



# Corporate Worship Position Paper

Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia

*“The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

As reviewed and amended by  
Presbytery, October 2011



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## Introduction

The purpose of this Position Paper is to express the unity of the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia in the essential principles and practices of Corporate Worship, firstly in accordance with the Scriptures and, subordinately, to the Westminster Confession of Faith. As a secondary purpose, this document also provides enquirers with an overview of and Biblical rationale for the Church's practices in Corporate Worship.

This document has not been drafted primarily as an academic exercise. The topic of worship in general and of corporate or public worship in particular, has been the focus of heated debates and 'worship wars' over the last several decades. Thankfully God has preserved us from the worst of these but we believe it is necessary to consider this topic now in the light of: (i) the Scriptures as our sole rule of faith and life<sup>1</sup>; (ii) our Reformed and confessional heritage<sup>2</sup>; and, (iii) the culture and circumstances in which God has placed us in His providence. As such, we have sought to delineate where the Bible speaks authoritatively to mandate certain principles and practices; and, where God has allowed for degrees of latitude and variation in particulars.

It ought not to be thought that this topic is one of secondary importance or a mere distraction from more important priorities. On the contrary, we believe there is no institution on the face of the earth more central to God's redemptive purposes than His Church, and that there is no subject more pivotal to the life of the Church than its communion with God in Corporate Worship. Indeed, throughout both Biblical and church history, it has very often been out of God-centred, Bible-saturated corporate worship that His people have been radically transformed and unleashed on a dying world. This document has been drafted with the prayer that our Corporate Worship as local churches individually, and as a wider Church, would be so used in God's purposes.

Due to the catastrophic impact of The Fall, however, we recognise that both the gathered church and its worship were entirely unknown and unknowable without special revelation. As supernatural and redemptive realities, we hold that Scripture alone provides the blueprint for Christ's church and its worship. This is the only source from which we understand Christ's priorities and emphases for His worship and how to "conduct ourselves in the house of God" (1 Tim 3:15), both for the good of the saints and for the most effective testimony to the lost.

Therefore, as we have approached this matter we have owned our natural blindness on the topic. Thankfully though, we have also been able to confess that the Holy Scriptures are an all-sufficient body of truth for Christ's people; and, that they exhaustively address everything worthy of emphasis and pre-eminence in His church of all ages. Because the Christian church and its worship are supernatural realities called into existence by the Word of God, it could only be so.

Sola Scriptura. Soli Deo Gloria.

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<sup>1</sup> The Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia (PRCA) believes the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired and infallible Word of God and the only rule of faith and life.

<sup>2</sup> The PRCA receives the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), as amended, as a faithful interpretation of the Word of God and as a confession of its own faith.

## Acknowledgements

In addition to the Scriptures and the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), numerous resources have provided assistance in the drafting of this document. We do, however, wish to publicly acknowledge the following resources as being of great assistance, without necessarily endorsing every particular contained in them.

- ❖ The Directory for the Public Worship of God (2011), Orthodox Presbyterian Church – Some sections of this document were used verbatim
- ❖ Gathered Worship Discussion Paper (2011), Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia

## Interpretation

Many of the principles and practices included in this Position Paper are understood by the Church to be required by the Word of God, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence, and are therefore to be joyfully received and obeyed (WCF 1:6, 21:1).

In matters of Circumstance and Form in worship not specifically provided for in Scripture, this Position Paper provides guidance according to the light of nature and Christian prudence, consistent with the general rules of the Word (WCF Ch 1:6). Such matters may be distinguished from those specifically mandated where the sentence includes the words "should", "is advisable", "is appropriate", "do well", "is fitting" or "may".

The Scripture passages given in brackets are not exhaustive. Some Biblical doctrines (even important ones, such as the Trinity) require an understanding of the whole pattern of Scripture, rather than one or two proof texts. In such instances, the texts given in brackets can only provide the reader with a place to start. A number of Defined Terms are also provided for in this document and these are capitalised for easy reference (i.e. where they are *not* capitalised, the standard dictionary definition applies).

Should there be any inconsistency between this Position Paper and the Westminster Confession of Faith as amended by the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia, the latter shall take precedence.

## Defined Terms

**Corporate Worship.** The occasions when the local church is called together for the specific purpose of worshipping God. The term Corporate Worship is largely synonymous with the terms Public Worship, Gathered Worship and Religious Worship (WCF 21).

**Circumstances** (of Corporate Worship). The practical incidentals of Corporate Worship, such as whether to sit in pews, chairs or stand, whether to meet in a church building or a shop front, the specific meeting times and length of the service, etc. (see Section 3.3; and, WCF 1:6).

**Elements** (of Corporate Worship). The primary and essential parts of Corporate Worship as prescribed by, or deduced from, Holy Scripture. They are the specific means God has chosen to bless in Corporate Worship, through the working of the Holy Spirit, to: (i) reveal Himself to humanity; and, (ii) instruct His gathered saints how they may respond to and commune with Him in ways that honour and delight Him (see Sections 2 and 3.2; and, WCF 21:3-5).

**Forms** (of Corporate Worship). The external means by which the Elements of worship are practically ordered and expressed, and which may vary from one culture or situation to another, for the purpose of ensuring intelligibility and edification. Some examples may include variations in the terminology used in preaching, the tunes selected for particular hymns, the precise sequence of prayers, hymns, Bible readings, etc. (see Section 3.3).

