

REPORT OF THE PANEL ON DOCTRINE GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2022

“The General Assembly recognising that the Covid-19 pandemic has raised issues of the nature of public worship and the role of Government remit to the Panel on Doctrine the matters arising from the pandemic and invite them to report to the General Assembly of 2022.”

Introduction

Issues of the relationship between Church and State came to the fore through 2020 and into 2021 as churches in Scotland were not permitted to meet for worship. This prompted a number of church leaders to pursue legal remedy through the courts for what was viewed as an illegitimate intrusion into the life of the church, even in a pandemic.

Issues of Church/State relationships and pressure points are certainly not new and extend back to the apostolic era itself. The very constituting of both the Free Church in 1843 and then in 1929 our present United Free Church, stems from a particular view of this relationship, as is true of a good number of their antecedents. Each generation, it seems, must explore anew what this is to look like.

Looking at the general thrust of the deliverance, and the emphases given in presenting the motion to the Assembly, the Panel saw four main areas that they believed would be helpful to seek to tease out.

- a) The nature of public worship especially given the new-found access to video linked services and therefore raising the question of:
- b) What constitutes the church physically here on earth?

This then opens out into the question of:

- c) What is the role of the state? And given our understanding of that:
- d) What is the role/ place/ position of the church in the kind of secular state we live in?

The Nature of Public Worship

Worship is the very heart of what it means to be a Christian: that we *worship in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks*.¹ Worship is the occupation of the heavenly beings²; and will be the joy of the ultimately redeemed of the Lord Jesus Christ.³ Worship on earth is a mirror of worship in heaven⁴ so that what we do when we worship is of the deepest significance to who we are, both as Christians and as Christ's church.

We are urged not to neglect meeting together because it has an eschatological significance and direction.⁵ But worship is not only significant for the church as the community of believers, it has significance as a way of communicating the gospel and glory of God to unbelievers. It is as the word is proclaimed that unbelievers come to know their condition as sinners, and come to worship too.⁶

¹ John 4: 23

² E.g. Isaiah 6:5; Revelation 4:8

³ E.g. Revelation 7: 9 – 11; 19: 1 – 3

⁴ Revelation 5: 9 – 11; Hebrews 12: 22 - 24

⁵ Hebrews 10:25

⁶ 1 Corinthians 14: 24 – 25

The Directory for the Publick Worship of God (1645) (part of the Westminster standards underpinning our Reformed Order) states as its very opening: *When the congregation is to meet for publick worship, the people (having before prepared their hearts thereunto) ought all to come and join therein; not absenting themselves from the publick ordinance through negligence, or upon pretence of private meetings.*

The gathering together of God's people as His people for worship is integral to our calling and responsibility as the church and its neglect is a serious matter. Nevertheless this raises a series of questions which have been highlighted through the pandemic and lockdown(s). It also has to be viewed in some regard as time and culturally bound. For example it might not be appropriate in a place and time where the church was facing persecution especially of a physically dangerous kind. Indeed, it is part of Scottish history in the secret gatherings of the Covenanters, where public worship became physically dangerous. This is not so for us at the moment, so we need to examine the other matters.

The inability to meet – or at least to be allowed to meet – led to churches, where possible, using video linkage. The security of Zoom meant that the service, beyond church members and adherents, tended to be by invitation only, and therefore was less than public as we would ordinarily have understood it. Whereas a YouTube broadcast would be open to any member of the public, anywhere – but was not really a gathering of God's people either.

The Nature of the Church

This leads us then into the question of the nature of the church, as church. The question we set out to respond to in the deliverance is what constitutes the church *physically* here on earth. The very nature of the question points us to something of an answer immediately. If we were to, as it were, flip the question slightly and ask an alternative question: what constitutes the church on earth *spiritually*, we would respond with something on the lines of: "Those who believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord."

Interestingly (and admittedly merely anecdotally) there seems to be a generational distinction between those who will tell of when they joined the church; and those who speak of when they became Christians. The two perspectives should not, of course, be in any tension. When we come to faith we become a member of Christ's body, the church and this is expressed in membership of the local church. In fact, in strikingly physical language, we are incorporated into the church as a body.

The foundations of the church, whether we use it somewhat anachronistically for the Old Testament as well as the New are set in the assembly of the people of God. In the Old for example in Nehemiah 8 where the people assemble to hear the word of God read and explained. In the New Testament we encounter the word *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) which likewise has its origins in the assembling of the people of a city.

The gathering of the people has particular purposes. Some we may gather up in the previous section under the nature of public worship: that is prayer; the reading of scripture; the exposition of the scriptures; and responsive praise. However the gathering has broader functions too. We meet to encourage one another; to build one another up; to exercise particular gifts that help care for one another; to demonstrate in practical and prayerful ways our love for one another; even learn to bear with one another, as well as bear one another's burdens.

Some, if not all of these "extras" can be done outwith the church meeting and certainly should be. Yet the pastoral letters of the New Testament are addressed to churches, and perhaps

where the church is more gathered rather than community based, these are a particularly essential part of the church in meeting together.

We live in a (spiritual) culture that has a tendency towards Gnosticism: that is, not simply a love of mystical and higher knowledge, but one in which there is a spirit/ body duality; one which would argue that the spirit is all, the body is of no lasting value or where the outward physical is of less importance than what the person feels they *really* are.

The Christian faith has no place for such a radical distinction. The Apostles Creed for example speaks of Jesus Christ *born of the virgin Mary*, where the creed was emphasising less the issue of Mary as a virgin and more that Jesus was actually *born* – physically into the world as we are. The Nicene Creed is even more emphatic, doubling up its testimony: *incarnate by the Holy Ghost And was made man*. Likewise the Apostles Creed sets out our belief in the *resurrection of the body*.

The loss of this close spiritual/ physical aspect was experienced during lockdown, especially by the lone elderly with the absence of touch; the absence of the hug. Spiritual love is expressed in bodily action. To paraphrase James in his letter, we are to love not only in words but in deeds. When the Hebrew writer urges his readers not to neglect meeting together the surrounding words give an urgency: *And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*⁷ Love, deeds and encouragement are all gathered in the church meeting together.

Similarly, just as we are each made in the image of God, yet can only reflect the merest fragment of what that means; so we are able to reflect a fuller expression of the fullness of that image as a people together. It is together that we are being built into a spiritual house as the holy priesthood of God.⁸ The church on earth is a foretaste of the church in glory, reflecting Jesus the perfect image of God.

Church online

Necessarily then, there is a tension between what we are *theologically* and what we may be able to be *practically*. What we have expressed thus far brings into sharper focus the strangeness of our experience when we were unable to meet together – not simply in common with other groups in society, but the particular spiritual/ physical bond that lies in being the Church.

By contrast, as we found ourselves compelled by the circumstances to be propelled into the worlds of Zoom or Teams or YouTube, the video or virtual service, we also uncovered a newfound ability to reach the housebound – or at least those with access to new technology. This has then raised other questions and issues of its relationship to what we traditionally think of church, as we've sought to lay out above. It must nevertheless be noted and acknowledged the efforts and ingenuity of many during the pandemic in finding ways to continue ministering to the churches in various ways. This perspective on video linkage may seem even now to be rather old-fashioned, as there have been churches in many parts of the world operating what they call a multi-campus model. Different gathering places, but the same video linked up preacher for all.

Positive possibilities

⁷ Hebrews 10: 24, 25

⁸ 1 Peter 2:4, 5; 9

We find ourselves raising questions that will need further discussion, even as we look at the positive possibilities of video linked church. For example, as just mentioned, it has enabled churches to make a better link with some of those who can no longer get to church, certainly in the ministry of word and prayer. Pastoral care needs still an element of physical presence, simply because we are social beings.

In the age we live in, with a shortage of trained ministry with many without access to the word preached biblically and faithfully, it opens up possibilities to those who desire the feeding of the word. It also raises possibilities for churches who have no access to ongoing ministry of the word. Positive possibility, yet the question of pastoral care, discipline and access to the sacraments remain problematic.

Lastly, as many churches have found, it provided access to those who wanted to have a look at, not just *that* church, but church and Christianity, who might feel the strangeness of entering a church building too much. It has provided evangelistic possibilities, yet these need to be supplemented if there is to be a real connection into the real, embodied, serving life of the church.

Questions Arising

As noted, the video link model has undoubtedly in places enabled a reach into communities that would not otherwise have been possible. There are however, a number of concerns with that model for church *per se*, given what we have said about the nature of the church.

First would be the pastoral relationship between minister and people, preaching to a people the minister knows and who know the preacher. Not only so, but the very act of preaching is an embodied encounter of preacher bearing God's word to a listening, worshipping people. Preaching is not lecturing, though as many have found from student experience, even lecturing carries some of the same weight of communicating by means of a physically present, personally experienced personality.

Second, as noted with a YouTube model, the potential loss of fellowship between members when people can tune in as and when – and if – they wish.

