

WRF Statement on Ecclesiology

Introduction

The Theological Commission of the World Reformed Fellowship has worked on three projects to date. At the General Assembly of the WRF in Edinburgh in 2010, the WRF Statement of Faith was presented and provisionally approved. Comments were invited and some small changes were made, with the work being concluded and approved in 2011. That Statement of Faith stands in continuity with the Reformed confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries but speaks to the issues and problems of the 21st century. At the General Assembly of the WRF in Jakarta, in 2019, the WRF Statement of Reformed Theological Identity was approved. That statement offers an answer to the question ‘What does it mean to be Reformed?’ At the General Assembly of the WRF in Florida in 2022, the Theological Commission intends to submit its third project: the WRF Statement on Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church).

The WRF Statement of Faith had one chapter on ecclesiology (see Appendix 1). It is not possible, however, in a short confessional statement to say all that is necessary about ecclesiology and so this Statement goes on to spell out our understanding of ecclesiology in much greater detail.

1. The Trinity and the Church

It is tempting to understand and define the church on the basis of our experience but experience is not the starting point for understanding the church. Rather, we must begin with God. The church exists because of the election of the Father, the reconciliation of the Son and the effective work of the Holy Spirit. It is established as a result of the gospel and follows necessarily as an implication of the gospel. The Trinitarian and Christological basis for ecclesiology can be summarised in four points:

i. Distinguishing between God and Creation

God in his eternal being lacks nothing. He does not need human beings or a church to be complete. The Creator/Creature distinction is a fundamental starting point for theology. God existed in trinity, prior to the creation of everything else. Expressed otherwise, this is the doctrine of God’s aseity: the view that God is entirely self-sufficient and that in his glory and perfection, he needs nothing outside of himself. Creation is an act of God whereby he freely chooses to bring into existence everything that is other than God. He does not do this because

of any lack in himself or because of any felt need but purely out of his free grace, love and power.

God the Father chose to create human beings and to be their God, sending his Son to be the one through whom they would be saved and brought into his kingdom. In other words, he elected to be the God who would be in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

ii. Distinguishing between God's being and human being

God's creation of the church is an act of his divine freedom in which, by his free grace, human beings are brought into covenant fellowship with him, through their union with Jesus Christ. The biblical use of the language of participation in God (Colossians 3:3 and 2 Peter 1:4) is best understood through a strong view of union with Christ, rather than suggesting any merging of divine being and human being. At the same time, we must not underestimate the significance of our union with Christ.

iii. Distinguishing between Christ and human beings in the Incarnation

The church is built on the work of Christ, which begins with the incarnation. In the incarnation the eternal Son of God took human existence in the womb of Mary. The eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, was born as a human being without ceasing to be God. The Incarnation of the Son of God is critical to Christian theology. The Incarnation was a personal union of the eternal Son with a particular instantiation of human nature. Thus, the incarnation is no basis for thinking of humanity in a generic union with God.

iv. Distinguishing between Christ and the Church

The church can only be understood and identified in relation to Christ. The church is the people of God, those who have been reconciled to him through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus says, 'I will build my church' (Matthew 16:18). We do not build it (Acts 2:47). So, the church belongs only to the triune God, through Christ its saviour and builder. The intimate connection between Christ and the church does not mean that the one flows into the other. A distinction is to be made. The church is not a continuation of the incarnation, nor does it have a divine nature. It exists, in union with Christ, to bear witness to the actions of God and to proclaim his Word.

Three significant benefits are obtained by beginning with these Trinitarian and Christological points. First, we identify what the church **is** (theologically) before discussing what the church **does** (practically), so as not to begin with the historical or sociological. Second, we avoid a number of ecclesiological errors including incarnational union, social Trinitarianism and various theologies of *koinonia*. Third, it means that our primary focus is not on secondary matters, such as ordination, leadership, worship, sacraments and structures of church government.

2. The Nature of the Church

The church consists of all who are united to Christ by the Holy Spirit. It is created by the Holy Spirit, as he brings God's elect people into relationship with Christ through the gift of faith. We believe that ordinarily there is no salvation outside the church.

Scripture and experience both teach that outward profession of faith and baptism do not always correspond to inward reality. In other words, not all who take the name of Christ are genuine Christians. This gives birth to the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. We believe that the visible and invisible church are two necessary ways of speaking of the one catholic or universal church as has been taught in Holy Scripture.

The church's visibility is evidenced by its profession of the doctrine of the gospel (cf. Eph. 2:20; Col. 1:23), the presence of God (cf. 1 Cor. 14:24-25), holiness, fellowship, and growth as new believers are added (Acts 2:47). The invisible church is the company of all those who are hidden in Christ with God (Col 3:3). It is catholic or universal, including all those in Christ through time and around the world (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:10; 1 Tim. 2:4; Rev. 7:9). Belief in the invisibility of the church is not to escape from the concrete embodiment of the church.

