



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT WORSHIP AT TRINITY CHURCH

Craig R. Higgins

The people who gather for worship each week at Trinity Church come from a broad variety of religious backgrounds. Some grew up attending no religious services of any kind, so to them all this “church stuff” is completely new. Others grew up in churches where the worship was very formal and traditional, and still others where the worship was very casual and spontaneous. Some have worshipped in a variety of churches; we even have a few folks who grew up in Presbyterian churches!

As you might expect, bringing such a diverse group together as a worshipping community is a bit tricky; when it comes to worship, it can seem as if we’re speaking different languages. Week after week, I get asked questions about our worship services. In this brief paper, I hope to answer a few of them.

“What is worship?”

The Rev. Dr. Tim Keller, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in the city, gives an excellent answer: *Worship is seeing the worth of God and giving God what he is worth. We come to “behold the glory of the Lord,”* and then to give him our praise, our thanks, our obedience.

Here’s another good definition, focusing on public worship: *Worship is a prescribed, corporate meeting between God and his people, in which God is praised and*

*his people are blessed.*¹ How would our worship be different if we truly believed—and acted upon the belief—that each Lord’s Day we are actually meeting with God himself?

“Why is attending church so important anyway? Can’t I worship God just as well in a boat on the lake or on a mountain trail?”

Of course, we can worship God at any time—and many of us find the beauty of God’s creation very conducive to worship. But the short answer is that God *desires* for us to worship him *together*—and he *commands* us to do so in the Holy Scriptures. In the book of Hebrews, we are given the astonishing news that, through Christ’s death and resurrection, we have direct access to God. The author

then says that we are not to give up “meeting together,”² as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (10:25).³ In fact, the principle of weekly corporate worship is in the Ten Commandments themselves. Surely part of what it means to “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exo-

Worship is...

- the quickening of the conscience by the holiness of God,
- the feeding of the mind by the truth of God,
- the purging of the imagination by the beauty of God,
- the opening of the heart to the love of God,
- the devotion of the will to the purpose of God.

— *William Temple (1881-1944)*
Archbishop of Canterbury

¹ From James A. DeJong, *Into His Presence: Perspectives on Reformed Worship* (CRC Publications, 1985).

² The Greek word is the root of the word “synagogue,” showing that the author had public worship in mind.

³ All Scripture quotation are from the *New International Version* (NIV). By “the Day,” the author is referring to “the Day of the Lord,” the time of Jesus’ second coming.

dus 20:8) is that we are to gather to worship God. We gather for public worship⁴ because God is pleased when his people do so, and because we need the encouragement of other believers. And it is only when we come together that we can celebrate the Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, which is "the central act of Christian worship on the Lord's Day."⁵

"I've heard it said that we come to worship to get our spiritual batteries recharged. Is that true?"

It is certainly true that God blesses his people when they gather for public worship. But we must beware of what has been called *upside-down worship*. What does this mean? Our worship is upside-down when we come to worship primarily to *receive* a blessing from God rather than to *give* a blessing to God. The wonderful surprise is that when our attention is on giving praise to God rather than receiving a blessing ourselves, then we receive the richest blessings of worship!

Yet it is true that we are constantly in need of the Lord's blessings, and so we come to worship *eager* to receive them! We seek to hear God's Word, to receive the Holy Communion, to receive God's peace. We come both to give *and* to receive!

"Is the worship at Trinity Church primarily intended for those who are followers of Jesus or for those who are investigating the Christian faith?"

The answer is *neither* and *both*. The primary "audience" of our worship is neither believers nor seekers, but God! First and foremost, our worship is directed heavenward. Yet we plan our services with the goal of *both* building up those who believe *and* challenging and helping those who are seeking spiritual reality.

The answer to the question is *both* precisely because it is *neither*! You see, a service designed merely to teach

⁴ Often called "common" worship, because we worship "in common" rather than alone. Hence Presbyterians have published various versions of the *Book of Common Worship* and Anglicans the *Book of Common Prayer*.

⁵ This statement, agreed upon by most all Christians, comes from the *Book of Common Prayer* (1979).

and equip believers will bore seekers, and a service designed merely to answer the questions of seekers will bore believers. What *all* of us need is to learn more and more who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Therefore a service that focuses on God and the gospel can speak to the needs of everyone who attends.

"Why is the worship at Trinity Church so informal?" AND "Why is our worship so formal?"

Yes, I am often asked *both* questions! Those coming from a more formal church environment are often startled at how casual and open our services are, while those coming from more informal backgrounds are often amazed at how structured our services are. It all depends on your previous experience. What we strive for is a service that honors the church's history of worship but without stuffiness—liturgical but informal, structured but not

uptight.