Third, the Reformed definition of a true church is one where the Word is rightly preached; the Sacraments properly administered and discipline is exercised according to God's Word.⁹ The advice issued by the Principal Clerks during lockdown, which admittedly may need to be revisited, nevertheless argued from the same principle of the physical nature of the spiritual church that communion, which is both with God and with one another as we serve one another, should not be administered in a "virtual" manner – each in their own corner. Related to this would be the matter of how discipline is to be conducted if people are never physically part of the church. Along with that therefore the pastoral guidance and challenge individually required raises different obstacles.

Fourth, how does pastoral care take place when the indicators we normally pick up from body language, posture and such like are absent. How much harder to conceal a troubled soul in personal conversation rather than through the medium of the screen.

Fifth, there is a real danger of succumbing to what is already culturally expected of the church, that is, the privatisation of faith. Herman Bavinck writing at the turn of the 20th century said: *Religion confined to the inner recesses of the heart and the privacy of one's own home, forfeits*

⁹ Scots Confession 1560 Chapter XVIII

*all claim to serious engagement with our public and civic life.... God becomes the great Unknown; the world first becomes a domain without God, then a domain that is anti-God.*¹⁰

So sixth, the fact that what we desire to have is a public act of worship in which those not yet within the life of the church may join and participate, whereas virtual church tends to speak only to the members where security of the link is needed; or else it can become no more than a passive spectacle in which elements may be skipped by if insufficiently 'entertaining'. Added to that is the public witness of the people of God gathering for worship.

It is, we hope, helpful to lay out some of the contours of church as physical embodied gathering as against a virtual presence, so that we hold on to the crucial elements of church when the consequences of lockdown have made all of us talk of what is the "new normal"; or "doing church in new ways". Possibilities have opened up undoubtedly, but there is an important core that should not be lost.

The fact that we are considering these issues arose out of the lockdown at the pandemic's height. But a wider perspective came into place by the role played by the Scottish Government making unlawful the opening of churches for corporate worship which raised the wider question of the interface and relationship between Church and State.

The Roles of Church & State

One great advantage the United Free Church has is that it possesses a very clear distinction between the role of the church and that of the state. At every ordination we hear: *Do you believe, as this Church in her historic testimony has constantly affirmed, that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the Church; that the Church derives from Him a government distinct from civil government; and that civil rulers possess no jurisdiction in her spiritual affairs.*¹¹

The Reformed Churches first of all see the interface between church and state through the prism of what is termed 'two kingdoms'. This is effectively drawing on Jesus' response to the spies sent by the priests and teachers of the law about paying taxes: *give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.*¹² That is, that while the whole earth is the Lord's, there are spheres for what we may call the civil or temporal authorities that are separate and distinct from the sphere of the ecclesial or spiritual authority lying in the Church.

This distinction of role is seen in the way it arose practically in the life of the early church. To the call to stop preaching in Jesus name, Peter tells the Sanhedrin that the apostles have a charge to obey God's commands rather than men's.¹³

Nevertheless, the apostle Paul, who suffered greatly at the hands of the pagan, civil authorities lays a responsibility on each church and Christian to: *submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.*¹⁴

¹⁰ Herman Bavinck: Reformed Dogmatics in one Volume ed. Peter Bolt 2011 p.170

¹¹ Practice & Procedure of the United Free Church of Scotland appendix 2

¹² Luke 20:25

¹³ Acts 5:29

¹⁴ Romans 13:1, 2

This brings a particular tension into the relationship between church and state in that the Christian conscience is bound by civil law. The Church has no *right* to rebel against the state, even against an unjust ruler where that ruler does not touch on her obligations in serving her Lord. So Paul encourages: *requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.*¹⁵ There is a gospel priority in praying for as well as submitting to the civil authorities.

Peter, who as we saw faced down the Sanhedrin with his determination to obey God rather than men nevertheless takes the same tack as Paul in his letter: *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king.*¹⁶

Yet we are also aware that there were occasions when the apostle Paul did have recourse to the courts, but on each occasion it was less a matter of personal rights, so much as to protect the Christians and the church itself. Certainly within the Reformed tradition, from Calvin on, the principle is that we insist on our rights as church or Christians out of love for God and our neighbour.¹⁷

Yet the principle of the two kingdoms also reminds us that there *is* a jurisdiction for the life of the Church, and in effect the judgement of the Judicial Review¹⁸ early in 2021 on the Scottish Government's banning of public worship in churches and other faith communities during a wider lockdown, affirmed that the state has no absolute right to bar public worship. The only weight upon us as Christians and as churches was and is, in the midst of a pandemic, how do we show love to our neighbour?

