

Introduction

The mission of the Christian church is to witness to Jesus Christ as God's good news for a needy world. This includes preaching the gospel, comforting the broken-hearted and teaching the content of faith. It also entails the prophetic task of discerning the signs of the times and asking what is true, honourable, just and pure, in order that the God of peace may be with us (see Philippians 4:8–9). Our true worship is to avoid conformity to this present age and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern the will of God – what is good, acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:1–2). With these biblical exhortations in mind, we offer the following confession of what it means both to believe in and to follow Jesus Christ in Australia today.

Following Jesus in a World of Deception, Violence and Fear

The world is overwhelmed by violence. Families and communities across the globe have been traumatised by terrorist attacks and other conflicts that violate basic human rights. This has resulted not only in horrific loss of individual life, but also in vicious cycles of vengeance that breed cultures of retribution. Violation of basic humanitarian norms is widespread and is not confined to insurgent movements that employ methods of terror. Removal of hard-won constraints on state power is increasingly taken for granted, justified by the presumption that force will resolve the issues at stake.

In recent years, Australians have become increasingly distrustful of politicians and government. This is hardly surprising in view of the Australian government's refusal to apologise to indigenous Australians, the 'children overboard' affair, treatment of asylum-seekers and others claiming refugee status, collusion in the illegal war in Iraq and half-hearted efforts to build bridges of understanding with members of Muslim communities. Australians have good reason to be concerned about the lack of public accountability on the part of those exercising political and bureaucratic power. Putting a spin on things, rather than speaking the truth, has become the norm.

What is the Christian response to all this? Jesus summoned those who follow him to work towards building communities of human wholeness, characterised by truth-telling, peacemaking and respect for the dignity of all, even perceived enemies. We affirm the abiding validity and value of Jesus' call, moral vision, teaching and practice. We also acknowledge that in each new time and place we need to discern what it means to follow Jesus. We offer what follows to the church in Australia, as well as to others with similar concerns, as a contribution to the process of discernment in a time marked by deception, violence and the politics of fear.

Our first loyalty

A Christian's first loyalty is to God, revealed in Jesus Christ. This loyalty is expressed by belonging to the church, the multi-ethnic 'body of Christ' spread throughout the world. Loyalty to God has priority over loyalty to one's nation, government or racial group. 'We must obey God rather than human authority' (Acts 5:29).

For this reason, we do not accept that claims of national or ethnic identity, let alone concerns for 'national security', supersede our loyalty to God. Nor do they override our responsibility to make the moral vision of Jesus real in our world.

Waging peace

Jesus' call to peacemaking commits Christians to the presumption that warfare is wrong. This commitment is strengthened by the devastating reality of war and its impact, not only on those who are paid to fight, but also on innocent families and communities as well as our fragile environment. Christians have a responsibility to be honest about the costs of war, to explore peaceful alternatives, to act on behalf of victims and to work for justice and reconciliation. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be known as the children of God' (Matthew 5:9).

For this reason, we join with those who oppose government policies based on the assumption that 'war on terror' overrides human rights and the rule of law. Certain measures can never be condoned – torture, bombing of civilians and the use of weapons of mass destruction.

Telling the truth

Jesus warned against judging others and failing to recognise our own faults (see Matthew 7:1–5). No person or institution, whether church or nation, is immune from moral failure. Individually and collectively, we should be strong enough to be truthful about our failures, compromises and deceptions. 'If we claim to be faultless, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1 John 1:8).

For this reason, we join with those who refuse to label critics of government policies as enemies of the 'Australian way of life'. No government or nation is above criticism and the duty of accountability. Telling the truth and working for justice and peace – not deception and fear – is the true calling of government.

Welcoming the 'other'

Jesus taught an ethic of love, but with a radical edge. He taught that to love as God loves is to love even those identified as enemies, to acknowledge their humanity and to respect their dignity. 'Love your enemies, I tell you, and pray for those who harass you, so that you may be children of your heavenly father...' (Matthew 5:44–45). This does not mean capitulating to evil, but it does require taking the hard road of opposing aggressive, inhumane acts while affirming the humanity of perpetrators.

For this reason, we join with those who insist that no person can be excluded from the law's protection. We reject any rhetoric that demonises perceived enemies because this helps to create a climate of tacit approval for the abuse and victimisation of those considered different, 'other' or a threat. We oppose mistreatment of prisoners and detainees, regardless of supposed benefits in dealing with terrorist activities, and we call for generosity in dealing with refugees, asylum-seekers and holders of temporary protection visas.

Called to freedom

'For freedom, Christ set us free' (Galatians 5:1, 13). Jesus Christ calls us to freedom – freedom to serve one another and freedom from fear, whether generated by terrorist activity, media frenzy or government rhetoric. Jesus' own freedom was expressed both by caring for those at the margins and by challenging authorities and institutions motivated by self-interest and the maintenance of power. Authentic Christian freedom is demonstrated by treating those at the edges of society as neighbours and by challenging authorities and institutions that prevent them from living life in all its fullness.

For this reason, we deny that Christian freedom is merely a 'spiritual' or 'religious' experience detached from the reality of bodily and communal life. Conforming to a culture of fear that ignores or tramples upon the needs of those who are different sabotages Christian freedom.

Looking ahead

By embracing Jesus' call to freedom, justice and peacemaking, we join the joyful adventure of living out an alternative to a stifling and destructive culture of deception, violence and fear.

Signatories to the confession:

Rev James Barr, Senior Minister, Canberra Baptist Church, Kingston, ACT

Dr Kevin Bray, Churches of Christ in the ACT

Rev'd Jane Foulcher, Senior Priest, St John the Baptist Anglican Church, Reid, ACT

Rev'd Dr Graeme Garrett, Canon Theologian, St Mark's National Theological Centre, ACT

Rev Mark Hurst, Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ)

Rev Mary Hurst, Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ)

Doug Hynd, Lecturer, St Mark's National Theological Centre, and President, AAANZ

Dr Ross Langmead, Professor of Missiology & Director, School of World Mission, Whitley College, Parkville, VIC

Rev Professor Thorwald Lorenzen, St Mark's National Theological Centre, ACT

Rev'd Dr Elizabeth MacKinlay, Centre for Ageing and Pastoral Studies, Canberra, ACT

Venerable Dr Sarah Macneil, All Saints Anglican Church, Ainslie, ACT

Rev Jeanette Mathews, Minister, Canberra Baptist Church, Kingston, ACT

Dr David Neville, Senior Lecturer in Theology, St Mark's National Theological Centre, ACT

Associate Professor Stephen Pickard, Director, St Mark's National Theological Centre, ACT

Most Rev Pat Power, Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn

Michael Smitheram, International Coordinator Micah Challenge, London

Dr Heather Thomson, Lecturer in Theology and Academic Dean, St Mark's National Theological Centre, ACT

Rev Peter Walker, Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT

For further comment you can contact:

Rev James Barr, Senior Minister, Canberra Baptist Church
jim@canbap.org Mobile: 0500-546-227

Doug Hynd
doug.hynd@netspeed.com.au

For information on Christian engagement in peacemaking and comment on issues of violence in Australia and overseas:

National Council of Churches in Australia – Decade to Overcome Violence
<http://www.ncca.org.au/dov>

Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand
<http://www.anabaptist.asn.au/>