# PRINCIPLES & PRACTICAL EMPHASES OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

## 1 Principles Concerning Corporate Worship

### 1.1 *The Priority of Corporate Worship*

- 1.1.1 Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever, which is the appropriate worship of God in everyday life (1 Cor 10:31, Rom 12:1). Nevertheless, in both the Old and New Testaments, worship consists primarily in specific acts of real and intimate communion with God Himself (Ps 96:7-9 - Hebrew: '*shachah*'; Matt. 4:9-10, John 4:24, 1 Cor 14:25, Rev 11:16 - Greek: '*proskuneo*'; cf. WCF 21:1).
- 1.1.2 God's people in all ages are, by definition, a worshiping community. In the covenant, God promises His chosen ones that He will dwell among them as their God and they will be His people (Gen 17:7, Ex 19:5, Deut 29:12-13, 2 Sam 7:14, Jer 31:33, Heb 8:10 cf. 2 Cor 6:16, Eph 2:22, Rev 21:3). Together the people of God are a Living Temple, a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation and His own Special People declaring the praises of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Cor 3:16-17, 2 Cor 6:16, Eph 2:19-22, 1 Pet 2:5, 9).
- 1.1.3 While both personal (Ps 1:2, Dan 6:10, 9:2-3, Matt 6:6) and family worship (Deut 6:6-9, 2 Tim 3:15) are essential to healthy discipleship, the Scriptures reserve the strongest encouragements of God's presence to the local church when it assembles in Christ's name and under His authority, even when consisting of only two or three believers. Where the worship of a local church is Biblical, spiritual and intelligible, times of Corporate Worship will be the fullest expression of its union with Christ on this side of heaven and even the unbelievers present may recognise the immediate presence of God in the assembly (Matt 18:15-20, 2 Cor 6:16, 1 Cor 14:23-25).

### 1.2 *The Essence of Corporate Worship*

- 1.2.1 Corporate Worship is not merely a gathering of God's children with each other, but is, before all else, a meeting of the triune God with His covenant people (see Section 1.1.1; Ps 95:1-2, Matt 18:20, 2 Cor 6:16; cf. WCF 7:1). Because of this only God Himself and His truth in Scripture are to be central in, and the primary emphasis of, everything that occurs in Corporate Worship (see Section 3).
- 1.2.2 In its essence, Corporate Worship is firstly a public bowing down or prostrating of ourselves in our hearts before the awesome presence of the triune God (Greek '*proskuneo*' - John 4:24, Matt. 4:9-10, 1 Cor 14:25, Rev 11:16) as He meets with His people. As the saints meet with the God of all truth, holiness and grace, Corporate Worship is also a time of learning, sanctification, equipping and comfort as they delight in and submit to the Word of God applied by the Spirit of God (1 Cor 14:3-5, 26, Eph 4:11-16, Col 3:16, Heb 10:24-25).
- 1.2.3 Far from being a passive spectator in Corporate Worship, Almighty God actively works by His Spirit in each Element of the service (Jn 14:26, Rom 8:26, 1 Thes 1:5, 1 Pet 1:2). In Corporate Worship, God communes with his people, and they with Him, in a manner which expresses the close relationships of the Father and his redeemed children (2 Sam 7:14, Rev 21: 3, 7), of the Son and his beloved bride (Eph 5:25, Rev 21:3, 9), and of the Holy Spirit and the living temple in which He dwells (2 Cor 6:16).

- 1.2.4 As such a meeting with God our Creator, Corporate Worship must necessarily involve the entirety of our beings (Matt 22:37, Mk 12:30, Lk 10:27). God's people are not to be cold, passive spectators in Corporate Worship but rather, by faith, are to participate actively and spiritually, seeking the Holy Spirit to powerfully engage their minds, emotions and wills in each Element of the service (Jn 14:26, 1 Cor 2:10, Eph 4:30).
- 1.2.5 Corporate Worship consists in the exercise of several Elements prescribed in Scripture, of which there are two principal types. These are, firstly, those Elements which are performed on behalf of God (by a representative voice) and, secondly, those Elements which are performed by the congregation (by their own or a representative voice).
- 1.2.6 In the first type, God, through Christ, by His Spirit working through the Word, addresses His people in the reading (2 Tim 3:16-17, 1 Tim 4:13) and preaching (2 Cor 5:20) of the Scriptures, and in the sacraments (1 Cor 11:26). In the second type, God's people, enabled by the Holy Spirit, address God, through Christ, in prayer (Lk 11:2), in song (Ps 96:1, Eph 5:19), in offerings (1 Cor 16:2), in hearing and submitting to the Word (Jas 1:22, Heb 4:2), and in receiving and partaking of the sacraments by faith (Jn 6:35; WCF 21:5).
- 1.2.7 Although all people are to be encouraged to attend Corporate Worship, only those with Christ as their Mediator, whose hearts have been made new by the Holy Spirit, can truly worship God (Eph 2:18, 3:12, Heb 9:6-15, Rev 1:6, 5:10, Prov 28:9; WCF 21:2).

### **1.3 Right Attitudes for Corporate Worship**

- 1.3.1 God's people not only are to come into His presence with a deep sense of awe at the thought of His perfect holiness and their own exceeding sinfulness (Ex 20:18, Is 6:1-5, Heb 12:28-29, 1 Tim 6:16, Rev 1:17), but also are to enter into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise (Ps 95:1, Ps 100:4, Is 12:3, Ps 32:11, Eph 5:19, 1 Pet 1:8; WCF 21:1). This is not least because of the great salvation that the Father has so graciously wrought for them through his only begotten Son and which He applies to them by his Holy Spirit.
- 1.3.2 Because Christ is the Mediator of the covenant (Heb 8:6, 9:15, 12:24), no one draws near to God except through Him alone (Heb 9; WCF 21:2). Therefore Corporate Worship is to be conducted in a manner that expresses conscious reliance upon both the mediation and merits of Jesus Christ together with the gracious, immediate working of His Spirit (Eph 2:18).
- 1.3.3 God's people must therefore be instructed and persuaded to value times of Corporate Worship that are conducted in biblical simplicity and that wholly rest on God to bless His own ordinances, and not upon human inventiveness, an over-dependence upon which may evidence the leaven of idolatry at work in a church (Ex 25:40, Lev 10:1, Jer 19:5, 32:35, Matt 15:8-9, Jn 4:22, Col 2:23).

