 86:9, 102:22, John 4:23, Acts 2:42, 46, 4:24-31, 20:7, 1 Cor 11:18-34, 16:2, 1 Tim 2:8, Heb 10:24, 12:28.)

1. *God-centered worship.* The first question to ask about worship is who it is “for”. Who is our primary audience and who are we primarily trying to please, or reach? The answer for us, which we believe is the definition of biblical worship, is that we are primarily trying to please God. He is our audience, and all the people, both worship leaders and congregation, are the performers.

This is a crucial point in practice. If we view the non-Christian as our primary focus, then the worship service is not a service of worship at all, but an evangelistic meeting. Evangelism is an important part of the church, but it cannot define our worship. We want to bring non-believers to see what true worship is, and true worship is not about them, but about God, and for God. We invite them to come alongside us as we do something that is not focused on them.

In the same way, if we focus on pleasing Christians, the church service can become something like an educational lecture series or a musical concert series. Christians need to be brought to the place of seeing that their main focus needs to be not on themselves, but on God, and worship is the primary place for them to put their focus on God. We find our highest joy when we are pleasing God, not ourselves, because we were made for his glory.

This does not mean that we get nothing from worship. God is glorified in pouring out blessing on us. Many in Reformed churches have called worship, prayer, and the sacraments “means of grace,” by which they mean that God blesses his people through their participation in these things. In times of prayer, we glorify God by acknowledging that he has the power to give us all good things, and in the sermon and the reading of the Bible, we glorify God by acknowledging his wisdom for us and his promises in the Gospel. But fundamentally, we are blessed by finding our joy in God himself, not by using his worship as a pill or therapy for our own benefit. If we turn to asking “What am I getting out of this?” we are robbed of our joy in God himself.

This God-centered focus is reflected in a number of ways. For example, we try to select songs which have theological content, that is, talk about who God is and what he has done, not focus on our own wants and needs. We call one another to worship responsively as a way of saying to each other, “Stop focusing on other things and focus on God!” We have a “prayer of invocation” at the beginning of the service to directly ask God to be with us and

fill us with his Spirit and to help us to please him. We set aside a fairly lengthy time for songs at the beginning of the service to focus our attention on God. This first part of the service may all be called “we come into God’s presence”—a lengthy, deliberate time to switch our focus from other things to focus on God, and pleasing him exclusively.

Our focus on God also leads us to not have solo music or ensemble “special music”, including during the offering, whether vocal or instrumental. In our experience, this can look a lot like a performance to please an audience which is the congregation, and in many churches there is applause after a good “performance” of this type, indicating that the congregation is saying it is well pleased. In general, we also avoid things that might be viewed as “flashy” or “crowd pleasing” such as excessive jokes and humor, slick video, etc. We want to convey at every point that we all together, congregation and leaders, are focusing on pleasing God. God is not impervious to our worship; he can be well pleased by it (e.g., Gen 8:20-21, Ezra 6:10, Hebrews 12:28) or can turn his face from it (e.g. Jeremiah 6:20).

Another implication of this principle for us is to *keep the focus on God*. Once having called one another to worship and focus on God, we do not want to have “intermissions” which draw our attention away from him. This can occur, for example, with extended “fellowship greeting times” during the service, announcements of church news and events, children’s sermons (during which everyone else is focusing on how cute the children are), etc. All of these things are right and proper to occur in other contexts, such as a children’s sermon in another room, or announcements and fellowship time after the service. (The “fellowship greeting” during the service, which has been adopted by many churches, is usually too short for meaningful fellowship, but long enough to distract our focus from God. We believe in a lengthy fellowship time without interruption after the service, in addition to worship of God without interruption.)

Before the service we have occasional solo or ensemble preludes which are to some degree performances, and after the service we have announcements which are informal and sometimes humorous. These are not part of formal worship for us, but “transitional” times. The announcements after the service transition us into fellowship with others and service in the world. The prelude can be called a performance among friends, which is meant to draw people toward worship from the natural greetings and fellowship as they arrive .

