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The Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches □ Est. 1998 □ Thoroughly Trinitarian, Historically Reformed, Warmly Evangelical □ www.crechurches.org



Welcome to our congregation

We are glad you decided to join us, and we hope that you feel welcome. We are a member congregation of the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (or CREC). We have been receiving new folks here long enough to know that there are some questions that come up frequently. Some of these distinctives are grounded in our denomination's confessional commitments, and others are more culturally-driven—that is, by means of an unwritten set of shared assumptions. If you join together with us, you should be able to sort through those distinctions at some point. For now, we just wanted to let you know of some of the things you are likely to encounter here—and perhaps give a word or two of explanation why.

As you read, please keep in mind that our churches do not worship in lockstep. Not everything described here applies to every CREC congregation, and that's fine, too. That's *another* thing you can expect.

The fact that we have identified these things that you may have questions about does not mean that we believe these to be the most important things about our faith and worship—it is just that, for visitors, they are perhaps the most obvious things about it. So here we go.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN OUR CREC CHURCH...

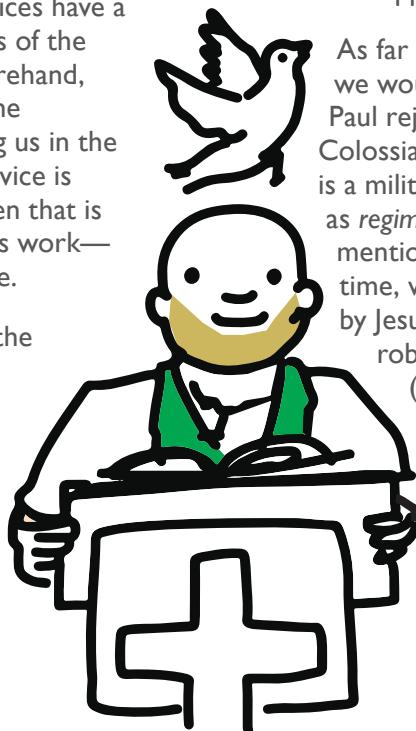
Liturgical Worship

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 tempted in 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 “liturgy” 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.

However, we don’t question the sincerity of 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). 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.

Covenant Renewal Worship



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 it 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,” and the whole sacrificed animal ascended to God in the column of smoke as an offering to Him. In the peace offering, the worshipper was privileged to partake of the offering, 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.

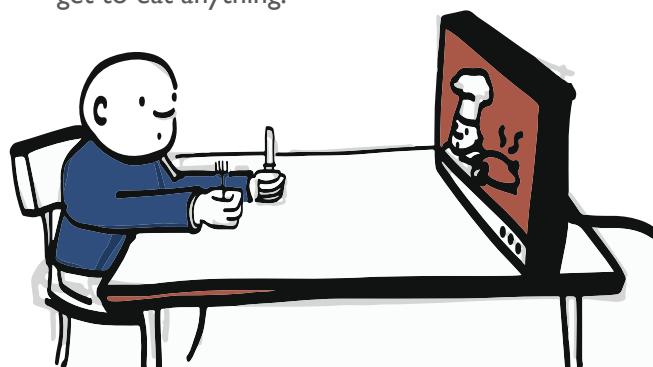
Once that is all done, we receive the benediction and go out into a lost world that needs to hear about Jesus Christ.

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 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.

A Worship Conversation

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.

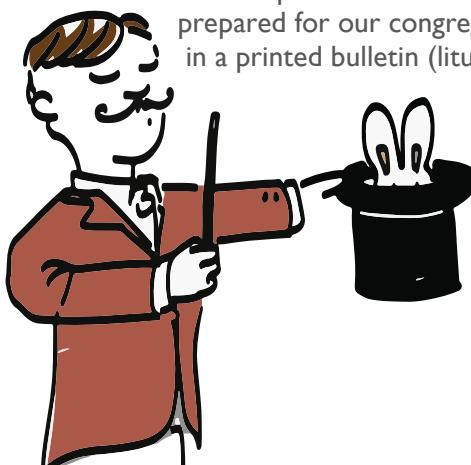
But unfortunately, a very similar sharp division has been creeping back in recent decades—now in the form of professional entertainers up front, and the audience out in the seats. Many who attend church do not expect to be asked to “do” anything. This did not happen all at once; it happened by degrees, 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 dialogue—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 (I Pet. 4:11). After the confession of sin, he announces the absolution of sin 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 *Lord’s Prayer*. 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 (liturgy), 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.

Worship Centrality

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.

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 “This is 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 will also respond together.)