### **1.4 The Lord's Day as the Primary Context of Corporate Worship**

- 1.4.1 God has set aside the first day of the week, or the Lord's Day, for His worship (Ex 20:8-11, 1 Cor 16:1-2, Acts 20:7, Rev 1:10; WCF 21:7). For God's children, remembering and sanctifying the entire day as the Christian Sabbath is a great delight, especially because it is a divine appointment and special audience with our Father the King, Christ our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit our Comforter (Is 58:13-14).

- 1.4.2 Although it is fitting for Christ's churches to assemble for worship on other occasions also, which are left to the discretion of particular Sessions<sup>3</sup>, the Lord calls the whole congregation of each local church to the sacred privilege and duty of assembling for Corporate Worship each Lord's Day (1 Cor 16:1-2, Acts 20:7).
- 1.4.3 Where the practice of weekly Sabbath rest and spiritual work is carelessly neglected or forsaken, the reality and spiritual power of Corporate Worship will always be compromised, the church and human society weakened, and both seriously undermined.
- 1.4.4 It is advisable that a congregation assemble for public worship both in the morning and in the evening of the Lord's Day where practically possible. Members who are unable to attend an evening worship service are encouraged to use the evening of the Lord's Day for family or private worship (Psalm 92:1-2).<sup>4</sup>

### **1.5 Participation in Corporate Worship**

- 1.5.1 In Corporate Worship, the saints gather together to draw near to the only true and living God as His covenant people, the body of Christ (see Section 1.1.1; Ps 95:1-2, Matt 18:20, 2 Cor 6:16).
- 1.5.2 Because God's people worship, not as an aggregation of individuals, but as a congregation of those who are members of one another in Christ, Corporate Worship is to be conducted as an activity in which all the members participate as the body of Christ (Eph 4:16, 25). As such, each one shall esteem others better than himself (Phil 2:3), labouring to worship together with sincerity (Eph 6:24), reverence (Heb 12:28-29), soundness of mind (2 Tim 1:7), joy (1 Pet 1:8), expectation (Lk 11:5-12) and great glory in God and His Gospel (Rom 1:16).
- 1.5.3 Accordingly, Corporate Worship is to be conducted in a manner that enables and expects all the members of the covenant community—male and female, old and young, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, healthy and infirm, people from every race and nation—to worship together (Jas 2:1, Gal 3:28, Col 3:11, Rom 10:12, Rom 16:1-16; WCF 26:1). For this reason, the covenant children should be present so far as possible, together with the adults and youth (Eph 6:1, Acts 16:32; WCF 25:2).

### **1.6 The Evangelistic Potential of Corporate Worship**

- 1.6.1 The Corporate Worship of the church is conducted in an unbelieving world, even where the surrounding culture is uninterested or even hostile. One of the divine purposes for Corporate Worship on this earth is for God's people to proclaim the wonderful works of God before the unbelieving nations and to sing joyfully to Him who called them out of darkness into His marvellous light (Ps 57:9, Ps108:3, 1 Pet 2:9).
- 1.6.2 As such, while Corporate Worship is before all else a meeting of the triune God with His covenant people, all such times are also to be highly valued as a testimony, not only to believers but also to unbelievers, to God's redemptive purposes in a fallen world. It is in this context of Christ's intimate communion with His people that unbelievers often become convinced of divine truth, convicted of sin and fall down on their faces in worship, reporting that God is truly among them (1 Cor 14:23-25; WCF 34:1).

<sup>3</sup> The word 'Session' is used to describe the Elders of a local church as they function together to lead, teach and oversee that particular church under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 14:23, 1 Tim 5:17, 1 Pet 5:1,5).

<sup>4</sup> This paragraph was added at Presbytery meeting April 2012

- 1.6.3 God may call sinners to Himself during Corporate Worship. Therefore sessions are to see that worship is conducted in a way that is as intelligible and as helpful as possible to winning the unbeliever, while still being in full accord with Scripture (1 Cor 9:22; 14:23-25; cf. WCF 34:6). Hence, members are to be encouraged to invite unbelievers to attend Corporate Worship as a compelling Gospel testimony.

## **2 The Practical Emphases of Scripture for Corporate Worship**

### **2.1 Introductory Comments**

- 2.1.1 The Scriptures contain many accounts of failed attempts by people, well-intentioned or otherwise, to worship God guided by their own insight, ingenuity and self-imposed religion (Gen 4:1-8, Lev 10:1, 2 Kin 12:25ff, Jer 19:5, 32:35, Matt 15:8-9, Col 2:23; cf. WCF 21:1).
- 2.1.2 Similarly, left to our own discretion, there may be many things we would attempt to offer to God in Corporate Worship today. And yet in the Scriptures we find the New Testament churches expressing their corporate worship primarily by way of a few specific ordinances or 'Elements' that are themselves defined by God-breathed revelation.
- 2.1.3 These Elements are the constituent parts of Corporate Worship as breathed out by God in Scripture. Together, they are the specific corporate activities upon which Christ the King of the Church has placed emphasis and which therefore must be the practical emphases in Corporate Worship in the Gospel age.
- 2.1.4 The divinely prescribed Elements of worship are: Reading God's Word, Preaching God's Word, Praying to God, Singing to God and the Sacraments, together with the giving of offerings, professions of faith and the making and renewing of vows (WCF 21:3-5).