2. *As God instructs us*. This next principle which guides us is often called the “regulative principle” in Reformed circles. The basic principle here is that we do things in worship which are specifically commanded in Scripture, because we cannot know what pleases God unless he tells us. Some churches take the attitude that anything not forbidden is allowed, but the regulative principle puts the shoe on the other foot—we ought not add things to worship unless we find specific biblical warrant. This principle is expressed in Scripture in places where God rejects people who offered novelties (e.g., Leviticus 10:1, Exodus 30:9) and when God specifically tells believers not to worship in the way of others (Deut 12:4) and to follow his directions carefully (Ex 25:40, Heb 8:5). Hebrews 12:18-29 tells us that we should be even more concerned to please God now than those who worshipped under

Moses, and ends with “let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” From this we understand that there is such a thing as *unacceptable* worship, and it stands to reason that the way we know what is acceptable is from what God himself tells us.

We must take care to apply Scripture properly for our time. The sacrificial system of the Law of Moses does not apply to us, since it is fulfilled in Christ (Heb 10:1-4, 9-14, Col 2:17). We can still learn general principles of the holiness of God and our approach to God in worship from the Law of Moses, however. At the same time, there is a consistent record that the book of Psalms has always been used by the church as a book of worship. It does not focus on the Temple worship, but on universal themes, and in several places anticipates the cessation of the sacrificial worship system (e.g., Ps 40:6, 51:16, 141:2).

Also, we believe that certain miraculous signs associated with the presence of the apostles writing the New Testament have ceased. These “signs, wonders, and mighty works” (Mat 10:1, Mark 6:7, Luke 9:1, Acts 5:12, 14:3, 2 Cor 12:12, Heb 2:3-4) were associated with the apostles. The Bible indicates that the time of revelation will cease (Heb 1:1-2, Dan 9:24) after the apostles, who are the “foundation” of the church (Eph 2:20, Rev 21:14), and there is no record of a later generation claiming to be (or being accepted as) apostles with the same signs and wonders. In this “cessationist” view, the gift of “tongues”, which we believe Scripture teaches was speaking in *known* languages (Acts 2:6-8), not babbling, has ceased in the church as a miraculous sign. Miraculous prophecies have also ceased, as an associated sign of those times (Acts 2:16-21).

On the basis of Scripture, we find that the following are clearly part of Christian worship: listening to the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42), i.e. the New Testament Scriptures, and listening to the Old Testament Scriptures (1 Tim 4:13), preaching and expounding the Scriptures (1 Tim 4:2, 13, 1 Cor 4:17, Acts 5:42), singing hymns and psalms (Col 3:16), prayer (Acts 2:42, 1 Tim 2:1, 8, Rev 5:8, 8:3), the Lord’s supper (Acts 2:42, 1 Cor 11:26), baptisms (Mat 28:19, Eph 4:5), collecting offerings (1 Cor 16:2), corporate professions (1 Tim 3:16, Psalm 107:32), personal testimonies of grace (Ps 22:22, 40:9-10, 107:32, 111:1), and vows of dedication (Ps 76:11). However, we see no biblical examples of any of the following as part of Christian worship: drama, games or comedy, visual arts such as movies or paintings, participatory crafts, or dance as a visual art (but see below for participatory dance). Incense, which some formal churches have adopted in worship, is clearly associated with the sacrificial system (e.g. Ex 25:6, 29, 30:1, 7, 37:5, 29, 2 Chr 4:22, 13:11) and is never mentioned in the Psalms or New Testament as part of worship. In fact, God is specifically angered by people inventing new types of incense (Ex 30:9, Lev 10:1, Num 3:4, 2 Chr 26:16-19). Several passages indicate that our prayers are now the incense given to God (Ps 141:2, Rev 5:8, 8:3).

