

Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia

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THE CHURCH AND WORSHIP

Christian worship is the grateful and heartfelt response of the believer to the revelation of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. This response must come from the whole person: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind". (Luke 10:27).

The object of worship is God alone (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). "Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only". Worship must not go beyond what is appointed in the Word of God and it can be rendered only through the one Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. It must be offered "in spirit and in truth". That is, animated by the Holy Spirit and constrained by Him to a true understanding of God.

The settings of worship are wherever the individual believer has fellowship with God: the home where a family unites in worshipping the Heavenly Father and wherever God's people assemble for worship.

Occasions for worship are unlimited, but there is one special day appointed for the congregational worship to be diligently observed – the Sabbath. The first day of the week, which is the Christian Sabbath, is to be observed as a day of rest from all regular employment, except such duties as may be considered works of necessity and mercy. The Sabbath should be devoted particularly to the public and private exercises of Christian worship and to the performance of good works.

Congregational worship, as revealed in the Word of God, consists of praise, prayer, the reading, preaching and hearing of the Word of God (Acts 2:42, 2 Chron. 29:30), tithes and offerings, the benediction and the administration of the ordinances of Baptism, and the Lord's Supper (Matthew 29:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 1 Timothy 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:2). The climax of this worship is preaching of the Word. Congregational worship is ordinarily under the leadership of an ordained pastor, and the preaching, in particular, is committed to those who are duly qualified and who have been regularly appointed. There are also references in Scripture to special observances such as solemn vows and covenants, thanksgiving and humiliation (Exodus 24:7; Joshua 4:24; 23 Kings 11:17; 23:3).

The Bible makes it clear that God has a particular care for the purity of his own worship. Its constituent elements are not left to man's choice or opinion. The punishment of Nadab and Abihu, who offered "strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them", of Saul, who assumed the duties of a priest in defiance of the command of Samuel; and of others (1 Sam. 12:13), who worshipped in their own way, emphasizes the danger of what the Bible calls "self-imposed worship" (Colossians 2:23), and the urgent necessity of strict conformity to God's requirements. Whatever is not commanded in the worship of God is forbidden. In Deuteronomy 12:32 God says, "See that you do all that I commanded you; do not add to it or take away from it". The Lord has made some changes in the manner of worship in the times of the New Testament because the work of the Old Testament priests has been fulfilled by Christ for all believers. This is why Jesus himself says we are to do whatever He has commanded (Matthew 28: 19, 20), and not worship according to the commands of men (Mark 7:7).

Praise

God has given us the Book of Psalms for singing His praise in worship. As a part of the inspired Scriptures, it is free from error and can be sung with confidence by all of God's people. Moreover it is filled with prophetic references to the Lord Jesus Christ and is eminently suitable for use in Christian worship.

Inspiration alone is not our reason for singing the Psalms in worship. Divine appointment is the only basis on which we can properly offer any song of praise to God in worship (2 Chronicles 23:18; Nehemiah 12:24, 45-46). The Book of Psalms is divinely appointed for praise in worship, to the exclusion of all other songs and hymns. To substitute anything else for the Divinely-appointed Book of Psalms is to fail to realize that the Divine provision for our praise is perfect and adequate.

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It is clear that the use of the Book of Psalms in worship is commanded in both the Old and New Testaments. It should be noted that the command in Colossians 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (cf. Ephesians 5:19) does not authorize the use of songs for worship other than those contained in the Book of Psalms, for the “psalms”, “hymns”, and “spiritual songs” referred to there, were the titles attached to the Psalms in the Septuagint Version of the Old Testament which was in general use in the Apostolic Church.

The fact that certain songs of praise preserved in the Old Testament are not included in the Psalter, has been used as an argument against exclusive psalmody. The Bible itself, it is affirmed, goes beyond the ‘exclusive psalmody’ restriction. Passages cited include the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10); the psalm of Jonah (Jonah 2:3-9); the song of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:10-20); the song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1-43; Exodus 15:1-18), the song of Deborah (Judges 5:1-31); the song of Habakkuk (Habakkuk 3:1-29).

It is clear that the Psalms of the Psalter grew out of a liturgical milieu, many of them being anonymous. They cover a span of almost a millennium, from the time of Moses (Psalm 90) to the period of the Exile (Psalms 126 and 137). The existence of songs of praise prior to the final collection and close of the Psalter, but not included in that collection, is not a problem. Not all the songs and canticles of the Old Testament period were included when the Psalter was completed, just as not all the apostolic epistles were included in the canon of Scripture (1 Corinthians 5:9; Colossians 4:16). What the Holy Spirit has given us in providence is adequate for our needs.

The Psalms contain many references to Christ and He frequently quoted them during His earthly ministry. Their beauty has endured throughout the centuries and they provide a common ground upon which all who accept God’s Word can worship together.

There is no warrant for instrumental accompaniment to the singing of New Testament worship. In Hebrews 13:15, Christians are called upon to “offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name.” It seems clear that the constitution and form of worship of the New Testament church were patterned after the Synagogue which did not have instrumental music and not after the Temple, which did as part of its sacrificial ritual (2 Chronicles 29: 27-30). If we are to follow the pattern of worship of the New Testament Church, which is our standard, our praise in worship will consist of psalms sung without instrumental accompaniment.

Prayer

Prayer is an ordinance of congregational worship in which, in ordinary circumstances, one person leads the worshippers and speaks for them to God. It is to be offered, like private prayer, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, with the utmost reverence in thought, language and manner, with simplicity and with deep humility such as becomes sinners in approaching the presence of the Holy God. The worshippers should consciously, in sincerity and in truth, identify themselves with the prayers which are being offered. It is probable that in the New Testament church, the people signified such identification and assent by responding ‘Amen’ at the end of the prayers. The Scriptural postures in congregational prayer are standing, kneeling or prostration.

Reading and Preaching the Word

God has appointed the reading and preaching of the Word by His messengers as the way by which His redemptive work is made known to men, so that they are made wise unto salvation. The proclamation of the Word is the centre and climax of public worship. The working of the Holy Spirit must be prayerfully sought in order that He may make the Word read and preached an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up, in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation. Preaching requires careful preparation of heart and mind on the part of both preacher and hearers. All should attend to it with diligence, preparation and prayer, receive the

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Word with meekness, faith and love, lay it up in their hearts, and practise it in their lives. (Shorter Catechism Q. 900, Hebrews 4:2; James 1:21)

Offering

The giving of tithes and offerings is an appointed and fitting part of congregational worship. God requires His people to give a portion of their substance to Him. This should be done cheerfully, regularly and proportionately as He has prospered them.

Benediction

Congregational worship is fittingly concluded with the pronouncing of the benediction by the minister, as the servant of God, who prays, that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit may be with His people.

Sacraments

The only sacraments of the New Testament church are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. They are holy ordinances instituted by Christ "wherein by sensible signs Christ and the benefits of the New Covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers" (Shorter Catechism Q. 92).

Worship and Life

The Bible emphasizes that worship and conduct cannot be separated. Repeatedly the prophets preached that laxity in conduct could not be compensated for by ritual observance. Also Christ Himself linked our worship of God inseparably with our conduct towards our fellow-men. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself". The purpose of worship can be realized only when, through it, the will of the worshipper is conformed to the will of God.

ABORTION

Unlike birth-control, which prevents the conceiving of human life, abortion is 'the expulsion through human instrumentality, from the womb of the mother, of a living unborn child with the intended result that the child will cease to exist'.

The questions are whether the child, in its unborn state, is a human personality (body and soul) and when does it become so? The writer of Psalm 139 speaks of the wonderful formation of his body in the womb. Through it all he regards himself as a distinct person. The Lord told Jeremiah that he knew him before he was born (Jeremiah 1: 4,5). John the Baptist, in the womb, was filled with the Holy Spirit and was capable of motion and emotion. His mother Elizabeth said, "The baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44). David confessed: "In sin did my mother conceive me"; the guilt of his sinful human nature was imputed to him from the moment of conception.