The work of the Spirit is both to unite believers with Christ and also with one another in visible communities which meet and in which they love and serve one another. United in Christ, believers are to seek the unity of the visible church (cf. John 17:20-23; Eph. 4:13). As Christ builds his church, the church's ministry contributes to the edification of the saints (cf. Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23; Eph. 4:11-13). As we share in Christ, we are to share generously with brothers and sisters in need (cf. Acts 2:44-45; 1 John 3:17).

The attributes of the church are stated in the Nicene Creed, that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This describes what the church is in Christ by the Spirit; and what it should strive for in its visible life. First, the church is to be one, meaning that the church is to be united. There is only one church and divisions are sinful, as Paul spelled out in his first letter to the Corinthians. As Jesus prayed, this one-ness of the church is to reflect the way that the Father and the Son are one (John 17). Second, the church is to be holy. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to sanctify the church and its members, yet human beings can undermine this by resisting the Spirit, quenching the Spirit or grieving the Spirit. To be holy is to be like Jesus and to be conformed to his image, the image of God in human beings having been damaged but not lost at the Fall. The church is holy because of the election of God and being set apart as a special people. Third, the church is to be catholic or universal and hence the title ‘catholic’ does not belong to any one part of the church. Every baptised person is part of the church. The catholicity of the church should be the basis for our engagement with other Christians and our commitment to recognise our fundamental unity despite disagreements over structures, doctrines and practices. Fourth, the church is apostolic. Some churches have defined apostolicity as the passing on of the faith from one generation to another by apostolic succession, through the laying on of hands, from bishop to bishop. Since the Reformation, Protestant churches have defined Apostolicity as the faithful transmission of the apostolic Faith.

With the 16th and 17th century Reformers, we also recognise the marks by which they identified the visible church. These are the faithful preaching and hearing of the Word of God and the faithful administration of the sacraments. Some churches added ‘discipline rightly administered’ as a mark of the church. With the majority of the Reformed tradition, we affirm the value of discipline, but do not believe that it constitutes a ‘mark’ of the church.

All churches are called to proclaim the gospel to the world. Any compromising of the commitment to accept the clear teaching of Scripture neither glorifies God nor furthers Christian unity.

All churches on earth are subject to mixture and error (WCF 25.1). While particular churches may degenerate to such an extent that they become non-churches, by the grace of God, they can be regenerated by the Holy Spirit, as they repent and return to their first love (Rev 2:4-5).

3. The Church & the Kingdom of God

The Centrality of the Kingdom

The kingdom of God is his rule, promised in the Old Testament as the new age in which he would redeem his people, including those from other nations, and bring peace and blessing to the world.

The Kingdom of God was the central theme of the preaching of Jesus who announced that ‘the kingdom of God is near’ (Mk.1:15 cf. Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; Lk. 10:9-11; Lk. 8:1; 9:11; 21:31). He described the kingdom in parables (Matt.13:24; 13:31; 13:33; 13:44; 13:45; 13:47; 13:52; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1; Mk.4:26; 4:30; Lk.13:19-20). His preaching, healings and exorcisms demonstrated the presence of the kingdom (Matt 11:4-6; 12:28; Lk 7:22-23). He called people to ‘receive’ and ‘enter’ the kingdom of God (Mk.10:15; cf. Matt.19:24; 21:31; Mk.9:47; 10:23-25; Lk.18:24-25; Jn.14:22), which is only possible through him and the gracious work of the Spirit (Mk.4:11; Lk.8:10; Jn.3:3,5).

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and Son of Man who received and rules the kingdom (Psa. 2:6–8; Psa. 110:1–2; Dan. 7:13–14; Matt. 1:18; 16:16; 25:31–32; Mark 11:9-10; 14:61–62; Luke 1:32–36; John 1:49; 4:25–26). He is the King of God’s kingdom which he established in his death, resurrection and ascension. The fullness of the kingdom will come when he returns in glory (Matt 16:28; 19:28; Mark 9:1; Lk.13:28-29; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:23-24; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Rev 11:15; 22:5).

During his earthly ministry Jesus sent his disciples ‘to proclaim the kingdom of God’ (Lk.9:2). The church is built on the confession that Jesus is the Christ and he gave to the apostles the keys of the kingdom, the authority to announce him as Lord and King and to determine who has entered the kingdom through him (Matt 16:13-19). After his resurrection he taught the apostles about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3) and, after his ascension, they continued to proclaim the kingdom (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 28:31). Every declaration that Jesus is Christ and Lord is a proclamation that he is the King of the kingdom of God.