Church & State Relations in a Secular Society

The Covid pandemic and the Judicial Review raised what we might term a pinch or pressure point in the relationship between Church and State as the motion to the Assembly indicates. There is no doubt that it was in itself, for many, a complex and highly nuanced area as even the Judicial Review judgement showed. The judgement stated that the Government had a right to act, but acted disproportionately. Although there was a *principle* argued in the Scottish Government's actions, equally for most there would probably have been little difference to how the local church actually acted in response to public health cautions on limiting the spread of the virus. So, we might ask, was there really a point?

The point of principle was that there are lines of relationship between Church and State that the State should not cross. Whilst the case in the circumstances and with the nuances may appear unclear, there are bigger issues lying ahead of the Church/ State relationship that will impact directly and, very likely, adversely on the life of the church.

¹⁵ 1 Timothy 2: 1, 2

¹⁶ 1 Peter 2: 12 - 17

¹⁷ E.g. Calvin Institutes 4.20.17; Bavinck Reformed Dogmatics section 335

¹⁸ William J U Philip & Others 2021 Court of Session Outer House 32

Whilst the Christendom model of Western society has long been subsumed by the secularisation of our culture, that does not mean that the church must therefore be silent; nor silent in speaking to the state. Rather the church in its witness to the gospel includes the ethical and moral commands of God, epitomised by the 10 commandments, but contained in the wider principles of both Old and New Testaments, not least to love God and our neighbour.

We would want to acknowledge that through the pandemic, avenues of communication and cooperation have opened up between the churches and arms of government at all levels. However, while seeing the helpfulness of churches within the communities they serve, this takes place in the context of a cultural shift that already tends to marginalise the church as a believing community, and faith more generally.

The desire of the church would surely be to have a prophetic role. To speak truth to power, both to encourage as well as challenge. The role of prophets in the Old Testament particularly was to call the people of God back to the ways of their covenant with God. Nevertheless, prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesy to the nations around. What the apostle Paul lays out in Romans 13 of the God-ordained role of the state, also implies that the state is accountable to God, whether or not it realises it, and therefore the church must have that prophetic role, whether or not it is listened to. The experience of the prophet is not always comfortable and the prophets often suffered for their witness.

There is surely also a desire to lay out principles for the church and not simply be reactive to events. Whether this is realistic is moot. We have a Christian Life Issues group whose task is to see what is arising in Government and society that may have consequences for the church and society, and that has necessarily to be reactive to legislation and events.

The more significant challenge facing the church is the competing direction of travel that church and state, rather, the state reflecting the prevailing culture, separately have.

This is partly evidenced in the wider shift in which moral choices are now often based on what feels right to the individual. Ethics has become aesthetics, or to put it biblically: *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*¹⁹ It therefore also sees an upturning of what have been traditional moral categories. Absolutes in morality are now viewed as oppressive and the church will therefore increasingly find itself, not merely in the wrong, but without the common language to engage with culture or state. It is here where the church and Christians will need to be alive to the pressures on the freedoms of faith; of expression of its views; and ultimately freedom of conscience.

If the United Free Church believes *that civil rulers possess no jurisdiction in her spiritual affairs* then we may come to need to reaffirm that the state has no rights over Christian conscience either.

Conclusion

This may be the point at which we may be asking how these disparate elements of worship and church/state relationships come together in a single Report. The answer lies in what the church needs to do and to be. It needs to be itself as a well-taught; worshipping; mutually encouraging; prayerful people resting on the sovereignty of her God. We need to be aware of the real challenges that face us in the 21st century, and not refighting 20th century battles.

¹⁹ Judges 21:25

We are commanded to pray for those who rule over us; and submit to them as far as doctrine and Christian conscience allow. It would be easy to pre-adopt a position of permanent opposition, but the apostles lived in times of persecution of one level or another, as did the early church; and as do churches throughout the world facing official State opposition of a degree we find hard to imagine. Yet Christians world-wide, for example China until recently, have made great inroads into the life of even atheistic nations by being good, godly, helpful, caring, humble, grace-filled people.

Equally important is that the Church and its leadership need to maintain doctrinal clarity, fidelity and integrity. Both to know where we stand, but also how we stand in reflecting our Lord and Saviour, that we are full of grace *and* truth. There is no easy answer to how we face what lies ahead except as far as possible to keep in step with the Spirit, living the fruit of the Spirit,²⁰ knowing that in this world there will be trouble, but we serve the One who has overcome the world.²¹

²⁰ Galatians 5:22 - 25

²¹ John 16:33