But the most common response is a hearty “Amen!” 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

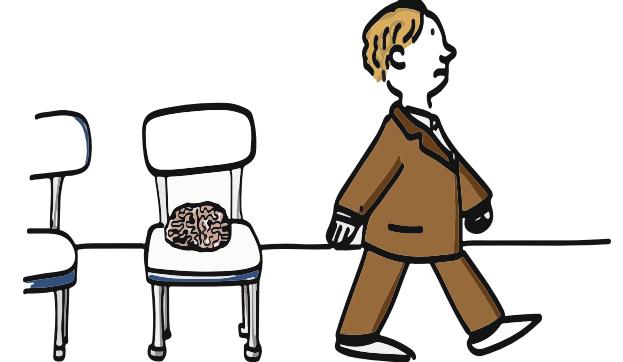
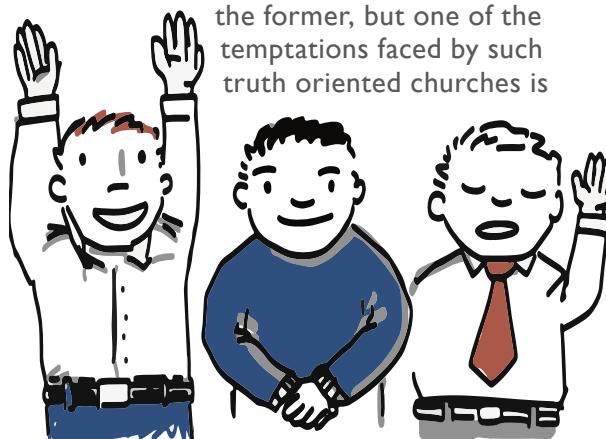
have offered up a blessing of God. “And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground” (Neh. 8:6).

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. Jerome said that in the early church the “Amen” sounded like a waterfall or thunderclap.

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 Gospel is being read. We sit during the Lord’s Supper. And we raise our hands together during the Lord’s Prayer.

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 praise during the Lord's Prayer (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.

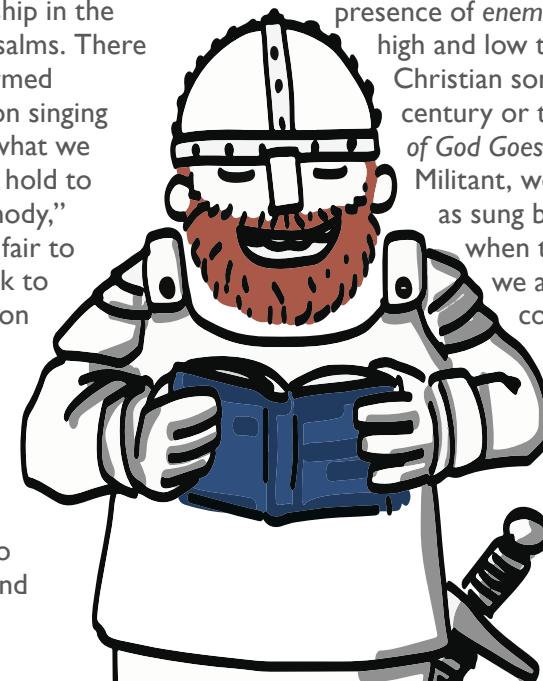
In short, we want to present our bodies to the Lord in worship, and we want to remind ourselves that we are doing so. This presentation of our bodies is part of our spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1-2).

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.

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

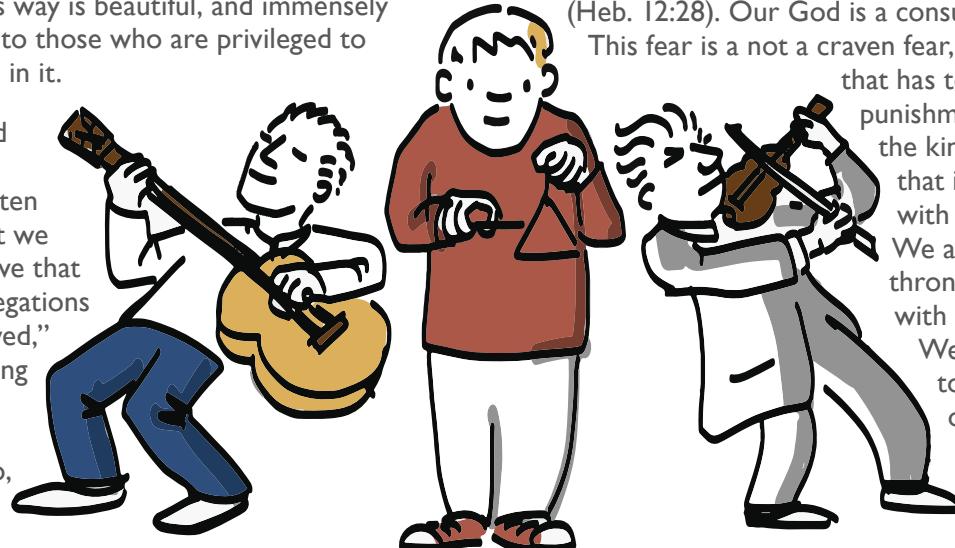
way they are for piano) and are therefore not readily available for worshipers.