The Church and the Kingdom

As the message of Christ as Lord is proclaimed, people enter the kingdom of God by faith in Christ, submitting to his rule. The church as the community of those who have entered Christ’s kingdom, it is the provisional form and embassy of the kingdom, though not its full realisation.

The life and witness of the church is a sign of the presence of the kingdom and the means by which God grows his kingdom in this age.

The church is not identical to the kingdom. The kingdom rests in Christ's heavenly reign, and will be fully realised in the coming of Christ. The church must submit to Christ's rule in its life and teaching. Such authority as the church has is given by Christ and exercised in service of him. The church is accountable to him as the ruler and head. The church is to proclaim Christ as Lord and call people to submit to him and pray for the kingdom to come in full (Matt 6:10; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:17, 20).

As the provisional form and embassy of the kingdom of Christ, the Church must not give its allegiance to any civil government. While it recognises civil authorities as ordained by God, the church serves and obeys Christ. As the provisional form and embassy of the kingdom of Christ, the church is opposed by Satan who now rules this world (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2Co 4:4; Eph 2:2; 1Jn 4:4; 5:19). The life and witness of the church involves warfare against Satan and his powers (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 6:10–17; 1 Th. 5:8).

4. The Church as a Covenant People

As a consequence of Adam's rebellion, the fallen and broken world community lives under the shadow of death (Gen 3). It is within this tragic context that the Lord undertook the creation of a covenant community, Israel and the Church (Rom 5: 12-21; 1 Cor 15: 21, 22), called to glorify his name, to enjoy him and proclaim his oracles.

Though the different Old Testament covenants and the communities they initiated were together the expression of the continuous, gracious, sovereign initiative of the Lord in view of giving birth to the messianic community of the redeemed, nevertheless they were 'imperfect', faulty and became obsolete. They were to foreshadow the New Covenant and its community announced by the prophet Jeremiah and fully revealed in, inaugurated and mediated by the Messiah, the Son of God Incarnate (Heb 9:15) when the Holy Spirit writes the law of God on the hearts of believers (Jer 31: 33).

Gen 12: 1-3; Ex 2: 23-25; Ex 19-24; Jos 24; Jer 31 :31-40.

Heb 8:13; 2Sa 7: 1-29; Ps 89: 3, 28, 34; Jer 31: 31-40: 33:14-26; Jn 1:29-34.

The Christian church stands in continuity with Israel, the covenant people of God in the Old Testament. It can be argued that the church originates in Gen 3:15 with the first promise of the gospel. In one important sense, however, the church began when God entered into a covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Romans 4:16-17; Galatians 3:7-9). The Hebrew equivalent of the New Testament term 'church' (often rendered 'assembly') is found in the Old Testament. The Christian church began when God sent the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost among those keeping the Passover. The Christian church, rooted in the renewal of Israel by her true Messiah, came to include people from all nations, as the new covenant people of God.

Within the new covenant community, the Lord initiates and entertains an ongoing intimate and loving relationship with his people. All its members belong to the family of God. There is, however, a difference between being part of the covenant community and being elect in union with Christ. Indeed, members of the covenant community can break the covenant and become a broken off branch but it is impossible for believers, who truly rest on the atoning work of Christ, are committed to and united in Christ, to be separated from him.

Mt 28: 19; Heb 2:1-4; 3:7-19; 5:11-6:12; 10: 19-39; 12:14-29; Ro 5-8; 2Co 5: 11-21

The new covenant community needs to maintain a high view of the apostolic truth and moral standards as it bears witness with compassion to the living Lord whether in the church or in the public square. It is the duty and responsibility of the leaders, pastors, elders and deacons, not only to care for the spiritual growth of the people of God, but to also teach them that the moral law and the principles of the civil law, as revealed in the Bible, remain relevant today. The ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the minds and hearts of believers, the body of Christ, incites the body of Christ to persevere in the obedience to the law of love as revealed in Christ. As a world and life view, the Christian Faith sheds light on every aspect of life within the covenant community, in both the private and public spheres of action and enterprise.

Mt 5:17-20; 2Ti 3:16; Tit 2:1-8; 1Co1:6-16; Ac 17: 22-34.

5. The Authority of the Church

The church is under the authority of Christ, the head of the church, who speaks through his Word by the Holy Spirit.

Christ is the head of the church: the existence and nature of the church depends on him and the church exists only in communion with him. Those united to Christ by the Spirit and his gift of faith participate in the death, resurrection and life of Christ and are united in one body in him. As head, Christ shares in the sufferings of the church, gives gifts to the church and cares for and rules the church.