### **2.2 Reading God's Word**

- 2.2.1 The Elders of each local church are exhorted to give attention to the public reading of the Scriptures in Corporate Worship (Neh 8:8, 1 Tim 4:13).
- 2.2.2 He who performs the public reading of Scripture serves as God's representative voice. Through this reading, God speaks directly to the congregation in his own words (2 Tim 3:16). For this reason, the reader ought to use an accurate, faithful translation in the language of the people (1 Cor 14:19; WCF 1:8). He must be prepared and read clearly and with understanding, and the congregation shall attend to the reading with the deepest reverence (Jas 1:22, Acts 10:33, Matt 13:19, Heb 4:2, Is 66:2).
- 2.2.3 Given the central role of the Scriptures in the life of Christ's church, it is appropriate that sizable portions are read each Lord's Day, normally with direct reference to the sermon, but also perhaps as part of systematic reading through Scriptures over a period of years.
- 2.2.4 The hearing of God's Word read is a means of grace to believers and unbelievers alike (Jn 17:17, 1 Pet 2:2, Heb 4:12, 1 Pet 1:23).

## **2.3 Preaching God's Word**

- 2.3.1 The preaching of the Word, the power of God to salvation, is central to the Corporate Worship of God (2 Tim 4:2). It is therefore a matter of supreme importance that the preacher preach only the Word of God, not human wisdom, and that he handle the Word of God correctly, regularly setting forward Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith (1 Cor 2:4, 2 Tim 3:16-17, 2 Cor 4:2, 2 Tim 2:15, Col 1:28, 1 Cor 2:2; WCF 21:5, 34:6). In the sermon, God addresses the congregation by the mouth of His servant (2 Cor 5:18, 20), and through His Spirit opens the ears of His people (Acts 16:14).
- 2.3.2 The preacher shall prepare each sermon prayerfully and diligently (Acts 6:4, 2 Tim 2:15). He may not use a passage merely as a point of departure. He should take care in preaching that his exposition and application of the Scriptures be clear and simple, having regard to the capacity of the hearers, in demonstration of the Spirit and power, with fervour and zeal, and that he not divorce Christian duty from Christian faith (Neh 8:8, Mk 12:37, 1 Cor 2:4, 2 Tim 3:16-17).
- 2.3.3 The preacher must, as Christ's ambassador, seek to build up the saints in the most holy faith and exhort the unconverted to be reconciled to God (Eph 4:12, 2 Cor 5:18-6:2). Nothing is more necessary than that the Gospel of salvation by grace be proclaimed without any adulteration or compromise, in order that the hearers may learn to rely only on the grace of God in Christ for salvation, to the exclusion of their own works or character, ascribing all glory to God alone for their salvation (Eph 2:8-10, 1:6, 12, 14).
- 2.3.4 The preacher is to instruct his hearers in the whole counsel of God, exhort the congregation to more mature obedience to Christ, and warn them of the sins and dangers that are around them and within them (Acts 20:27, Tit 2:11-12, 1 Jn 2:15-17). A preacher fails to perform his task as a God-appointed watchman on Zion's walls when he neglects to warn the congregation of dangerous or soul-destroying errors and teachings (2 Cor 11:2-4, 13-15).

## **2.4 Praying to God**

- 2.4.1 A vital mark of the true people of God is that they are a "house of prayer", and this is especially so when they are assembled together in Corporate Worship (Is 56:7, Matt 21:13; WCF 21:3).
- 2.4.2 For it to be acceptable to God, all prayer is to be by faith (Mk 11:24), ordinarily to the Father (Matt 6:9), in the name of the Son of God (Jn 14:13, 14, 1 Pet 2:5), by the help of His Spirit (Rom 8:26), and according to His will (1 Jn 5:14).
- 2.4.3 He who leads in public prayer serves as the voice of the congregation. For this reason, he ought to pray in such a way, in clear words and in the plural, that the entire assembly of God's people can pray with him; and it is the duty of the members of the congregation, not only to hear his words, but also to pray them in their hearts (Matt 15:8). To these ends, he who leads should diligently prepare himself to pray, having his thoughts infused with Scriptural themes and being ready to take hold of God's promises by faith on behalf of the congregation (1 Jn 5:14, Dan 9:1-19, 1 Ki 18:1, 42).

2.4.4 During Corporate Worship there should ordinarily be a breadth of prayer, which may be offered as more than one prayer, throughout the service. Such prayer should include adoration of God's perfections (Matt 6:9), thanksgiving for all His mercies (Psalm 107:8-9), confession of sin (Matt 6:12-15), supplication for forgiveness through the blood of the atonement and for renewal by the Holy Spirit (Psalm 51:1-4, 10-12), lamentation in times of distress or crisis, and intercession for the needs of God's people and others (Eph 6:18-19, Phil 1:4, 2 Tim 2:1). It is appropriate that the congregation intercede for the whole of mankind; for civic rulers; for the church universal; for evangelism and missions at home and abroad; for our whole Church and for other faithful churches; and especially for the particular local church itself, including its officers, its ministries, and its members (Rom 15:30-31, Eph 1:16ff, 3:14ff, 2 Cor 1:11, 9:14, 13:7, Col 4:2-4, 2 Tim 2:1-4).