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.

Musical Style

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 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: Reverence is to be located in the words and the 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.

Scripture Reading

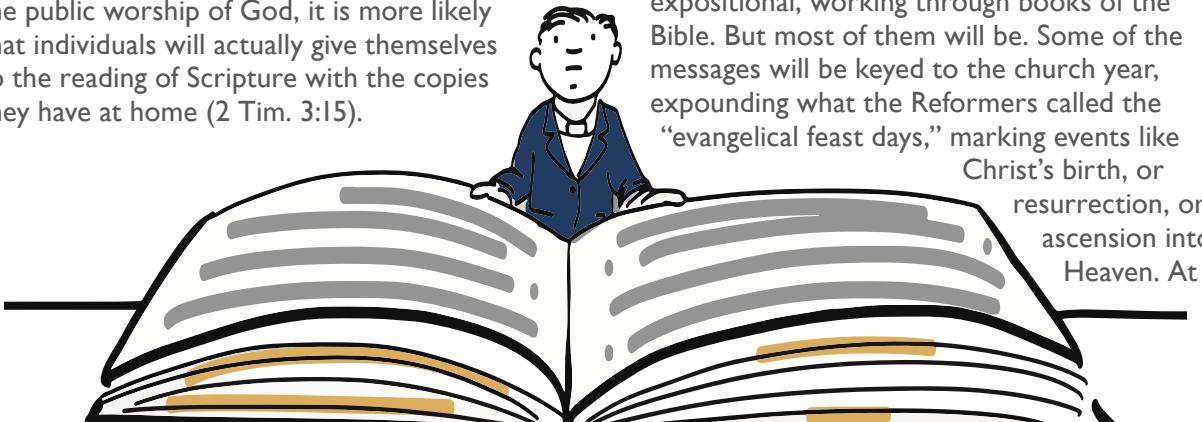
Another practice that is common in CREC churches is that of listening to Scriptures read aloud. This is distinct from the reading of the text for the sermon—it is simply a time in the service where the Word of God is recognized as central and foundational to our lives. We usually have at least one



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 “This is 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).



Biblical Sermons

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).

Optimism about the Future of the Church

A doctrinal emphasis that you are very likely to find in CREC churches is, oddly enough, a doctrinal point that is not actually required by any of our approved doctrinal statements. When it comes to the question of eschatology (what will happen at the end of the world), the only thing that the universal church has agreed on thus far is that Jesus Christ will one day return in power and glory to judge “the quick and the dead.” When it comes to all the particular details surrounding and leading up to that glorious event, the broader church has not yet reached a consensus. Some denominations are premillennial dispensationalist, some are historic premillennial, some are amillennial, and so on. Someone once joked that the millennium is a thousand years of peace that Christians like to fight about.



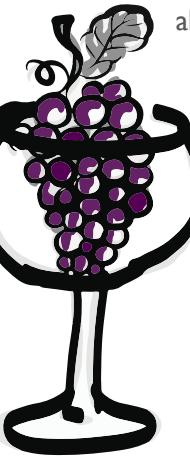
Although it is not a doctrinal requirement of the CREC, our pastors and church leaders are overwhelmingly what is called *postmillennial*. This is an odd doctrinal position in our day, but there was a time in the history of the Reformed churches when it was much more commonplace, and in this, we are simply returning to our historic roots. What it means, in broad outlines, is that we believe that the preaching of the gospel in the world will be powerful and effective, that the nations will come to Christ in order to be discipled by Him, a golden era of human history will ensue, and that *after* this (where the “post” comes from), the Lord Jesus will return to destroy the last enemy, death.

If you are not accustomed to this sort of thing, and you attach yourself to a CREC church, the optimism might take some getting used to. When you used to see some outrage on the evening news, you would tell a friend that it’s the “last days,” and what should we expect? But now you have friends telling you that the bad guys can’t keep this kind of folly up forever, and it will soon be time for us to make our move.

As was mentioned just above, this is not a doctrinal requirement for our church leaders, and still less for the members of our churches. But it would be fair to say that it has become a significant part of the culture of the CREC.

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 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 (I 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 would 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, tithe

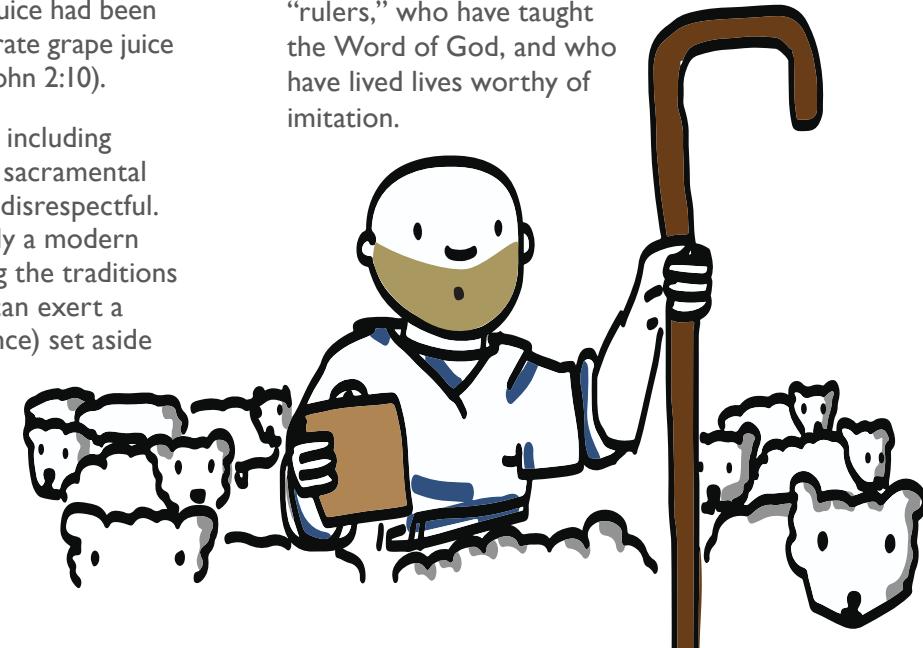
money was to be used to buy *shekar*, or “strong drink” (Deut. 14:22-26). In the New, the word for wine is *oinos*, and is clearly alcoholic, as multiple contexts make clear.

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.

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 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).

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, so here are a few words of explanation.

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.

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 eighteen. The Christian faith is not like one of those rides at Disneyland, where you have to be a certain height to participate. As Voddie Baucham says, “We cannot continue to send our children to Caesar for their education and be surprised when they come home as Romans.”

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 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 and if, for example, someone’s financial circumstances make private education unattainable, we want to have financial assistance available through the church and its deacon fund.

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*.”

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 Afghanistan), you will find a diverse range of opinions, but they will generally vary between support based on conservative Christian principles and opposition also based on conservative Christian principles.

Voting practices will generally follow a conservative/libertarian pattern, and when our people don’t vote it is generally because the available options don’t go far enough (e.g., “if God had wanted us to vote, He would have given us candidates”). So if your Volvo has a COEXIST bumper sticker right next to the Hope & Change sticker, it will probably be pretty lonely out there in the church parking lot.



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, it is a function of them receiving the gift without acknowledging the Giver—but the gift is real, for all that. There is a completely different sense in which we 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 of always reforming). 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.

Immanuel Reformed Church Distinctives

Moses prepared Israel to enter the land by appointing Joshua, setting up a plan to preserve and teach the law, composing a song, and promising the Lord would set up His house in the land.

Through the Spirit, Jesus still gives these gifts to His conquering, suffering church: Leaders, a book, a song, and a table.

Leaders

Immanuel Reformed Church cultivates Christlike leaders who, like kings, rule the church in the fear of the Lord, feed the flock, and care for the weak; who, like priests, lead the people of God into His presence; who, like prophets, openly proclaim the whole word of God with all boldness.

A Book

Immanuel Reformed Church is a whole-Bible church, teaching the infallible Word in all its depth and beauty as the story of Jesus’ suffering and glory. We read, hear, sing, pray, and preach Scripture so the Bible will transform our imaginations, shape our desires, and remake the world.

A Song

Song is a sacrifice of praise, an offering of our life’s breath to God. Song is witness, and readies us for the courageous witness of martyrdom. At Immanuel Reformed Church, we sing our liturgy and chant Psalms, so we can learn to pray from the Bible’s own hymnbook.

A Table

Through Jesus His and Spirit, our Father spreads a table in the midst of our enemies. Having received, we give, extending hospitality to one another, to neighbors, to strangers. Our hospitality includes all Christians, as we pray for and collaborate with churches from every denomination.

We aspire to serve God as a well-ordered, biblically-saturated, joyful, musical, festive, and hospitable communion of believers called, by the Spirit of Jesus, to give ourselves for the life of the world. Come and join us as we share the adventure of God.