The church is authorised by the risen Christ to proclaim his Word, to baptise his people and to make disciples in all nations. The church does not need authorisation or recognition by political powers or any other human authorities, although it recognises and respects human authorities within their God-given domains. The mission, teaching and life of the church is directed by Christ through his Word and Spirit.

The church is bound to the Word of God in the Scriptures in its faith and life. It is to teach and obey all that is revealed in Scripture and may neither remove anything that is revealed, nor add anything that is not revealed.

The risen Christ has appointed pastors, teachers and elders for his church who are to lead and guide the church on the basis of the Word of God. Their authority is that of servants and stewards under the direction of the Lord. They have authority to manage the life of the church of God under the authority of Christ in the Scriptures. They are to teach what is taught in Scripture and have no authority to teach as church doctrine what is not revealed in Scripture, nor to require God's people to obey anything not required by God in Scripture. When they teach and live faithfully, they are to be respected and honoured.

Questions of doctrine and obedience should be determined on the basis of Scripture by councils of pastors, teachers and elders called by the Church, seeking the widest possible consensus. Churches should receive the statements and confessions of historical councils with great respect and thanks while testing all things by Scripture.

6. The Liturgy of the Church

The church exists to worship her Lord and liturgy is the church's ordered worship. Christian worship is not a human initiative but a response to God's love for his people (1 John 4:10) and should be ordered by his will revealed in Scripture. Liturgy does not limit the freedom of the

Spirit but recognises that God is not a God of confusion (1 Cor 14:33). Liturgy is not an end in itself but attests the work of God in Christ.

As the worship practices of the church are determined by doctrine as revealed in Scripture, so doctrine is also nurtured by the church's liturgical practices. These practices are not a mere remembrance of God's deeds in the past, but a re-enactment of God's salvific story (cf. Exod. 12:1-6; 1 Cor. 11:23-26).

The worship of the church stands over against the worldviews of the world and their idolatrous worship. In the singing of praise to God, the people of God confess that the human life is received from God and returned to God (cf. Rom. 11:36). In the reading and preaching of Scripture, the church knows itself as a hearer, doer, and proclaimer of the Word (cf. Jas. 1:22-25). In prayer, the church witnesses its total dependence on God and its fellowship with God (cf. Acts 2:42). In sacraments the church proclaims the gospel of grace through visible signs that attest to spiritual reality.

In Baptism, the people of God are baptized into the one body of Christ as an initiation rite (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). This rite incorporates the baptized into the church as the family of God, where ethnic and social differences are relativized (cf. Col. 3:11). Baptism is a sign of God's grace and promise, indicating that we are included in the covenant people of God. It conveys the grace it signifies as it is used by the Spirit and received by faith given by the Spirit but it does not convey grace *ex opere operato*. We reject the idea of baptismal regeneration.

In the Lord's Supper believers participate really and spiritually in the blood and the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16). It is neither a carnal eating/drinking on the one hand nor an empty symbolism on the other. In the Lord's Supper the people of God confess that they do not live by physical bread alone, but by the word of God (cf. Matt. 4:4), which is made visible through bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. As a remembrance, the Lord's Supper points to the efficacious death of Christ in the past (cf. 1 Cor. 11:26); as spiritual nourishment, it feeds believers in the present (John 6:53-56); as a foretaste, it anticipates the great supper of God in the future (cf. Rev. 19:17).

7. The Gifts & Ministry of the Church

Christ the risen Lord and head of his church calls the church to service: to serve him in worship and obedience, to serve one another in the bonds of unity and to serve the world in his name and with his gospel.

Through his Spirit, Christ empowers and equips the church to serve. The Spirit gives to every believer gifts to be used in service of the Lord, one another and the mission of the church to the world. The New Testament lists of gifts are indicative but not exhaustive. Gifts may come from the sanctification of natural abilities or be a special endowment for a lifetime or a season of service. All believers and their gifts should be valued and welcomed in the church. They are to be used for the common good, and in an orderly way that seeks to build the church. Gifts are to be used to meet the needs of others and subject to the leadership of the church.

Christ also gives people as gifts to his church, including those who are appointed to hold office in the church. The offices of the Church have included apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors/bishops, elders, deacons and evangelists. Paul instructed that elders should be appointed in every place and that some of them should devote themselves to a teaching ministry. He also gives a list of qualifications for the elders and deacons who will serve in the local church. The leaders of the church are appointed to work together to teach, pray for and oversee the church. Deacons are appointed to serve the church, particularly by exercising mercy ministries and caring for the physical needs of the community.