"Why do we sing so many of those old, boring hymns?" AND "Why do we sing so many of those new, shallow worship songs?"

Again, I hear *both* of these questions. While most of what I hear is positive (people seem to like the eclectic approach to music at Trinity Church), there are some (you know who you are!) who wish that our music was *all* traditional or *all* contemporary.

We sing the older hymns because they are so rich—in them we sing so many of the great truths about God, and these hymns have stood the test of time. They are a part of our legacy, and it is important that we know our heritage and pass it on to our children. We sing newer worship songs because they are written in a familiar musical style and are conducive to heartfelt worship.

Yes, some of the old hymns are dull and some of the new songs are shallow; we try to avoid those. But there are so many good songs—new and old—and we want to sing them all. And parents, let's teach our kids the great hymns of the faith—new and old—by singing them at home!

In choosing our music at Trinity Church, we are also guided by our commitment to be a “church for the unchurched”—a congregation particularly open to those who are spiritually seeking. Experience has shown us that, while stuffiness is a definite “put off,” the more traditional music is often more attractive to those who have not attended church in a long while. In fact, we have found that a *mixture* of styles—all done pursuing excellence, of course—may be the most welcoming style of all! Our attitude is that, while keeping the focus on God, we’re more concerning with reaching our neighbors than with simply choosing the music we like.

Let’s face it. Some of us need to expand our tastes, or even to repent of using our tastes as an excuse for a worshipless spirit. C.S. Lewis, best known as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, once wrote, “If we cannot lay down our tastes, along with all our other carnal baggage, at the church door, surely we should at least bring them in to be humbled, and, if necessary, modified, not to be indulged.”⁶

“What is the meaning of the shirts and robes the pastors wear during the worship?”

At Trinity Church the ministers usually wear distinctive clothing. Clergy throughout church history have worn such clothing, and clergy in many churches (including most Presbyterian and Reformed churches) wear such clothing today, for a simple reason: These are *uniforms*, and the purpose of the pastors’ uniforms is to help us remember why we follow their leading as they preach and teach, pray and celebrate. It’s not because an individual pastor is your friend or favorite Bible teacher (though, of course, that may be true!); it is because the pastor has been set apart by Christ’s church to be a minister of Word and sacrament. These “uniforms” draw our attention away from the individual and direct it to the God whose gospel is being proclaimed.

So we usually wear clergy shirts to our worship services and at some other times.⁷ We also regularly wear robes and stoles in the services. The robe is either the black Genevan gown (technically more of an academic robe) or the white alb, an ancient worship garment, usually worn with a rope cincture. Non-ordained worship leaders can wear robes; not just the clergy. But only pastors wear a stole—the strip of

⁶ From a letter to the *Church Times*, August 10, 1951.

⁷ You’d be surprised how many people come up to me to talk about their faith questions when I’m wearing mine.

cloth worn around the neck. The color of the stole varies according to the time of the church year.

“What is the church year?”

At the top of our bulletin you will see a line that says, “The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost” or “The Third Sunday of Advent” or something like that. This is a reference to the church’s annual cycle of worship—the liturgical year—that focuses our attention on the person and work of Christ. The year begins with the Advent season (beginning four Sundays before Christmas Day), then to the twelve days of Christmas (yes, just like the song), then to the Epiphany season, to Lent,⁸ and finally to Easter, which lasts 50 days. After Easter, we go to “the Season after Pentecost,” or “regular time.” There are traditional colors for each season: violet (Advent, Lent), white (Christmas, Easter, other major festivals), red (Good Friday, the Day of Pentecost), and green (the Epiphany and after-Pentecost seasons). This cycle helps us to highlight all the major truths of the Christian faith each year.

“Isn’t it difficult to pray from your heart when using a written prayer?”

Some folks are unaccustomed to written prayers and responses, and so find our prayers of confession, eucharistic prayers (prayers at the Lord’s Table), and our responses (“Thanks be to God!”) a bit difficult. But look at it this way: When you sing a hymn or praise song that is addressed to God—such as “Rock of Ages” or “Thou Art Worthy”—you’re singing a prayer, and therefore you’re praying words written by someone else. Of course, whether or not you’re *really* praying—or just mouthing the words—depends on the attitude of your heart. It’s the same with written prayers: Make sure your heart is in it, and the prayer becomes your own. After all, the Scriptures are full of written prayers. They are a way to help us all be, not mere spectators, but vibrant *participants* in worship!

“Why do we celebrate communion every Sunday?”