## 2.5 *Singing to God*

- 2.5.1 *The calling to sing to the Lord.*<sup>5</sup> Divine truth should move us (Is 12:3, Ps 32:11). Therefore God repeatedly commands us to sing (Psalm 100:2, Zeph 3:14, Zech 2:10, Eph 5:19, Col 3:16, Jas 5:13). As such, the worship of the God we love is never to be an uninterested or heartless duty and this is especially so in sung worship (Ps 27:6, 66:2).
- 2.5.2 *The purposes and character of singing in worship.* Congregational singing in Corporate Worship is both an act of worship to God Himself, and of teaching and admonishing one another in Scriptural truths. As such it is both a duty and great privilege to be practised in all the churches and by all of the members; and it is appropriate that each congregation cultivate its ability to sing together wholeheartedly and with delight and beauty (Col 3:16, Eph 5:18-20; WCF 21:5).
- 2.5.3 *The choice of materials for singing in worship.* In the choice of song for Corporate Worship, great care must be taken that materials are selected: (i) that are in accord with the teaching and tenor of Scripture (1 Cor 14:15); and, (ii) that simultaneously engage the mind and excite the affections with reference to Biblical truth (Psalm 47:7). The words are to be suitable for the worship of a great God who is both transcendent<sup>6</sup> and immanent<sup>7</sup>; and, the tunes are to be subordinate to and supportive of the themes and the mood conveyed by the words.
- 2.5.4 *Congregational singing is to be the focus of music in worship.* As the emphasis of the New Testament with regard to music in worship is upon the voices of the redeemed in congregational singing (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16, Heb 2:12, Rev 5:9, 14:3, 15:3), musical instruments and/or supporting vocalists, whether live or recorded, ought not to assume a role of emphasis or prominence in the Corporate Worship of the churches.
- 2.5.5 *Employing musical gifts to assist congregational singing.* Musical gifts may nevertheless be properly used in Corporate Worship to assist and serve the congregation in its sung worship of God. While such gifts shall not be used to attract praise or applause toward the musicians (Is 42:8, 48:11, Jn 3:30), or to entertain the congregation (see Section 1.2.1), a simple excellence and aesthetic<sup>8</sup> quality should be pursued in their use to assist the entire congregation to sing with Biblical understanding and emotion, making melody in their hearts to the Lord (Psalm 33:3, Eph 5:19, 1 Cor 14:26, Mal 1:7-8).

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<sup>5</sup> The Presbytery felt it beneficial to include subheadings for each of the points in Section 2.5.

<sup>6</sup> Transcendent means 'going beyond the limits of creation'. God is different to, and infinitely above, His creation.

<sup>7</sup> Immanent means 'dwelling within creation'. God is actively involved in and draws near to His creation.

<sup>8</sup> Aesthetic means 'having a sense of beauty'.

- 2.5.6 *The legitimate use of musical instruments in worship.* One or more musical instruments in Corporate Worship are lawful provided that they remain as a Circumstance of worship and do not become a central focus or point of emphasis (see Section 3.3). The Scriptures: (i) evidence that they were employed in worship under the old administration of the Covenant of Grace (Ps 71:22, 81:2, 144:9, 150:1-6); (ii) indicate such use was not exclusively associated with the sacrificial system or with typology (eg. Ps 92:1-4); and, (iii) describe the worship of heaven as employing instruments (Rev 5:8, 15:2).
- 2.5.7 *The position and number of musicians.* Given their status as Circumstances of worship, it is advisable that neither musical instruments nor supporting vocalists be positioned in a place of prominence in Corporate Worship; and, that their number is maintained in proportion to the size of the assembly to ensure the singing of the entire congregation is very clearly the focus of the music in worship (Col 3:16, Eph 5:18-20, Rev 5:11-14).
- 2.5.8 *Discerning between musical forms.* In addition, instrumentation, music and tunes should be chosen remembering that: (i) because of God's common grace in the world, various musical forms, including a number that are popular in the present day, are morally acceptable and can be used with discretion in the worship of God and to His glory; and, (ii) some musical forms may not be edifying to the congregation and therefore ought not be used in Corporate Worship (1 Cor 10:23).
- 2.5.9 *The collection of songs and the media used.* Although different media may be used to print or project the words for each song, it is advisable that each Session oversee a collection of songs that are carefully selected for the Corporate Worship of the local church. As such, congregations do well to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16) that respond to the full scope of divine revelation in their selection (1 Chron 16:9, Acts 20:27), as well as those that represent both the best of the present and past hymns.
- 2.5.10 *The status of solos, choirs, etc.* Because Corporate Worship is the worship of God by His people as a body (Ps 34:3, 95:1-6, Matt 26:30, Rev 5:9, 14:3, 15:3), we normally seek to have the whole congregation singing when God's praise is sung. Therefore, while it may be helpful in exceptional situations, in singing God's praises in Corporate Worship we do not normally employ solos, singing groups, or choirs.

## **2.6 The Sacraments**

- 2.6.1 The two sacraments, Baptism (WCF 28) and the Lord's Supper (WCF 29), as visible signs and seals of the Word of the covenant (Rom 4:11, Gen 17:7, 10, cf. Col 2:11-12), are important Elements of Corporate Worship. They represent Christ and His benefits (1 Cor 10:16, 11:23-26, Gal 3:27), confirm His people's participation in Him (Jn 6:53-56, 1 Cor 12:12-13), visibly mark off from the world those who belong to His church (Rom 15:8, Ex 12:48), and solemnly bind them to covenant faith and loyalty (Rom 6:3-4, 1 Cor 10:16, 21; WCF 27:1).
- 2.6.2 The sacraments are ordinarily administered in an assembly of the local church for Corporate Worship, baptism being a sacrament whereby the persons baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church (1 Cor 12:13, Acts 2:41; WCF 28:1), and the Lord's Supper signifying and sealing the communion of believers with Christ and with each other as members of his mystical body (Jn 6:53-56, 1 Cor 12:12-13, Lk 22:17, Matt 26:27, 1 Cor 10:16-17; WCF 29:1).

- 2.6.3 While the sacraments are principally for the benefit of the believer (Matt 26:26-29, 1 Cor 11:24-25), the right administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, together with an explanation of their Gospel meaning, also provides a testimony to any unbelievers present (1 Cor 11:26).
- 2.6.4 In order that the sacraments may be observed with discernment and profit, it is imperative that adequate preparation be made prior to their administration (1 Cor 11:27-29, 31). In observing the sacraments, God's people ought to meditate on the teaching of the Word of God concerning them and consider their own walk with Christ, repenting of sin and reaffirming their solemn covenant with Him.

## **2.7 Other Elements**

- 2.7.1 In addition to these five Elements of Corporate Worship, the Scriptures also recognise the place of bringing offerings on the Lord's Day (1 Cor 16:2), the public profession of faith, the corporate confession of faith (for example The Apostles Creed, The Nicene Creed etc) and the taking and renewing of vows before God (Matt 10:32, Rom 10:9-10, Ps 22:25; WCF 22:1) as worthy inclusions in the Corporate Worship of the church (WCF 21:5).

## THE THEOLOGY & LEADERSHIP OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

### 3 The Theological Framework Governing Corporate Worship

#### 3.1 *Sola Scriptura: A God-breathed Blueprint is Vital to Corporate Worship*

- 3.1.1 Biblically, Corporate Worship exists specifically in the context of Christ's Church as the covenant people of God (see Section 1.1.2, Heb 13:20 with Eph 5:25). Neither the gathered professing church of the redeemed and their children, nor their approach to God in worship, was devised by man's ingenuity. On the contrary, due to the catastrophic impact of The Fall, both Christ's church and its worship are entirely unknown and unknowable without special, God-breathed revelation.
- 3.1.2 Rather than having his eyes opened to divine knowledge, in Adam's sin man had his mind blinded spiritually (Eph 4:17-18); he became dead in trespasses and sins and at enmity toward God (Gen 6:5, Ps 14:3, Is 1:2-6, Eph 2:1-3, Rom 5:10, Rom 7:18, Col 1:21; WCF 6:1, 6:2). It was from this condition of total depravity that the most fundamental struggle of the earth's history arose, namely the battle between the worship of the Creator and the worship of created imaginations and things. Idolatry in all its multiplied forms became the religious condition of the entire human race (Rom 1:18-25); and, even Christians and churches are not utterly free from its deceptive power such that they are warned away and commanded to flee from it by the Apostles (1 Cor 10:14).
- 3.1.3 God's people do not know how to conduct themselves in the church, which is the house of the living God, apart from the Scriptures (1 Tim 3:15). The power and deceptiveness of indwelling sin, which is 'a law' at work in every believer, also involves an often subtle but undying bias toward disobedience in a redeemed person. Even Paul, the Spirit-filled Apostle, had little confidence in his own personal intentions and efforts (Rom 7:14,18, 24). He found that at his very best moments of seeking to honour God, this powerful law of sin was most actively at work within him (Rom 7:21, cf Gal 5:17b).
- 3.1.4 In the context of humanity's idolatry, blindness and disobedience, the Scriptures testify of themselves as being the unique, all-sufficient source of knowledge and authority in spiritual matters (Deut 12:28-32, 2 Tim 3:14-17). Scripture alone provides the only blueprint for Christ's church and its worship, as supernatural and redemptive realities in all ages. It is the only source from which we understand Christ's priorities as it exhaustively addresses everything worthy of emphasis and pre-eminence in His church.
- 3.1.5 In the Gospel age, the Holy Spirit has been poured out and helps the saints in their infirmities. The Spirit lusts against the flesh and enables believers, to fulfil (albeit imperfectly) the righteous requirements of the law (Gal 5:17, Rom 8:3-4). Nevertheless, the genuine leading of the Holy Spirit must never be divorced from the Scriptures which He breathed out. The subjective promptings of the Holy Spirit, with regard to the church and its worship, will always be in perfect harmony with the text of Scripture and may be reliably tested and discerned by this objective standard (Jn 16:13 with Jn 17:17, Eph 1:13).

### **3.2 The Regulative Principle and the Elements of Corporate Worship**

- 3.2.1 This requirement for a God-breathed blueprint for the essential Elements of Corporate Worship has historically been known as the Regulative Principle. Importantly though, this principle by no means suggests that Christ has prescribed a set order for Corporate Worship in all of its external Circumstances and Forms. Therefore while the Regulative Principle helps assure unity between the churches in the most essential matters of worship, it also allows for Biblical latitude and variation in lesser matters.
- 3.2.2 In essence, the Regulative Principle asserts that all of the central features of both church government and Corporate Worship have a specific, positive God-breathed mandate (see Section 3.1). Because both the church and its Corporate Worship were supernaturally revealed by God in His word, only that which is revealed in Scripture as central in either should be emphasised or given prominence with nothing else being placed at the centre by man. Therefore this mandate occurs in the form of explicit Bible commands, Apostolic examples from the New Testament and/or immediate and undeniable inferences from either.
- 3.2.3 With regard to Corporate Worship, this Scriptural principle asserts that God may not be worshiped according to human imaginations or inventions or in any way not instituted by His Word, nor may the church require her members to participate in activities of worship, including beloved traditions or new cultural fads, that God's Word does not require (Ex 20:4-6; WCF 1:6, 21:1). And because *where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty*, rather than being considered an onerous restriction, the Scriptures' all-sufficiency concerning the central Elements of Corporate Worship secures true freedom to know and delight in God as He is and to worship Him as He desires (John 4:24; John 17:17, 6:63).
- 3.2.4 At its heart, therefore, the Regulative Principle is simply a Scriptural and ethical principle that equips the Church to make God-honouring decisions about itself and its worship<sup>9</sup>. This is of great value because humanity in its fallen state, even redeemed humanity, has a constant tendency to devalue and deemphasise what God says should be at the centre of our lives, the Church and its worship. In its place, we naturally tend to position whatever we would prefer to be at the centre. This is the heart and soul of idolatry.

### **3.3 The Regulative Principle and the Circumstances and Forms of Corporate Worship**

- 3.3.1 Both the Scriptures and the Regulative Principle derived from them recognise the dual themes of the uniqueness of Corporate Worship (Jn 4:24, cf. 17:17, 6:63) and its practical intersection with life in God's world, even a fallen world (eg. 1 Cor 9:22, 14:26, 40). The Biblical concepts of the Church and worship, as heavenly as they are, recognise that those who worship on earth do so as finite beings with human needs and limitations; both the Church and worship have external characteristics that are common to human actions and societies in general.
- 3.3.2 This distinction is articulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith as there being "*some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed*" (WCF 1:6). In other words, while Christian prudence and the general rules of the Word are to be applied, the Circumstances of Corporate Worship do not require a specific Scriptural mandate.

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<sup>9</sup> A principle being, by definition, a 'general and fundamental truth that may be used in deciding conduct or choice' - Random House Dictionary

- 3.3.3 Importantly, a Circumstance should never assume a central place or emphasis; nor become an attraction in its own right, but always remain external to and on the circumference of the centre. For this reason, each Session must exercise diligence to ensure that things acceptable as Circumstances do not subtly drift to the centre of Corporate Worship.
- 3.3.4 Similarly, the external Forms used to convey the Elements are legitimate where they are consistent with the Scriptural meaning, character and (in the case of the sacraments) mode of the Elements. Such Forms may indeed vary from one culture or situation to another for the sake of intelligibility and edification. In all cases, however, valid Forms of worship will avoid drawing undue attention to themselves and instead place the emphasis on the divine truths communicated by the Elements. (For example, a sermon illustration is most edifying where the Scriptural point is remembered more than the intricacies of the illustration itself.)
- 3.3.5 The distinction between the Elements of worship on the one hand, and the external Circumstances and Forms of worship on the other, is wholly consistent with the spirit of the Gospel. The Regulative Principle simply demands an answer to the ethical questions of: “*What is really being emphasised here?*” and then, “*Do those things have a positive Scriptural mandate?*” (see Sections 3.1 and 3.2). This is because Christ’s church belongs to Christ and not to man.

## 4 The Leadership of Corporate Worship

### 4.1 *Leading & Serving in Corporate Worship*

- 4.1.1 The Lord Jesus Christ is the living and only Head of the church and its worship (Eph 5:23, Col 1:18).
- 4.1.2 Christ rules over Corporate Worship by His Word and Spirit, not only directly, but also through the ministry of Elders in their ruling and teaching His church (Matt 16:18-19, Acts 20:17, 28, 1 Tim 3:1-5, 15, 5:17, Tit 1:5-9, 1 Pet 5:1-2, 5). For this reason the Session is responsible to give immediate oversight to the conduct of Corporate Worship in each local church.
- 4.1.3 Corporate Worship is ordinarily to be led by the Elders who have been set apart to represent the Lord Jesus Christ in the administration of his Word and sacraments (see Section 4.1.2). Where the Session deems it appropriate, it may also select others that are qualified to assist them lead the congregation in particular aspects of Corporate Worship. In addition, the Session may seek the assistance of others with musical gifts to serve the congregation in its sung worship of God (see Section 2.5).
- 4.1.4 The Session shall ensure that only professing Christians who adorn their profession with a godly life take a special part in Corporate Worship, whether in a leading or serving capacity (see Sections 1.1.2, 1.2.1 and 1.2.7). Ordinarily, those who regularly perform any special part in Corporate Worship should also be communicant members of the local church in which they serve.
- 4.1.5 The Elders and all others who lead or serve in Corporate Worship shall exercise great care not to draw unnecessary attention to themselves or their talents, or to seek any glory from people. On the contrary, all who lead or serve shall actively labour to focus all attention, glory and praise not upon themselves but upon the Lord alone, as He is revealed in each of the Elements of worship (Is 42:8, 48:11, Jn 3:30).

## **4.2 The Planning & Organisation of Corporate Worship**

- 4.2.1 Sessions are to give thoughtful attention to the organisation of Corporate Worship, remembering their responsibility to give their very best to the Lord (as well as leading the congregation to do the same) (Mal 1:7-8), and to pursue edification of the body in all things (1 Cor 14:26).
- 4.2.2 To this end, it is advisable that Teaching Elders and all others who regularly lead in Corporate Worship review their practices of organisation and leadership frequently and thoughtfully, aiming to effectively unite freshness with faithfulness in the assembly of the saints (see Section 4.2.1).
- 4.2.3 It is also advisable that those organising Corporate Worship provide sufficient notice of the parts of Scripture to be read and/or the selections for sung worship so as to allow the necessary practice by those leading or serving the congregation in worship for the pursuit of a simple excellence in all things (see Section 4.2.1).
- 4.2.4 The planning and organisation of Corporate Worship are to aim at all parts being conducted decently, in a comprehensible order (1 Cor 11:40), and for the sake of the edification of all (1 Cor 14:26).
- 4.2.5 As the Church's mandate is to preach the Gospel to, and make disciples of, persons of all ages and cultures without distinction (Matt 18:19-20, Gal 3:28, Col 3:11), regular occasions of Corporate Worship are not to be targeted only to narrow demographic segments, except in the case where particular language barriers exist.
- 4.2.6 Technology may be used to assist the congregation to focus upon God in the Elements of Corporate Worship. Nevertheless, as an extension of man, technologies per se are to be used with discretion and never allowed to become either a distraction, or an end or focus in themselves (see Section 3).

## **4.3 The Comprehensibility & Authenticity of Corporate Worship**

- 4.3.1 Because Biblical worship begins with an engagement of the mind, elders are to specifically aim at the understanding of the people (1 Cor 14:2, 9, 15, 19, 20). To this end it is advisable that those leading use the common language of the people and avoid unnecessary jargon. This may include updating the language of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; introducing theologically sound new songs which use present day language; explaining important theological words; and briefly introducing each Element of the service (e.g. the context to Bible readings, the linkage between songs and the sermon, etc).
- 4.3.2 Corporate Worship must avoid the foolishness of being wedded to one particular historical era to the exclusion of others. For example, an excessive focus on being either 'contemporary' or 'historical' will lack authenticity as neither by itself is completely true; Christ's Church being called to live out the Gospel in the present (1 Cor 9:22, 1 Cor 14:26) while being intimately connected to the past (Heb 12:1, in context).
- 4.3.3 Because Corporate Worship is to be in spirit and in truth, those who lead must avoid vain repetition and using unnecessarily pious sounding expressions (Matt 6:7). Because of this it is also advisable that leaders avoid singing songs with overly repetitious lyrics, or using the same call to worship, song, or benediction week by week. Similarly the use of words or expressions that are flowery, archaic or excessively formalistic should be avoided.

#### **4.4 The Place of Culture in Corporate Worship**

- 4.4.1 The Lord Jesus Christ has not prescribed a set order for Corporate Worship, nor all of its external Circumstances and Forms. Rather, Christ has given the churches a large measure of liberty in these matters, subject to Christian prudence and the general rules of the Word, so that the essential Elements of Corporate Worship may be expressed in any cultural setting on earth (see Section 3).
- 4.4.2 Because many aspects of any culture are not morally neutral, each local church is to exercise care in the practices of Corporate Worship so as to distance itself from the excesses and distorted sinful aspects of its surrounding culture.
- 4.4.3 All cultures on the earth have, by God's common grace, ways in which the true worship of God may be expressed. It is the responsibility of each local church to seek out legitimate ways, not only to communicate the Gospel (1 Cor 9:22) but also adopt the most helpful Circumstances and Forms of worship (Acts 15:10-11, 1 Cor 14:26), recognising that a refusal to do so may evidence a lack of Christ-like love to others and even be a form of idolatry dressed up as orthodoxy (Mark 7:7-9).
- 4.4.4 Christ's Church is called to be as culturally-accessible to the surrounding population as faithfulness to God's Word will allow. Because unbelievers are to be considered in Corporate Worship (1 Cor 14:23), those leading are to remove unnecessary obstacles to the Gospel in their practices so that, by becoming all things to all men they might by all means save some (1 Cor 9:22).

#### **4.5 Pursuing Unity in Corporate Worship**

- 4.5.1 While Elders are not to ignore matters of form, they do well to focus the attention of the church on the essence of Corporate Worship, namely meeting with God Himself, rather than on the external form (see Section 1.2).
- 4.5.2 Elders are also to cultivate a mature attitude to change within each local church (Eph 4:16). Where there are two legitimate possibilities for a practice in Corporate Worship, it is not of itself inherently more unifying to advocate for or resist change. Each situation must be assessed on its Scriptural merits.
- 4.5.3 Elders are to be examples in (1 Tim 4:12), and to encourage the church toward, attitudes which promote unity, such as patience and forbearance (Gal 5:22-23), quickness to hear (Jas 1:19), mutual submission (Eph 5:21), and esteeming others better than oneself (Phil 2:3).

## 5 Conclusion

***“And above all these things, put on love, which is the bond of perfection.”***

Paul to the Colossians (Col 3:14)

The external Forms and Circumstances of Corporate Worship are not ultimately the glue that holds us together. Rather it is our adoption by the Father, our union with Jesus Christ and our being indwelt by the Holy Spirit in love.<sup>10</sup>

John Calvin has written:

*“Lastly, because he (Christ) has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate<sup>11</sup> traditional practices and to establish new ones.*

*“Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. **But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.**”<sup>12</sup>*

Our relationship to God produces a sanctified relationship to fellow Christians.

*“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ...Love suffers long and is kind... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ...Love never fails.”*

Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13: 1,4,7)

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<sup>10</sup> Adapted from Kevin deYoung ‘10 Principles for Church Music’ <http://thegospelcoalition.org>

<sup>11</sup> Abrogate means, ‘to abolish, or put an end to’.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Institutes of the Christian Religion (4.10.30)’