God appoints the officers of the church, through the church (usually called ‘ordination’). No one should take to themselves an office in the church. The church should only appoint those who meet the Biblical qualifications. Many churches in the WRF and associated reformed movements hold that only properly qualified men should be ordained to the offices of pastor and elder. In western cultures at least, this is a counter-cultural stance. Other reformed churches believe that women may properly be appointed to these offices, while some denominations allow presbyteries and congregations freedom on the matter. Whichever view is taken must be tested against Scripture. Churches, in their teaching and practice, should enable and encourage women to contribute effectively to the life and ministry of the church, recognising that women are gifted by God and may be called to many aspects of service.

Elders and pastors must be faithful to the gospel by holding to sound doctrine, live exemplary godly lives and be able to lead and teach. Pastors should also be able to preach effectively.

Deacons must hold to sound doctrine and live godly lives. Appointment may take place through recognition by those already ordained as pastors and elders or by the affirmation of the congregation or both. When a new church begins with informal and non-ordained leaders, the church and the leaders should seek to regularise this as soon as possible.

The officers of the church are called to lead the church as servants. They are to shepherd God's flock willingly; they are to give their possessions, time and energy generously, not seeking benefit for themselves; they are not to lord over the church but to serve as examples of humble love. In this, they follow the example of the Good Shepherd who gave his life for his sheep. Ministry is the task of the whole church, not the calling of the officers alone. The officers of the church are to lead the whole church in ministry, encouraging, equipping and enabling all God's people to use their gifts in God's service.

Discipline is one aspect of ministry committed to the pastors and elders. It is an expression of care for the body of Christ and a commitment to the growth of the church and its members in the likeness of Christ. Discipline is to be exercised as a ministry of humble love. Christ authorised church discipline when he granted to the church the 'keys of the kingdom'. That is, the church is to welcome into the kingdom all who come to Christ in repentance and faith and exclude from the kingdom those who persistently disobey Christ. This authority is ministerial, not magisterial; the church is only to declare and apply what God has revealed in his word. It has no power to make new or extra rules for inclusion or exclusion from the kingdom. Further, the church exercises this authority only in relation to the visible church. The declarations of the church do not determine a person's standing with Christ but must seek to indicate that standing.

Church discipline is exercised by the pastors and elders of the church, on behalf of the church. They do this in the general ministry of the word, declaring the gospel promises and warnings; and through welcoming believers into membership of the church and warning and even excluding those who continue in sin. Church discipline is always to be exercised for the good of God's people, seeking to reclaim the wandering, warn others of the dangers of sin and protect the body of Christ from God's judgement.

Christians should recognise the authority of the church to exercise discipline. They should not leave a congregation in order to avoid a proper disciplinary procedure. A church should not

receive into membership a person who is facing discipline or is under discipline from another church. An exception can be made if it is proven that the process has been unjust.

The church has a particular responsibility to protect the weak and vulnerable among it from those who would abuse them. This includes physical, sexual, financial and spiritual abuse. This demands care in appointing people to roles of authority in the church and requires that all church leaders should be subject to effective accountability.

8. The Unity of the Church

It is God's will, as expressed in Jesus' prayer in John 17, that the church should be one and that this unity should reflect the unity between the Father and the Son. The teaching of Scripture is that the church is the bride of Christ but it does not envisage multiple brides, only one. Hence the fact that the church is the bride of Christ is one symbol of its unity. It is also clear from Scripture that the unity of the church should be visible, since the unity has a purpose, namely, that the world may believe (John 17:21) and that the world may know that Christ was sent by the Father (John 17:23). The unity of the church is to be an earthly reality and not simply an eschatological hope. Some argue that the church is already united in Christ, although that unity is neither institutional nor visible. The church, however, should make every effort to give visible expression to its spiritual unity.

We believe that the unity of the church is to reflect the unity of God but we reject the theology of social trinitarianism, since it seeks to model the relationship of believers on assertions regarding the relationship between individual members of the trinity. Among other problems, this tends to undermine the unity of the trinity in the one being of God.

In affirming the unity of the church, we reject the view that unity is founded upon the headship of the bishop. Rather, we believe that Christ is head of the church and is the foundation of its unity, a unity which the church is called to preserve.

9. On Separation and Schism

We affirm that it is appropriate for specific churches to distinguish themselves from other churches in manner of governance or in choice of confession, while practising open communion with the other churches. Breaking communion with such churches is schismatic,

adding to the sufferings of Christ and discouraging the world from believing the gospel (John 17:20-23; Col 1:24; 2 Cor 1:5; 4:10; Phil 3:10; Acts 9:4).