The scriptural evidence is reflected in nature. After fertilization the new cell is genetically complete, with nothing more than sustenance and protection needed for him or her to grow till birth. Hence God regards the unborn foetus as fully human. It is created in His image, being body and soul from conception. The unborn child is protected by His commandments.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia places on record its abhorrence of abortion on demand as a means of destruction of human life and a form of manslaughter. We condemn the practice as contrary to God's law, an offence to the divine image of man, and detrimental to the welfare of our nation. We call upon our legislators to take steps to have this practice forbidden by law, and to see that this law is justly enforced (Proverbs 6:15, 17; 4:11, 12; 31:8, 9).

Many pregnant women suffer under difficult circumstances. It may be that the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest. The resulting grief should not be eased by the taking of human life. Men and

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women may suffer considerable mental, emotional or economic stress because of an unplanned pregnancy – none of these circumstances can justify the taking of a life. People who need support to continue a pregnancy should be helped by Christians and the government to do so.

It would seem that the only circumstance which justifies abortion is when the life of the mother is at risk and can be saved only by the termination of her pregnancy. In such a case, when it becomes a question of choosing between one human life and another, the final decision will rest with the mother. She is not obligated to give up her life.

When abortion-on-demand has taken place, the church should be ready to provide help to the parents and others who may realize their guilt if they have contributed to the death. Christians should reflect God's compassion to those grieving over the death of the child. However, they cannot provide false comfort or false hope. The genuine forgiveness and comfort found through faith in Christ Jesus should be offered as the only source of true peace.

See: Open Your Mouth for the Dumb. (P. Barnes), Abortion in Australia (J. Buckingham & A. Fisher).

CHURCH AUTHORITY

Suspicion and fear or disappointment are often in people's minds when they hear the Christian Church speak out. Some of this is justified in view of contradictions between what is said by various factions of the church when they are all claiming to speak for God.

It is also wise to take care when psychological or political pressures are used by churches trying to force their views on people. It is an understandable reaction to ask, "Who gives them the right to tell us what to believe?".

Reformed Presbyterians believe Jesus Christ's words in which He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18), meaning that He and He alone does have the right to tell everyone everywhere what to believe. But we are also sensitive to the great care which needs to be taken when anyone claims to speak in Christ's name.

We do not as a church claim to have any right to force our views on anyone. We do not claim to have a special way of finding the truth which no-one else can learn for themselves by listening to what God says. Private interpretations which individual church groups try to defend because they come from their own traditions or from respected leaders or from social pressures are not what we identify with the things Jesus Christ wants the world to know.

We do believe that Jesus Christ has provided authoritative teaching which needs to be followed. This teaching is not confused, vague, or contradictory. It is teaching which is given in words and is identical with the teaching and words of the Bible.

We confess that the church at times fails by making its own interpretation of the Bible *exactly* equal to what Christ himself wants the church to be saying on his behalf. This is a temptation we try to resist all the times, to be true to Christ. But we also believe that the church often says the right thing and that there is a way to tell the difference.

By believing in Jesus Christ as a real person and listening to His teaching as it has been reported in the Bible each person can come to a knowledge of the truth which Christ communicates. On the human level we need to understand His language and meaning in the overall context of what He is saying in the Bible, comparing one part with another.

Regarding God's influence on human life, we need to recognize the unique wisdom He possesses and His unique ability to reach into the spirit of a willing person and teach them the truth. In this respect, the Bible is a special book which carries its own authority through the Holy Spirit's convincing power.

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“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16).

We believe there is a great need for this genuine, godly authority to be understood and relied upon. Disrespect for all authority is not the answer in times when false and misleading claims to authority are around us everywhere. Proper respect for proper authority is the answer. We invite anyone who is in need of reliable and sound guidance to contact us for help in getting into a position of understanding the Bible.

The church which speaks with genuine authority does not proclaim things of its own invention nor for its own power, but proclaims the good news which Christ wants to share through his teaching.

THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

We live in a society which we would call materialist or consumerist. All too easily we are caught up in the desire to have more and more. Such desire comes from within each of us and is reinforced by the advertising media which tells us we deserve to have more and more.

We often know that there is something not right about this. The popular saying, ‘Money can’t buy you friends or happiness’, is one indicator. Yet we still fear to be left behind, miss out, or not ‘keep up with the Joneses’.

The Bible has an enormous amount to say on this matter. It speaks of the deceitfulness of riches (Matthew 13:22) as if we are so easily led astray by the false belief that money and consumerism can somehow make us ultimately happy or provide for us for all time. In *The Parable of the Rich Fool* the rich man said to himself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ However, the reply from God was, “You fool! This night your life will be demanded from you.” (Luke 12:13-21).

We are warned in particular about how material things become a god to us and draw us away from the true God. We “cannot serve both God and money.” (Matthew 6:24) “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

We do not believe that wealth is wrong in itself. It is the *love* of money, not money itself, that is “the root of all evil.” (1 Timothy 6:10) We are urged therefore to have our priorities right. We are to “seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33) Whatever is added to us we are then required to use wisely, “not putting our hope in wealth which is uncertain But to be right in good deeds, generous and willing to share.” (1 Timothy 6:17, 18)

We all know the difficulty of getting our priorities right in regard to using what we have. Jesus spoke of the struggle it is for the rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. (Luke 18: 24, 25) Yet he showed great love and concern for the rich. The rich, and all of us, need to reciprocate his love. The rich ruler of Luke 18 went away sad because he would not accept Jesus’ ‘difficult’ teachings on wealth. By contrast, in Luke 19, Zaccheus, the wealthy chief tax collector, decided to give half of his possessions to the poor, and repay fourfold any he had cheated.

We commend the words of Jesus to all. “Do not store up treasures on earth but store up treasures in heaven for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6: 19-21)

THE MEDIATORIAL KINGSHIP OF CHRIST AND ITS NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The Lord Jesus Christ, as Mediator of the Covenant of Grace, executes the offices of Prophet, Priest and King. From eternity past the Lord Jesus has exercised that eternal or essential kingship which is

his by virtue of his divine Sonship. However his Mediatorial Kingship has been given to him in respect to his work of redemption.

His Mediatorial Kingship was decreed in God's eternal plan of redemption prior to our Lord's incarnation. This decree anticipates his redemptive work, and accompanied the decree of redemption. Psalm 2 speaks of the Father's decree in the context of the hostility of the nations against his Messiah. Although the Psalm refers to the Davidic monarchy it also points to the prior appointment of an even greater king whose kingdom will be established at a later date, see Psalm 2:8-9.

See also Luke 22:29, "And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my father has conferred one on me." John 5:27, "And he has given him (the Son of Man) authority to judge because he is the Son of Man."

His Mediatorial Kingship was heralded at the time of the incarnation. At his birth he was acknowledged to be a king. "Where is he who was born king of the Jews." Matthew 2:2. He was granted authority to lay down his life and authority to take it up again. See John 10:18. This he received from his Father. This authority was a practical necessity in view of the ministry which lay before him.

In our Lord's high priestly prayer he spoke of a grant of authority which was clearly redemptive in purpose. Speaking to his father about himself, Jesus prayed, "For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him." John 17:2.

His Mediatorial Kingship was a grant of authority that accompanied his exaltation. In other words it was contingent upon his death and resurrection as mediator of the covenant of grace. Matthew 28:18, Ephesians 1:20-23, Phil 2:9f. By his resurrection and ascension the Lord Jesus was invested with regal power and authority over all things in heaven and on earth, over men and angels, over individuals and nations, over Church and State.

Nations, as such, have, by the decree of God the Father, been given to the Lord Jesus Christ so that he may rule over them as their supreme Lord. As the Son of God he providentially directs the acts and affairs of nations. As Mediator he is also entitled to unlimited moral dominion over every creature able to hear his commands. He gathers the nations under his Lordship through the preaching of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. This happens as individuals are saved and brought to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ in every sphere of life.

Nations, as political and constitutional entities, are obliged to recognize the political dimensions of our Lord's redemptive Lordship. Jesus Christ must be explicitly recognized in the nation's constitution as the supreme ruler. Nations are obliged to appoint their rulers, frame their laws, and regulate their administration according to Christ's revealed will and in subservience to the interests of his kingdom.

As the Scriptures are the supreme standard for the regulation of civil government, Scriptural requirements are required of those who rule. Rulers are bound to rule in the fear of God. They should personally profess and exemplify Christianity. They should officially acknowledge their own and the nation's subjection to Christ as Lord. They should, in their role as civil rulers, aid the Church in the accomplishment of its task, and, at the same time, recognize the spiritual independence of the Church which is subject to Jesus Christ alone.

The Australian Constitution fails to acknowledge the authority of Jesus Christ. Successive governments have not sought to remedy this failing. Our primary allegiance is to King Jesus and Christian citizens should act politically in a way that is consistent with this principle.

THE PERMANENCE OF MARRIAGE

According to God's design, human beings should be sexually united only within a permanent marriage relationship between a man and a woman (Matthew 19:4-6). No alteration to this

arrangement should be considered on merely human authority. As Christians we believe that this permanent relationship should not be broken by any human being, because Jesus Christ said, 'They are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.'

We believe disregard for God's pattern is wrong. Trial marriage, swapping partners, unmarried people accepting the privilege of sexual intercourse without commitment to unbroken loyalty, are all judged wrong by God's standard. The Bible teaches, 'Since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband' (1 Corinthians 7:2), and, 'Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral' (Hebrews 13:4). Because God is right, all who reject his directions should be warned about their error.

The only other patterns open to a person is to enjoy working in God's world outside of marriage, devoted to him with the loyalty and attention which might otherwise be given to a marriage partner. Both alternatives have distinct advantages of their own, but we should not think of either being in itself more virtuous than the other. Married or unmarried, the main aim is to honour God and enjoy the benefits he gives us (1 Corinthians 10:31).

God-oriented and God-directed living is rejected by many today in favour of self-centred pleasure. Many marriages begin and end without regard for God's directions. Despite laws which overlook the fact, the end of marriage is also under the authority of God's word. The Bible makes it clear that when the marriage bond is violated in certain circumstances an offended person may have the right to claim the bond is broken and the offender at fault.

The only circumstances in which this may happen are in cases of adultery, that is, being sexually united to a person other than the marriage partner, or wilful desertion, which is when one partner refuses to maintain the marriage relationship (Matthew 19:9, 1 Corinthians 7:12-15). In such cases the one against whom these steps are taken may obtain a divorce and be free to remarry. In every other case the marriage obligations remain. If divorce has taken place on unbiblical grounds it needs to be repented of and God's pardon obtained and recognised by the church before marriage can take place again.

How can the obligations of married people be fulfilled in cases of mistreatment on the part of one or both partners? The answer to such problems, even though they may be very complex, is to follow God's directions and trust him. The Reformed Presbyterian Church is ready to help in such situations. Wrong behaviour can be identified and changed. The roles of husbands and wives can be clarified. Strength and patience can be found in God's word.

Human marriage which shows each partner submitting to the other and seeking forgiveness for wrongs done pictures the relationship which exists between Christians and Jesus Christ who loves them and gave himself for them.

Further reading: "Christian Living in the Home" (J. Adams); "Divorce" (J. Murray)

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Christians who decide to get married are required to marry "only in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 7:39) This means that they are to approach matrimony thoughtfully with an understanding of God's purposes in marriage. It also means that a Christian may only marry a person who professes the same saving faith in the Lord Jesus and may not marry an unbeliever. See 2 Corinthians 6:14. We recognise that this verse has a wider application than marriage, but one implication is that a believer may not be unequally yoked with an unbeliever in marriage.

Because of the importance of this principle office holders within the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia shall not conduct marriage ceremonies for couples who are entering an unequal yoke; nor will Church buildings be made available for such ceremonies.