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Dear Fellow Worshiper:

God's Word presents worship as our primary activity in heaven. During this life, we are privileged to participate in worship as a foretaste of what is to come. Despite this centrality in God's plan, worship is a source of controversy, not only in the PCA, but also across many denominations today. The following principles and Q&A are presented to assist MNA church planters in their leading worship that will glorify God, according to His Word. I pray that the guidelines presented here will be helpful.

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Sincerely in Christ,

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**MNA GUIDELINES FOR
CHURCH PLANTERS ON
PRINCIPLES AND
PRACTICES
OF WORSHIP**

OCTOBER 2000

Principles and Practices of Worship for MNA Sponsored Church Plants

I. Key Principles of Public Worship Practices for MNA Church Planters

A. “Since the Holy Scriptures are the only infallible rule of faith and practice, the principles of public worship must be derived from the Bible, and from no other source.” (BCO III. 47-1).

B. “A service of public worship is not merely a gathering of God’s children with each other, but before all else, a meeting of the triune God with His chosen people.” (BCO III. 47-2).

C. “The end of public worship is the glory of God. His people should engage in all its several parts with an eye single to His glory. Public worship has as its aim the building of Christ’s church by the perfecting of the saints and the addition to its membership such as are being saved – all to the glory of God.” (BCO III. 47-3).

D. “The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given His Church a large measure of liberty in this matter. It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God’s Word are observed and the Spirit of the Lord is, that all things may be done decently and in order, and that God’s people should serve Him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness. From its beginning to its end a service of public worship should be characterized by that simplicity which is an evidence of sincerity and by that beauty and dignity which are a manifestation of holiness.” (BCO III. 47-6).

E. “It behooves God’s people not only to come into His presence with a deep sense of awe at the thought of His perfect holiness and their own exceeding sinfulness, but also to enter His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise for the great salvation, which He has so graciously wrought for them through His only begotten Son and applied to them by the Holy Spirit.” (BCO III. 47-8).

F. “The Bible teaches that the following are proper elements of worship service: reading the Holy Scripture, singing of psalms and hymns, the offering of prayer, the preaching of the Word, the presentation of offerings, confessing the faith and observing the Sacraments; and on special occasions taking oaths.” (BCO III. 47-9). Exercise of every one of the elements in this list is not intended to be compulsory in every service nor is this list intended to be an exhaustive summary of all that the Bible teaches is appropriate for public worship. (cf. differing lists in WLC # 108 and WCF 21.5).

II. Key Questions and Answers Regarding Public Worship Practices for MNA Church Planters, Based upon the Key Principles

A. What is the end and chief priority of worship?

Worship's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him (e.g., Deut. 12:12; Psalm 150:2; and I.C. above).

Worship is not just one activity among others, but is the very heart of the believer's existence and of the body life of the church. Worship is the purpose for which God has saved us from sin (John 4:23; I Peter 2:9). Because the praises of God in Christ will fill the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 5:12-13), our present earthly worship is to be reverently joyful, hearty and exuberant, as well as humbly astonished and contrite in anticipation of that heavenly worship which we will enjoy forever. Worship is not only a duty, but it is also the highest and most joyful activity of our redeemed humanity.

In worship, we humble ourselves before God and serve Him, honoring Him as Lord and Savior. This is true both in the "narrow sense" of worship, in which we set aside certain times to meet with God (Heb. 10:25), and in the "board sense" in which all of life is a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2). Worship is therefore primarily "vertical" in focus: God-centered and Christ-centered, in and through the Holy Spirit. However, there is also a "horizontal" aspect of worship, for glorifying God summons us in worship to edify one another (I Cor. 14:26).

-- From *Proposed Statement of Identity for the PCA (1994)*

B. Are there any other ends and/or priorities for worship?

While the chief end of public worship is to glorify God and to enjoy Him, the worship of God should also consider as secondary and tertiary priorities, respectively, the perfecting of the saints and the addition to its membership of such as are being saved – all to the glory of God. Thus, while edification and evangelism cannot become the primary goals of biblical worship they cannot be excluded from our consideration of the purposes that should be served by worship (see I.C. above).

Neither the horizontal or vertical concerns of Scripture can rightly be ignored in biblical worship. In addition to the primary purpose of glorifying God, biblical worship also considers the good of God's people and, thus, requires aspects that promote their love (1 Cor. 14:1), encouragement (1 Cor. 14:3), instruction (1 Cor. 14:3-6), mutual edification (1 Cor. 14:12; 26-28), thanksgiving (1 Cor. 14:16); witness to unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:16,23), and conviction of sin (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

C. What are the qualities of public worship that meet these ends and priorities?

- a. God-centered (I.C. above)
- b. Biblically based (I.A. above)
- c. Historically informed but not governed (I.A., I.D. above)
- d. Participatory (I.B., I.C., I.D., I.F. above)
- e. Culturally sensitive (I.C., I.D., see also BCO Chapters 50, 51, 53)

D. How are we to determine our worship practices according to the primary and subordinate ends of worship?

We may not determine our worship practices apart from a commitment to the exegesis of Scripture which determines the rules that govern the bounds of our worship practices (I.A. above), nor apart from the exegesis of our culture which determine how we shall exercise the liberty that Scripture grants within these bounds on such matters as style of music, the times of worship, liturgical style, etc. (I.D. above).

We should exercise our biblical liberties that enable God's people to worship Him "according to the necessities and capacities of the hearers" (WLC #159) and in accord with the wisdom of the historic church because it is necessary for us to be instructed by the wisdom of the people of God in past ages as well as by the influences of our culture that affect meaningful and understandable worship. Even as our preaching is to be in the vernacular terms of our people (since WLC 156 states that the reading of the Word is to be in the "vulgar languages" – i.e., vernacular – it inevitably follows that preaching also is to be in the vernacular), it is, our worship should be accessible to the people to whom God calls us to minister without yielding to improper cultural influences. The prudential judgment required for weighing such matters is given to the leadership of individual churches who are urged to weigh biblical mandates over personal or societal preferences. Knowing that we will be judged by our extremes, the law of love requires that churches not take advantage of their liberties in worship to the detriment of the glory of God or the good of His people (both those present and those being called to Him).

E. What degree of variation should there be in our various churches' worship practices?

We should not embrace worship or liturgical practices that exclude our praise of God, confession of our sinfulness, our dependence on His grace, and instruction in righteousness motivated by love and gratitude (I.A., I.C., I.E., I.F. above).

We should embrace the diversity of proper expressions of biblical worship that indicate God is moving among every tribe and nation, language and people, and

that indicate we are sensitive to the varying aspects of this mission that God gives to individual churches in the way that they exercise their worship liberties (I.D., I.E. above).

We have no right to impose a preferred style of worship on other bodies of believers. We are responsible to challenge all members of the body of Christ to honor His priorities and glory in worship (I.D. above).

The following pages from, *Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture*, © 1997, CRC Publications, are included to provide a helpful discussion of some of the historic distinctives of worship in the reformed tradition. Used by permission.

REFORMED WORSHIP

Finally, we address the question of *Reformed* worship. Is there such a thing as Reformed worship? Or is there only Christian worship? What are the “non-negotiables” of Reformed worship that synod mandated its committee to identify? What is the Reformed character of worship?

Our committee seriously wrestled with these important questions. We concluded that it was not particularly helpful to talk about the non-negotiables of Reformed worship as though Reformed worship were something totally distinct from (and superior to) Christian worship and something that we must feverishly defend and protect lest it be forever lost. Rather, we concluded that it was more helpful and honest to talk about *Christian worship* and then to acknowledge that, like every other worship tradition, the Reformed worship tradition has both received gifts from and given gifts to Christian worship and that what it has given has arisen from what it first received. In that spirit we note some of the gifts to Christian worship that the Reformed tradition has made over the centuries and encourage the continued cultivation of these gifts. Most of these gifts noted below have already been explored in our preceding theological reflection.

With gratitude to God we note the following eight gifts as some of the particular gifts that the Reformed tradition has made to Christian worship:

- ◆ A redemptive-historical perspective on worship (a) that takes seriously the rich communion of relationships in worship - from the relationships within the holy Trinity, to the relationships between God and His people, to the relationships among God’s people (here and now and throughout history – from Abraham to the saints around the throne) and (b) that takes seriously the intimate connection between service and love of God and service and love of neighbor and the need for integrity of these two. Also implicit in this rich redemptive-historical perspective is an understanding of the

relationship of church and kingdom that keeps Christian worship always directed out beyond itself into service in every dimension of life in God's world.

- ◆ A fully trinitarian emphasis in worship that seeks balanced attention to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
- ◆ An understanding that preaching is proclamation of the Word of God that results in a Spirit-charged encounter with God, not mere lecture or instruction. In this connection, it is significant that in Reformed worship the Holy Spirit is traditionally invoked not only in the context of the sacraments but also in the context of the reading and preaching of the Word (the prayer for illumination).
- ◆ An emphasis upon doctrinal preaching (most clearly exemplified by catechism preaching).
- ◆ Calvin's sacramental theology that emphasizes the real presence of Christ in the sacraments (over against a view of the sacraments as mere symbols).
- ◆ A particular emphasis upon the acts of worship that arise out of a view of worship as true encounter with God. These include the salutation, the declaration of pardon, the prayer for illumination, and the benediction.
- ◆ A conviction that congregational singing is at the heart of worship music, integrated into every part of worship, and a corresponding caution that congregational singing should not be minimized and/or swallowed up by other forms of worship music.
- ◆ A strong appreciation of the Old Testament in general and of psalm singing in particular as part of public worship. (Much of the Reformed emphasis upon the psalms and the Old Testament is related to the redemptive-historical theology set forth above.)

Although churches in the Reformed tradition may not be the only churches that have appreciated these elements of worship, we see these as eight gifts that Reformed worship has given to worship in the Christian church. We also see them as gifts that we should continue to emphasize and cultivate in the Christian Reformed Church.

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