Some Reformed churches have historically rejected the use of musical instruments in worship, but we find this odd, since these churches typically affirm the Psalms as standards for Christian worship, and the Psalms contain many positive injunctions to use strings (Ps 33:2, 81:2, 92:3, 98:5, 147:7, 149:3, 150:4), percussion (Ps 81:2, 149:3, 150:4), woodwinds (Ps 150:4), and brass (Ps 98:6, 150:3). The Psalms also command clapping (Ps 47:1),

shouting (Ps 66:1, 81:1, 89:15), raising hands (Ps 134:2, 141:2), and dancing (Ps 149:3, 150:4). On this last, the dancing envisioned in the Psalms is corporate dancing (imagine a Jewish folk dance), not watching dancing girls. Watching dancing girls would fall into the same category as solo music for us, as drawing attention to a “performance”, but biblically, dancing by the congregation (or slight swaying, in typical repressed white American fashion) is not at all forbidden.

In general, we want to be respectful of people’s culture and not force people into emotional expressions they are not comfortable with, but we also want to push people a bit to show joy and praise of God in all of the above ways. The elders in particular feel called to lead the congregation in open expressions of worship, such as raising hands and clapping to music. However, we do not call on the people to do physical actions other than to stand at times. Raising hands, kneeling (which is biblical according to Psalm 95:6), clapping, dancing or swaying, and even singing are left up to the participant, so that people do not feel pressured to do things that are foreign to them. Even standing is optional, especially if a person has a physical problem.

Some artists who are not musicians may wonder why their arts are not included in worship while music is. Part of our reason is based on the regulative principle—we do not see visual arts, drama, etc., included in worship in the Bible. Of course, these other arts can be done outside of worship as a blessing to others and as a good calling. In the same way, solo and ensemble music performances can be done outside of corporate worship. But we do not see worship primarily as about “art” at all. As discussed above, worship is about the whole congregation speaking with one voice to God, not artists performing for the congregation. The musicians who help lead worship are primarily there to assist the singing of the whole congregation to be more musical. If the musicians have become the focus of attention, we have lost the focus of worship on God.

Some Christians have also made the argument that visual things are treated differently from music in Scripture, with the important precedent of the Second Commandment which forbids “images” in worship. Even if we are not worshipping the image itself, one may see in this command a warning that images have power that words and music do not. Pragmatically, we see this in how video games and television have the power to suck people in to nearly addictive states, reducing brain activity, while reading aloud and singing enhance brain activity.

3. *Gospel-centered.* In taking Scripture as our lead in worship, we want to center on the things Scripture centers on. Clearly, the Gospel of forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus is something that the Bible centers on (Mark 16:15, 1 Cor 2:2, Gal 1:8). It is the center of the worship of God in heaven (Rev 5:9-10). The Gospel is not just for evangelism; it is the lifeblood of believers (Rom 1:16-17). We need to constantly remind ourselves of the Gospel; without it we can easily fall back into forgetting who we are in Christ and justifying ourselves by our deeds. The whole Bible makes sense only in the context of the work of Christ (John 5:39, Luke 24:26-27).

This Gospel-centered emphasis comes to the forefront in the second part of worship, which starts with the call to confession. This second part of the service may be called “we recall our relationship to God.” We rehearse the Gospel each week in the corporate and private (silent) confession of sin, the assurance of forgiveness, the song of response in which we dedicate ourselves to God in the response of faith to his Gospel, and the prayers of the saints, which testify to the glorious position he raises us up to in the Gospel, that we are not merely forgiven but have bold access to the Father as adopted sons and daughters to present our requests. On some occasions we also have individual times of dedication (e.g. vows of membership and vows of baptism, and on some occasions commissioning of missionaries) before the song of response. The collection of offerings also occurs at this time as a response to the Gospel of faith in action.