Despite the strong teaching in Scripture on the unity of the church, it may be a legitimate Christian option to separate from a church, if that church has repeatedly failed to discipline those of its officers who deny elements of the New Testament *kerygma* or condone breaches of the biblical moral standards.

We affirm our commitment to work earnestly for healing in the body of Christ and to ameliorate and reverse multiple divisions between denominations and among independent churches. We commit to pray, worship, and reflect together with other reformed churches separated from us on secondary matters, to facilitate inter-church fellowship and unity. We fully support efforts by the World Reformed Fellowship to heal the wounds of ecclesial separation and schism.

10. On Church and Parachurch

We affirm that, under God, missionary societies and other parachurch agencies have been key catalysts of dramatic church growth in the non-western world throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and that they continue to play an important role in executing the evangelistic and diaconal ministries of Christ's divided Church.

We affirm that churches and parachurch bodies have distinct complementary roles in that churches sponsor the parachurch agencies and parachurch agencies serve the churches. While parachurch agencies are not churches, individual agencies, by fulfilling one or more of the specific ministries allocated by Christ to his Church, enable the supporting churches to work together vicariously. While parachurch agencies are accountable to supporting individuals, grant-giving charitable trusts and others, their primary accountability is to supporting churches.

11. The Mission of the Church

The Nature of Mission

We affirm that, since the Fall of Adam and the active presence of evil in the world, God has been building a kingdom of righteousness centered on the work of Christ. This active involvement and direction of the history of the world is called the mission of God (*missio dei*).

The mission of the church is founded on and contained within the mission of God. The church is called to be a servant within the mission of God, and it should not seek to exalt itself.

We affirm that God cares about our eternal destiny, as well as our earthly life. The mission of God aims at the total transformation of the human community, so that people can enjoy the gracious fellowship of God as well as the loving fellowship of people. We are called to love our neighbors in concrete ways as we share the gospel. Thus, we cannot be indifferent to the sufferings of our neighbors. On the other hand, social transformation is not our final goal. Our social involvement is a witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.

Mission and the Church

We affirm that the church exists as an essential part of the mission of God. God's mission is not limited to building up the church; however, God has uniquely called the church to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to equip Christians with truth and spirituality. We should separate the mission of God from the building up of local churches.

We affirm that God commands and empowers the church to engage in missionary works. The missions of the church should always focus on sharing the gospel and building up the saints. While the church may engage in other activities, it should not deviate from its primary tasks of the worship of God, building up of Christian fellowship and evangelical witness to the world.

The church should normally be a growing body, calling more and more people to become the disciples of Christ. The church is called to engage in evangelism and to plant new churches in new locations or among new people groups. The church longs for and works towards the day when all people groups everywhere can have their indigenous church. Even when the church may be situated in a hostile situation where evangelism is very difficult, it should always pray to God and wait expectantly for new opportunities.

Church and Society

We affirm that the church is part of civil society. The church should ordinarily fulfill all the legal and civic responsibilities of a non-profit organization. However, Jesus Christ, whose kingdom 'is not of this world' (John 18:36), is the only Lord of the church. Therefore, the church should always be critical of the danger of conforming to the established political power.

The church is called to exercise its prophetic gift to give eschatological direction for society, suffering courageously for the sake of Christ.

We affirm that the church should encourage Christians to be good citizens in their country. We affirm that our ethnic, national and cultural identities are gifts from God, and we can be proud of these gifts. However, the church also recognizes that all nation states and cultural traditions are products of human history, and therefore they are subject to the judgment of God.

We affirm that the Word of God contains the absolute standards for human living. The church should seek to make known these standards to the whole society, and to persuade even non-Christians to adopt these standards. Christians can and should be involved in the political life of their society. The church as an institution should not seek to gain political power, its mission is by witness and persuasion.

12. Application of Ecclesiology

The church is a living community of redeemed people, and as such our statement must address some of the issues involved in living as God's people. We offer the following statements aware that no discussion of the life of the church can be exhaustive and that each church faces its own questions about serving Christ faithfully. We do not imagine that the following brief comments deal with all the issues which press on the churches today, let alone offer anything like a comprehensive response. We offer these statements in an effort to alert members of the WRF and the wider church to some of the pressing ecclesiastical issues of the day.

Proliferation of churches

In the 21st century the Christian church has continued to differentiate and divide (the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity estimates there are 46,400 Christian denominations in the world in 2022). Churches are distinguished from each other by many factors including doctrine, culture, language, ethnicity, location, styles and polity. Given the history of Christianity and the globalisation of the church, differentiation and division are inevitable and cannot realistically be undone. Nevertheless, Jesus prayed for the unity of his church and we are united in him. On this basis, churches should seek fuller expression of unity and fellowship, rather than isolation. Congregations should seek to be part of communions or denominations. They should also seek to work with, worship with and pray for other churches in their region and globally.