It seems quite clear from reading both the New Testament and the writings of the early church that the first Christians celebrated Holy Communion each time they worshipped together. However, by the end of the Middle Ages, this practice had been lost due to superstition. While a priest officiated at the Mass each week, the people only received communion on Easter,

⁸ I also have a paper entitled, “On Keeping a Holy Lent.” Contact us if you’d like a copy.

and then only the bread. When the Protestant Reformation—a movement to return the church to its early roots—took place in the 16th century, the Reformers wanted to restore the weekly celebration of the Eucharist.⁹ Trinity Church is part of a growing trend to go “back to the basics” and celebrate the Lord’s Supper each Lord’s Day.

“Who can receive communion at Trinity Church?”

At Trinity, we practice what is called “open communion” or “eucharistic hospitality,” welcoming all baptized followers of Christ. In order to receive communion here you need to be (1) a follower of Jesus Christ, trusting him as Savior and Lord, (2) a baptized member of a church that proclaims the gospel, and (3) seeking to be in a right relationship with God and with your neighbors. We believe that we come, not to Trinity Church’s table or to a Presbyterian table, but to the Table of the Lord.¹⁰

“How can my children receive communion at Trinity Church?”

Children are welcome to receive the Eucharist at Trinity Church once they have been baptized and made a public profession of their faith in Jesus Christ. For members of Trinity Church,¹¹ the process is quite simple; we refer to this process as *confirmation*.

Each year at the Rye congregation we offer a Confirmation Class for children—aimed primarily at fourth and fifth graders. I usually teach this class during the season of Lent; we meet for four to six weeks during the classes after the worship service. After the class, your child will meet with a couple of elders and/or pastors for a “confirmation interview,” where they will be asked some basic questions about what it means to follow Christ. The interviewers, if they agree that your child is indeed trusting in Jesus, will recommend to the Session that your child be *confirmed*, that is, received as a communing member.¹² This can take

⁹ Eucharist, which means “thanksgiving,” is another name for Holy Communion, or the Lord’s Supper.

¹⁰ Some denominations teach their members not to receive the Eucharist in churches of other denominations. While we disagree, we appreciate your respecting the guidelines of the church of which you are a member.

¹¹ If you’re interested in becoming an official member—or covenant partner—of Trinity Church, please sign up for the “Introduction to Trinity Church” seminar.

¹² Baptized children who have not yet been made a public profession of faith are non-communing *members* of

place throughout the year, but we especially love confirming children at the Easter Vigil—the family service on Easter Eve. At the service, your child will affirm the confirmation vows, and the pastor will pray for your child, by name, that he or she will always faithfully follow Jesus.¹³ Your child would then receive the Eucharist.

Please note, however, that parents need not wait for the annual Confirmation Class. If you feel that your child understands the gospel message, then you can arrange for a confirmation interview at any time. There is no predetermined minimum age for this.

“How can I receive Holy Baptism?” AND “How can I have my child baptized?”

If you have never been baptized,¹⁴ we will gladly baptize you upon your profession of faith in Christ as part of your becoming a member of Trinity Church. (The Scriptures teach that Christians are to be part of local churches, and so we baptize people into particular church membership, not as “Christians at large.”) If you’ve decided to follow Christ, then baptism is the first step, and you should proceed without delay.

In order for your child to be baptized, you need to be a member (covenant partner) of Trinity Church who can affirm the basic baptismal vows—that you believe in Christ as your Savior and that you intend to nurture your child in the Christian faith, in the context of the church. Please speak with me to arrange a convenient time for this happy event.¹⁵

the church. So confirmation is not “joining the church,” it is *confirming* the faith professed at baptism.

¹³ If your child has not been baptized, he or she would also receive Holy Baptism at this service.

¹⁴ Like all the historic churches, we do not re-baptize people. We recognize the baptisms of other churches so long as they baptize in water and in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and they believe the basic truths of the Christian faith.

¹⁵ Of course, some Christians do not accept the practice of infant baptism. If this describes you, you are still welcome to be a member of Trinity Church, and we will baptize your children upon their profession of faith. We will also be happy to lead in a infant dedication ceremony in your home or elsewhere, but our practice is not to incorporate these into our worship services.

“How can my children get the most out of worship at Trinity Church?”

First of all, children of all ages are welcome in our worship services. Yes, children make noise and wiggle; that’s how God made them! In the Gospels we see that Jesus was comfortable around—and took great pleasure in—young children. Nursery care for infants and toddlers (including a Bible story for the toddlers) is available at all services.

We also offer a Children’s Church program that teaches younger children the great stories of the Christian faith in the context of age-appropriate worship. Yes, it’s worship; they sing, they say prayers, they even take an offering! Children’s Church is available for kids from age 3 through 3rd grade.¹⁶ Kids are dismissed for Children’s Church before the sermon.

In addition, during much of the year, we also offer *Fourtify*, a time of teaching for 4th & 5th graders. They hear a modified version of the sermon from the main service, and then return for Communion.

We are convinced, however, that the best course for the spiritual formation of older children and teenagers is for them to join in the worship of the main congregation. Of course, some parts of the service may be a bit difficult for them; for example, they may not always follow every point of the sermon. However, here are some suggestions on how you can help your children get the most out of the worship service.

1. First and foremost, you must take an active role as a parent. I cannot emphasize this enough: The extent to which your children find worship vibrant and interesting is largely in your hands. We love to see a parent with an arm around a child, quietly explaining something the child might not understand, helping the child follow the flow of the service.
2. Make sure that your children participate in the service. They should be expected to join in the prayers, the hymns, etc. One of the advantages of our structured service is that even young children

¹⁶ Please note that the Children’s Church year begins in September. If your child turns three at some later point in the school year, he or she should remain in the toddler nursery until the following September.

can truly participate.¹⁷ We must teach even our little ones the dangers of upside-down worship! If your children ask, “Why do we have to go to church?” remind them, “We don’t *go* to church; we *are* the church! Because God has saved us by sending his Son, it is our privilege to worship with our brothers and sisters.”

3. Talk with your kids about their worship. Over Sunday brunch/dinner, talk with your kids about the service—the sermon, the songs, the prayers.¹⁸
4. Don’t limit your efforts to Sundays. Your children will never get the most out of worship if it only begins with the call to worship and ends with the benediction. Through the week, be preparing for worship by reading the sermon text for the coming Sunday, by singing and praying at home.
5. Let them scribble and draw. Yes, you’ll see worship folders with kids’ drawings of ponies and superheroes. *Don’t worry about it!* You’ll be surprised how much they take in and understand. (I still remember sermons from when I was a child, even though I was busy drawing Batman!)
6. Don’t give up! We’ve been there, so we know what it’s like.¹⁹ Our kids complained about boring schoolwork, but as parents we knew that if we gave in they would never know the joys of learning. Teaching your children to participate in worship with God’s people will pay even richer dividends. But if we parents give up, we may be leading our precious children to spiritual ruin.
7. Most importantly, pray. Pray each day for your children to be filled with the Spirit, to be given a heart eager to worship God.

¹⁷ Incorporating kids into the service is important for many reasons, including teaching them how to worship. Worship is *always* participatory—*never* a spectator sport!

¹⁸ I’m told that some families never have Sunday brunch or dinner together because of other activities. Friends, this ought not to be! Part of honoring the Lord’s Day is keeping it free from the crazy pace of the other six days.

¹⁹ We now have adult kids, but we remember. And you can also speak to my wife—who, remember, never had her husband to help her with the kids at church!

“Hey, I’m not a kid anymore. How can I get the most out of worship?”

All of us who are followers of Christ eagerly desire for our worship of God to be meaningful and vibrant. Here are some ways to see that happen.

1. Make attending worship your top priority. Corporate worship is the *center* of the Christian life; make sure it’s the center of yours. Be prepared to participate fully in every part of the service. Vibrant worship is never *casual* worship; it requires concentration and participation.²⁰
2. In your worship, put first things first. No more upside-down worship! We don’t attend worship only to receive from God but to give to God our praise and adoration. Remember who God is; allow your imagination to be captured by God’s holiness and transcendence, his love and his grace. Remember

Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. We worship so that we live in response to and from this center, the living God. Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by spec-ters and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose.

— Eugene H. Peterson
Reversed Thunder

who you are—weaker, guiltier, and more sinful that you would’ve ever dared admit, but in Christ more loved, valued, and accepted than you would’ve ever dared hope. And remember *where* you are—we worship “with the angels and arch-angels and all the host of heaven.” Don’t merely ask, “What did I get out of the worship service?”

²⁰ Easily overlooked but common sense advice: It is easier to participate fully if we’ve had a good night’s sleep, if we arrive for worship a few minutes early (using the prelude for preparation), and if we’ve been spending time in the spiritual disciplines of Scripture reading and prayer throughout the week.

but “What did *God* get out of my worship of him this day?”

3. Come to worship expecting God to work in your life. This doesn’t mean working yourself into some emotional state, but rather coming to wor-ship expecting God to do “spiritual surgery” in your life—expecting him to teach you, to trans-form and remake you.
4. Come to worship expecting God to work in the lives of your friends. Remember: Our worship ser-vices are not just for us, but also for our friends and neighbors who need to hear the good news of Christ. The critical event in the life of this church is when someone says, “Now *that’s* what my friend needs to hear,” and then brings that friend to Trinity Church. When you see Christ changing the lives of your friends, then you will especially want to praise him for his grace and favor.



O Almighty God, who pour out on all who de-sire it the spirit of grace and supplication: De-liver us, when we draw near to you, from cold-ness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and kindled affections we may worship you in the Spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—from the Book of Common Prayer

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