It is important to us that these responses come after the rehearsal of the Gospel and not after the sermon. That could lead to the impression that the offerings are a response to how well the pastor preaches. The flow of our service is that we respond to the Gospel with our dedication to God, and then we hear from God in the sermon, as he directs us how to flesh out the Gospel in our lives.

Our Gospel-centered emphasis also extends to the sermon. We always try to see the relation of text to the Gospel, and the one who preaches is encouraged to present himself as a saved sinner, with real stories of grace in his life, not as one who only sees (or preaches about) sin in others. It is very important to set the tone in the church that we can all be gracious to others because we have received grace. Leaders of the church should not be wallowing in sin, of course, but what we want to convey is that the Gospel leads us to repent daily.

4. *Scripture-filled.* Because we believe it is the true Word from God, Scripture plays a central role throughout our service. The call to worship, the call to confession, and the words of assurance after the confession are always verbatim from Scripture. (The assurance of pardon comes from God himself, not a “priest”, and so it is important to us to have God’s Word quoted directly.) We also always have a “proclamatory” reading of Scripture without comment during the first part of the service, to let Scripture speak for itself. The third part of our worship service is focused on the “expository” reading and preaching on Scripture in the sermon. This part of the service can be called “we hear from God.” Sermons are always tied directly to Scripture, and normally we preach through whole books of the Bible chapter by chapter as a way of making sure we are faithful to the context of the Bible.

We also favor songs which quote from Scripture and which use Scriptural themes, although we do not require that every song be verbatim from the Bible. Because we believe in the unity of the whole Bible, we try to have a balance of texts from both Old and New Testaments during each worship service. So, for example, if the sermon is on a New Testament passage, we will try to have the early proclamatory reading be from the Old Testament, or some of the songs or readings for the call to confession or call to worship will be from the Old Testament, and vice versa if the sermon looks at an Old Testament passage.

All of our songs should have Scriptural content, and not be “empty phrases” and “many words” (Mat 6:7, Eccl 5:1-3). This does not mean that every song needs to be a direct quote from Scripture, but that they should be filled with Scriptural teaching and themes. In general, while some degree of repetition is fine, and is used in Scripture (e.g. Psalm 118), overmuch repetition can become mantra-like and disengage our minds. Our songs should have content which engages our mind, because we are called to worship God with our whole self, including our minds, not disengage our minds (Luke 10:27, Rom 12:2, 1 Cor 14:15).

Consistent with the principle that our worship is God-centered, not man-centered, we do not want the sermon to become seen primarily as an educational lecture. Certainly it will be educational to many who have less experience with Christianity. But the primary role of the sermon is not to be a college lecture or to be new for people who have been Christians for years. The primary role of the sermon is to bring forth Scripture to speak to us, as though God were speaking. The preacher is to put aside his own opinions and preach what he feels are accurate applications of what God actually says to us in Scripture.

As part of our Scripture and Gospel focus, we generally avoid political issues. This is not because we view politics as unimportant or unaffected by our Christian belief. Rather, we see a prioritization in worship that we focus on God and his Gospel primarily, then on exposition of Scripture to learn more about who God is and who we are, and then application to our lives of these truths. In the applications, there is a priority first to get our personal lives in order (Mat 7:3-5, 1 Tim 3:5), then to exhort one another in the church (1 John 4:20-21, 1 Cor 5:12, Heb 3:12-13), and last to confront the world about issues of justice and mercy (Isaiah 1:17, 58:6, Prov 24:11-12, Micah 6:8). We cannot let our priorities become inverted to let our church become defined by political issues.

After the sermon, we have two songs to allow people time to reflect on the sermon while still in an attitude of worship. Ideally, these songs will have themes that relate to the sermon. The final prayer of the service also is usually a reflection on the theme of the sermon, in which we are sent out into the world to apply the things we have heard.

5. *Historically connected.* While the tradition of churches never overrules the clear teaching of Scripture, we believe that it is valuable and important to convey that we are connected to the historical church through the centuries. By making these historical connections, we express humbleness that we learn from our elders in the faith, we give our community a sense of roots, and we testify to the universal nature of the church which is greater than our own community.

Among the things we do to express these historical roots are using ancient liturgical forms such as the call to worship; the sequence of the call to confession, corporate confession, and words of assurance, and the benediction at the end of the service; reciting creeds which are true to the Bible (this occurs after the sermon, as a sort of “sermon from history,” as a way of showing that that sermon’s teaching is not a novelty invented by us); referencing and quoting various Christians from history in the sermon; and using lyrics and music from

older generations, not only recently written songs. In many cases we will use adaptations of these older creeds or songs which make them more accessible to modern people, either by updating archaic wordings or using new musical forms.

We also see value in showing connectedness to the universal church geographically, as well as historically. This can involve using musical forms from churches in other cultures, and quoting Christians from other cultures. We are rooted in our own Western, English-speaking culture, however, and see these roots as a positive thing; we do not have a goal of becoming culture-less or adopting a “global culture.”

6. Elder-led, but involving the whole covenant community. As discussed above, worship is all of the Christians speaking with one voice to God. To do this properly, there must be order, because God is a God of order and not chaos (1 Cor 14:33, 40). In our church, we have a leadership structure with a plurality of elders including the pastors, which we believe is the biblical pattern (1 Tim 5:17, Titus 1:5, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:1-2). These elders of the church are in charge of the worship and take the lead in worship.

This does not mean that every voice heard in the worship service must be that of an elder, however. The elders may choose people from the congregation to participate in various ways. In our church, this includes testimonies by believers, from written statements which are reviewed by an elder in advance, prayers by various believers, and announcements at the end. The general rule for us is that the participation by non-elders not be perceived as “authoritative,” which would normally be the perception for the worship leader and the preacher. Our worship is normally led by an elder but sometimes is also led by an elder in training, i.e., an intern.

Our corporate prayer time in which we include prayers by members of the congregation is important to us as a way of speaking collectively to God. This kind of prayer is not “public prayer” like that of the Pharisees (Mat 6:5). Rather, it is “corporate prayer,” in which we all pray together with the person who leads (see, e.g., Acts 12:12, 13:3). For this reason, the person who prays should make sure to pray things that he or she is sure that the rest of the congregation will agree with; it is not a time to pray “at” the rest of the congregation and try to give them lessons.

The prayer time is also a clear demonstration of the priesthood of all believers, that we all have access equally to the throne of God through the work of Christ. We have at least two people from the congregation pray, in addition to the worship leader and preacher, and we deliberately try to have demographic balance in who is picked, among old and young, men and women, and those used to public speaking and those who are not. Normally these people are members, but non-members well known to the elders may also be asked to pray.

Less well known to most people is the prayer time which precedes our service, in which we “commission” the one who preaches and the worship leader, and we pray for the worship team and for the Spirit to be among us, drawing unbelievers to faith and strengthening the

believers. We do not view this prayer time as optional—it is essential that the pastor and worship leader go forth with the sense that they have the support of the other leaders of the church, in unity. Anyone in the church is welcome to join us in this prayer time, and we hope for the day when many people will join before the service to call on God for the work of his Spirit among us.

Another way that we demonstrate the priesthood of all believers is that our elders and pastors do not wear special robes. Some people in Reformed churches and various traditional churches have argued that the robes of the preacher remind people to respect the word of God, since the preacher in some sense stands for the word of God. But we believe that this can too easily slide into viewing the pastor as a “priest,” i.e., a mediator between us and God, and can easily tempt the pastor to think of himself above others. Jesus clearly taught that those in authority in the church are not to be set up above others (Mat 23:5-12), although the office is to be treated with respect (1 Thess 5:12).

Another aspect of our communal worship is that we try as much as possible to include children. This means that we all must be gracious toward parents who have children who make noise or are a bit unruly. This must be balanced against the need for good order. For this reason we also offer a nursery for infants and toddlers and a children’s worship during the sermon for children up to age 7. Our goal with the children’s worship is to transition children into fully participating in the worship time of the whole church.

Although we do not have musical performances that lead the people to clap and applaud, we do encourage people to applaud after a person makes a public profession of faith in Christ and joins the church. This clapping is not an approval of a performance by the person, but a rejoicing with the person and a welcome, in the spirit of how the angels in heaven rejoice over every sinner who repents (Luke 15:7,10).

Because of our emphasis on the corporate nature of worship, we also want to make sure that the musical instruments and vocalists do not overwhelm the congregational singing. All of the worship musical team should be seeing themselves as assisting the congregation to make the whole worship experience more musical and more glorifying to God, not as putting on a performance for the congregation. The type of instruments and the number of vocalists should be chosen consistent with not having a sound that makes it hard for people to hear other people singing. As the church grows, the types of instruments can be revisited from time to time by the elders to decide what is appropriate.

The principle of good order in worship brings up the issue of “excellence.” It is not a goal to have a musical performance that is so excellent that the worship service resembles a professional concert. But badly done music can distract people from worship. In a small church, there is more of a sense that amateur musicians are our friends and we tolerate a lot of mistakes, but in a larger church where people do not know the musicians personally, mistakes are more of a distraction. The same applies to the sound board and microphone system. The operators of these systems should have a goal of not having distractions such as feedback whistle, dead microphones, or microphones turned up too loud. In general, all of those involved in worship should not have a cavalier attitude toward worship, but

should make a serious attempt at excellence, even while we know that we will make mistakes and can laugh at ourselves when we do. We should also not be “penny wise and pound foolish” in considering expenses for worship; we should err on the side of doing what we can to prevent distractions.

Our desire that our worship team not have a cavalier attitude leads to the natural implication that we want all of those on the worship team to be professing Christians (though not necessarily members of our church) who worship along with us throughout the whole service. The desire for excellence can never take precedence over the need for spiritual unity among those who lead us in worship. The music team leader appointed by the elders usually judges whether a particular volunteer should be invited to be on the music team; in some cases the elders may be consulted.

Projecting words to songs and Scriptures on a screen is a somewhat neutral technology, but we do not use this, out of a sense of keeping technology to the minimum necessary and in the background, so that the focus remains on God. In addition, it is “one more thing that can go wrong” which can be a distraction, e.g., if the words are not advanced in synch with the music, or the projector fails somehow.

7. Intelligible, not necessarily pleasing, to the unbeliever.

As discussed above, worship is primarily an act of Christians speaking to God, not an act either by or for non-Christians. However, we are not to do things in secret, but proclaim from the rooftops, so to speak, our love for Christ (Mat 10:27, John 18:20). The apostle Paul assumed that unbelievers would be attending Christian worship (1 Cor 14:23-25). Worship is not the same as evangelism, but worship can be used by God to convict the hearts of people who are unbelievers and draw them to God as they see his name lifted up.

Therefore we have the attitude of assuming that a significant number of unbelievers is present at every worship service. One implication of this is that the worship leader and pastor explain many things in the service. This is not only for the unbeliever; many believers benefit from being reminded why we do the things we do, or what our basic beliefs are. We also seek in the sermons to explain basic points and not assume that everyone, even professing Christians, knows a lot of inside theological language or is familiar with everything in the Bible.

Faithful worship and preaching can also drive people away—we are the aroma of Christ to those who are being saved and the odor of death to those who are perishing (2 Cor 2:15-16). We cannot design our worship to please everyone in our society. We can, however, be “intelligible” to the unbeliever. A good standard is to imagine that everything we say will be printed in the local newspaper. We do not want to water down what we believe, but we also do not want to adopt an attitude of antagonism toward others, or an attitude of isolation. All too often, a preacher can please believers by preaching against various types of unbelievers who are not there. Such preaching sounds orthodox but can actually be a way of puffing up ourselves in pride that we are not like those sinners.

One of the practical ways that we help the unbeliever, and also increase unity among the believers, is to print in the bulletin the entire passage of Scripture to be expounded in the sermon and any other Scriptures referenced. This allows the whole congregation to follow along in the same translation, and does not assume that a visitor has brought a Bible or knows how to find a passage in the Bible. It also gives the visitor something to take home to remember the lesson.

One implication of assuming that unbelievers are present is drawing lines where we ask a nonbeliever not to participate. This is sometimes called “fencing” in Reformed circles. We “fence” participation in two places. The first is in the offering. We try to make clear that we only expect those who are committed to our church to participate in the offering. This is for three reasons. The first is that it is a principle of Scripture that the offerings of an unrepentant person are not acceptable in worship (Deut 23:18, Mat 5:23-24). Second, there must not be a hint of compulsion in giving (2 Cor 9:7). Third, in our society, the church has become associated with love of money, and many people assume that the church is interested in doing a performance for the sake of getting their money. We speak to unbelievers that we are not trying to get their money; instead, they are guests of our hospitality.

The second part of the service which we “fence” is the Lord’s Supper. We make clear that the Lord’s Supper is for people who are believers in Christ who have joined themselves to a biblical church. This is based on the Scriptural injunction that those who participate are those who are in the Body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17). Requiring that people be members of a church is a problem for some people who consider themselves Christians but have never formally joined a church, but Scripture teaches that one cannot, under normal circumstances, be joined to Christ but not be joined to his people (Mat 18:17-18, John 20:22-23, 1 Cor 12:12-27). We let each person decide whether he or she is joined to a “biblical” church, but at the minimum, the person should be baptized and have made a public profession of faith in some Christian church. Our denomination recognizes adult or infant baptism in any Trinitarian Christian church. The basis of this goes back to the early church fathers, who affirmed that the validity of a sacrament is not dependent on the heart or faithfulness of the one who administers it: otherwise no one could ever know if they had received a valid sacrament, because no one knows perfectly the heart of another. Rather, the sacrament is valid when done in the way God commands (Mat 28:19).

The format of our Lord’s supper of having people come forward to receive the elements, instead of passing out the elements, is designed to make participation a deliberate decision by the believers, not the default for everyone sitting in the seats. In this way, those who do not participate are not singled out. We take the communion in groups to emphasize the corporate nature of our worship; it is not a single file of individuals, but a set of group meals. While we believe that the proper elements of communion are normally real wine and real bread, as used by Christ, we provide non-alcoholic grape juice and gluten-free bread so as to not create a barrier for people who may have trouble with alcohol or glutes.

The Lord's supper is also for those who "examine themselves" and "judge themselves truly" (1 Cor 11:28, 31), and those who participate in an "unworthy" or cavalier manner can be guilty of "profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27). The Lord's supper is a time of drawing especially near to our holy God by people who are believers. Because of this, we ask that children who have not yet made a public profession of faith not participate. There is no minimum age for this public profession. Because of our commitment to including children in the covenant community, however, we encourage parents to bring their children with them to be blessed by the elders.

The principle of "good order" discussed above means for us that the Lord's supper (and baptism) normally always must be led by elders (always a "teaching elder," i.e., pastor, and preferably other elders as well.)

Concluding thoughts

Not everything in our order of worship is cast in stone, but nearly everything present in the service has been carefully thought out by the elders and is done the way it is for a reason. We have adjusted some things over time, partly in response to growth in numbers and partly in attempts to make the flow better or to keep the service from going too long.

We don't think that churches that do some things differently are all in the wrong; in many cases decisions must be made taking into account the culture of the community we are part of, pragmatic issues of time and available space, the number of people, etc. We do encourage all churches to consider the seven principles that have outlined above, even if they make different decisions on how they work those out.