Contextualisation

The Christian gospel is inherently translatable and Christian mission has always exercised flexibility, so Christian churches will take different forms and patterns as the gospel grows in various cultures. Churches and Christians in one culture and context should be very cautious about condemning patterns of church life that emerge in other cultures and contexts. Yet there are limits to contextualisation. The church is called to follow Christ and preach his gospel; it must remain a community that is identified as those baptised into his name. It is only able to fulfill its calling to be the light of the world as it remains distinct from the surrounding culture in faithfulness to Christ. While contextualisation serves mission, for the sake of that mission the church should not merge into the culture surrounding it.

Church leaders and Pastoral Care

Our Lord Jesus Christ said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11). Church leaders are under-shepherds appointed by Christ, the Chief Shepherd (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1–4). Their calling is to present themselves as living sacrifices of thankfulness to God and as faithful intercessors for the sheep (cf. Heidelberg Catechism 32) and to keep the flock of the Lord.

Church leaders are called to be under-shepherds who follow Christ the Servant king. Sadly, this has not always been the case, and there have been innumerable recent scandalous cases of authoritarian and abusive church leadership. Church leaders must commit themselves to protect and serve those they follow. Churches should examine potential leaders carefully and ensure that leaders are accountable for how they treat those they lead.

Church as business

Our contemporary culture is dominated by commercial activity and a consumerist worldview. This infiltrates the church and corrupts church life.

On the one hand, churches and church leaders adopt business assumptions. Success is determined by income, numbers and other measurable outcomes, not faithfulness to Christ and the church growing in him. Ministry is directed by marketing insights and the gospel is accommodated to the culture. Over against this, we take the view that church polity must be determined by Scripture and not by business models.

On the other hand, church members treat church as commodity or service which they purchase. They choose churches to which offer a better product and that appeal to their style, rather than committing to serving brothers and sisters.

Church leaders and members need to be alert to this corrosive influence and learn to think and live counter-culturally. Pastors are not business managers or executives and church members are not consumers.

Persecution

Jesus himself suffered and died and warned his church that it would face persecution, so all Christians should expect to face suffering for the sake of Christ. Churches in many parts of the world face grim persecution from the state, from other religions, from neighbours, and even from family members. This is one way in which Christ purifies and sanctifies his church. In the face of severe injustices, the church is called to remain faithful to Christ in its testimony and life; to pray for and to love those who oppose them and to seek to live at peace with those around them. Love does not exclude seeking justice from appropriate authorities or even self-defence but it does not allow revenge. Churches around the world are called to pray for, suffer with and support the persecuted church.

Intrusion of the State

In various ways, governments seek to intrude upon and direct the life and witness of the churches. Civil authorities are appointed by God for the good of society and the Church should submit to them within their proper jurisdiction and pray for all those in authority. Historically, Reformed theology has advocated a relationship between church and state, indicating that they owe duties and responsibilities to one another. Today there is no unanimity among reformed churches regarding the exact nature of the church-state relationship and, in the prevailing secularised climate, most churches tend to give this issue a low profile, while on occasion maintaining what they believe to be their God-given right to speak truth to power. Under Christ, the Church has authority over its own life and doctrine into which civil authorities should not intrude. A Church should only disobey civil authorities if the authorities require from them a confession or action which is contrary to God's will in Scripture, or if they prohibit a confession or action which God requires in Scripture. In such situations, the church should resist and protest the intrusion of the civil authorities while seeking to live at peace.

Division on sexual ethics

Views of sexual and gender ethics constitute one of the deep divides in the global church. Many churches in the western world have embraced views of divorce, marriage, sex and gender which are contrary to God's revealed will. This dishonours God and misleads his people. We grieve for this. We call on churches in all parts of the world to maintain the biblical view of marriage as the exclusive lifelong covenant between a man and a woman, which is the only proper setting for sexual activity. We also call on churches to assert the created distinction of men and women and to teach their people to embrace the gender which they have been given by God in their body. Differing views on sex and gender threaten to divide the global church and many denominations and local churches. We grieve this division but insist that faithfulness to the Lord requires continued commitment to a biblical view of sex and gender.

Relation of confessing movements to liberal denominations

Within many mainstream and liberal denominations there are confessing movements of those who seek to remain faithful to the apostolic gospel and biblical ethics. These movements often face significant pressures from denominational authorities. We commend these confessing movements for their commitment to orthodoxy. We call on denominations to listen to the witness of those who call them to return to biblical views. We encourage members of the WRF to support confessional movements and for those in more biblical denominations to pray for and encourage the confessing movements. Where it becomes difficult for congregations to maintain faithful witness in a denomination, other denominations should welcome these churches into their fellowship.

Relation of traditional western churches to non-western churches

We thank God for the missionary movement which over the last 250 years has seen the gospel spread from Europe to almost every nation in the world. We rejoice that the Christian church of the 21st century is global. We recognise the missions movement has often sought to conform non-western churches to inappropriate cultural patterns and has not always supported the development of genuinely indigenous churches. Since the church is representative of the new humanity in Christ, we encourage indigenous churches to find forms appropriate to their own language and culture, rather than models provided by western churches. We rejoice that the church does have an indigenous expression in many places, and we encourage further development of this. We rejoice that the non-western church is increasingly taking a role in

intra- and inter-cultural missions, and we encourage these churches to continue to develop a commitment to global mission. We call on western churches to continue to share their people and resources generously with churches in non-western nations.

Christianity and other Religions

We affirm that Jesus Christ is the only savior of humankind. Other religions may teach important truth about the human condition, but they do not bring people into fellowship with the triune God and into eternal life.

We affirm that Christians have the duty to share the gospel with people of all faiths and seek to lead them to become followers of Christ. However, Christians should demonstrate utmost respect to the religious and cultural traditions of other people. While honest and rigorous debates may be appropriate on some occasions, Christians should not engage in demeaning remarks against other religions and their adherents.

We affirm that Christians should always strive to live faithfully according to the Bible. On the other hand, conversion to the Christian faith should not automatically lead to the abandonment of one's cultural and social heritage. Therefore, believers coming from other religions may have to work out ways of worship and evangelism that are quite different from western churches. However, all Christians should guard themselves carefully from falling into syncretism.

13. Conclusion

Following a worldwide pandemic and during a period when many churches are experiencing serious decline, much discussion has taken place regarding the nature and function of the church. People are asking 'What is the Church and why is it important?' In this WRF Statement on Ecclesiology, we have sought to answer this and other questions, on the basis of Scripture and from a Reformed perspective. We commend our work to the individuals, churches and institutions who are part of the World Reformed Fellowship and urge that the Statement be used to facilitate discussion.

As a Theological Commission, we would like to continue our work in this area by exploring further what we have said about the nature of the church and especially its unity. Given the divisions within the Reformed community, not least our denominationalism, we would like to

explore the issue of ecumenism. This is a word which produces a negative reaction among many Reformed people but we believe that it can be recovered by developing a solidly biblical and theological ecumenism.

We envisage not simply an academic treatise on the subject but also an engagement with WRF members and others, to facilitate discussions which might lead to greater unity and the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer in John 17. As a fellowship, WRF is perhaps better placed to help in this way, than are formal arrangements of councils of churches.

Professor A.T.B. McGowan BD STM PhD

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Appendix: Extract from WRF Statement of Faith

Chapter VIII: On the Church:

1. Its Nature

The church is both the invisible company of all Christians (known only to God) and the visible church on earth, in its many communities. The church is the spiritual and supernatural Body of Christ, who is the Head of the church. Every Christian is united to Christ and joined to every other Christian by God, thus constituting the church. In the life of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, the worship of God, fellowship, the Holy Scriptures, the sacraments and mission, are central.

2. The Ministries of the Church

Scripture indicates a number of ministries which God has given to the church at different times: apostles, prophets, elders, deacons and evangelists. Today, in each local church there are to be elders and deacons. The elders are to be pastors, overseers and examples and some of them are to devote themselves to preaching and teaching. Deacons are to care for the poor and needy, and to see to the practical, financial and fabric needs of the church. Like the eldership, this is a spiritual office requiring spiritual qualities.

3. Worship of God

The primary responsibility of the church is the worship of God. The nature and content of this worship is determined by God himself, as revealed to us in Scripture. This should include the singing of praise to God, the reading and preaching of Scripture and prayer.

4. The Autonomy of the Local Congregation

Each congregation of believers has a degree of autonomy under the rule of the elders but there is also a wider unity with all other congregations. This connectionalism has been expressed in different ways at different times, in different parts of the church.

5. The Sacraments

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It is instituted by Christ and is representative of the work of Christ. Protestant churches recognise only two: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (or Eucharist or Holy Communion). These are often identified with the two sacraments of the Old Testament church: circumcision and the Passover. Baptism is a rite of initiation into the Christian church. It is to be administered by using water. The Lord's Supper points to the death of Christ

on the Cross, using bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood of Christ. It also provides for believers an opportunity for the strengthening of faith, fellowship in Christ and spiritual nourishment, while proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes.