

What's Right with the Church?

On loving, honouring and obeying our church

“What's Wrong With The Church?”

For some time now, unloving critics of the Church dominate the public voice. “What's wrong with the Church?” is a common topic of conversation and derision.

Sadly, this is no longer merely a philosophical exercise. It is increasingly an ideological flashpoint as activists unabashedly coerce governments into silencing Christians and isolating the Church from public life altogether.

Freedom to Preach, Pray and Counsel is Under Attack

Just a couple of examples will demonstrate my point:

More than three years after former Managing Director of the Australian Christian Lobby, Lyle Shelton, blogged his concerns about a drag queen story time event at a Brisbane Library, a Queensland tribunal finally found he had not vilified the two drag queens at the centre of that event. But it took three years to find him innocent.

This is an important win for free speech, given how important it is to be able to publicly discuss some of the massive issues which the recent wave of gender ideology poses for children, for Australian society, and religious people in particular. The freedom to discuss such things openly should be more robustly protected than it is, without legal challenges being made so easily.

Sadly, this win is an exception rather than the rule for religious people are increasingly being silenced from making any comments at all on these issues.

A case in point: Following similar legislation already introduced in Victoria, in NSW, proposed “Conversion Practices” legislation poses a threat to the ability of pastors, parents, and medical professionals to freely express their faith-based viewpoints on gender identity issues without fear of repercussion.

A final example: The Albanese Government is proposing the “Combating Misinformation and Disinformation Bill”, which would see the government define what truth is and give power to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) and online platforms —like META or YouTube— to enforce it.

This bill would result in the government being the ultimate authority of truth. The government and mainstream media would be exempt from the rules of this bill, at the expense of regular citizens and residents of Australia, not just religious people and not just the Church.¹

While I would not advocate for ignoring the problems of the Church, I do insist we need to strike a positive note about all of these issues. Arguing how wrong or dangerous these proposed laws will be for religious people and their institutions will only serve to reinforce politicians in their own beliefs.

A better approach would be to describe for them the prosocial benefits of religion. Silencing religious persons in the public sphere will only serve to harm society by decreasing these benefits for individuals, families and social groups.

Sociologist Rodney Stark, one of the most celebrated and respected sociologists of religion in the world, demonstrates that religious people:²

- are the primary source of secular charitable funds that benefit victims of misfortune whatever their beliefs;
- dominate the ranks of blood donors and other prosocial behaviours;
- are much less likely to commit crimes;
- are far more likely to donate their money and time to socially beneficial programs and to be active in civic affairs —the impact of religious people on volunteering alone is an estimated \$47 billion annually in the United States alone!;
- enjoy superior mental health, are deemed happier, less neurotic, and far less likely to commit suicide;
- enjoy superior physical health, having an average life expectancy more than seven years longer than that of the irreligious;
- are more apt to marry, less likely to divorce, and report higher degrees of satisfaction with their spouse;
- religious husbands are far less likely to abuse their wives or children —this is, of course, contrary to the story that religions create systems of oppression in the home because of ‘male patriarchy’;
- religious fathers are more likely to be involved in youth-related activities such as coaching sports teams or leading Scout troops, etc;
- religious students perform better on standardized achievement tests, are far less likely to drop out of school, obtain better jobs upon graduation, and are far less likely to be on unemployment;
- 247 studies done between 1944 and 2010 have demonstrated religion has a positive effect on society in regard to crime, deviance, and delinquency;
- and, I could go on...

Highlighting the prosocial benefits of religion generally will help to convince our law makers away from legislation that would adversely affect those benefits being realised in Australia; yet, they should also bring to mind all the benefits of Christianity specifically. The world today needs to be reminded of what is right about the Church.

Its Foundation

The first thing that is right about the Church is **its foundation**. In our scripture focus from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do the people say I am?”

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13)³

A variety of answers were given, which is no less true in our day. The only answer that really matters is what came to Jesus' next question, "But you," he asked them, "who do you say that I am?"

"But you," he asked them, "who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."
(Matthew 16:15–16)

"You are the Son of the living God", spoke out Peter. The "you" in Jesus' question is emphatic and plural.⁴ He was asking the disciples as a group. When Peter answered, it was on behalf of the whole group of disciples there present.

Peter's answer was a confident statement of belief on the disciples' part, which earned Jesus' commendation, "Blessed are you, and on this rock I will build my Church".⁵

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. (Matthew 16:18)

Jesus did not say he would establish the Congregational church or the Anglican church or the Catholic church. He said, "I will build My church."

This is the foundation of the worldwide and eternal Church, that people in all times and places have come to believe and know that Jesus is who he said he is because what is written about him is true! And no one would deny Jesus was a good moral teacher and a powerful healer. Having him as a role model is certainly better than:

- **Barnaby Joyce**, a former Deputy Prime Minister whose political career took a hit when he was involved in a high-profile scandal involving an extramarital affair with a former staff member.
- **Don Burke**, a much loved television presenter who has faced several allegations of sexual harassment and bullying from former employees and colleagues.
- **George Calombaris**, the celebrity chef and television personality whose reputation took a hit when he was found to have underpaid staff in his restaurant empire by millions of dollars.
- **Ben Cousins**, the former Australian Rules Football star who has had numerous legal troubles linked to drug use and domestic violence.
- **Kyle Sandilands** a radio host known for his controversial on-air comments, but his offensive joke about the Virgin Mary in 2019 led to widespread backlash and protests.

Because these celebrities are in the public eye, the public is conditioned by the media to look up to such as these. But, no, there is no one better to model your life after than Christ Jesus. There has never been any reason to lose your faith in him. And he builds his Church on the foundation of the confident faith found in his followers.

Nothing—not critics, those who would silence, or even take up arms— nothing will prevail against the Church of Christ for he has conquered the world! (Jn 16:33)

Its Function

The second thing that is right about the Church is **its function**.

The apostle Paul wrote in his *Letter to the Ephesians*,

Christ is the head of the church... (Ephesians 5:23b)

From this we learn the Church is the mind through which Christ thinks.

In that same letter, we read,

and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love (Ephesians 3:17)

Thus, the Church is also the heart through which Christ loves.

In Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, we read,

We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people. (1 Corinthians 2:13)

The Church is also the voice through which Christ speaks.

Luke wrote in *The Acts of the Apostles*,

But Peter said, "I don't have silver or gold, but what I do have, I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!" (Acts 3:6)

If was not Peter's power that healed the crippled man, the power of Christ through Peter's laying hands on the cripple. Thus, the Church is also the hands through which Christ helps.

And finally, back to the apostle Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*,

Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

And the Church, therefore, is the body of believers through whom Christ works.

The Church has a function in this world to continue the work of Christ Jesus. Just as we see God the Father in Jesus the Son, the world sees Jesus in the Church when it is fulfilling its functions as it should.

Its Fruit

Think of **its fruit** that the Church has produced throughout Christian history.

In his book, "Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World", historian Tom Holland presents a deep exploration of the profound impact of Christianity on Western culture. The book traces the influence of Christianity from antiquity to the present day,

arguing that many of the values and principles we hold today have their roots in Christian teachings.

Key points include:

- **The revolutionary nature of Christianity:** The author highlights how Christianity introduced radical concepts such as the inherent value of every human being, charity, and forgiveness.
- **The influence on moral values:** Holland argues that even secular Western concepts of morality and ethics are deeply rooted in Christian tradition.
- **The transformation of the Roman Empire:** Christianity's role in reshaping the Roman Empire and later European societies is extensively detailed.
- **The impact on modern society:** Even in an increasingly secular age, Holland suggests that our society is still fundamentally shaped by Christian influence.

Throughout the book, Holland presents a compelling case for Christianity's formative role in creating the world as we know it today.

Despite its apparent weakness and evident failures, the Church continues to produce the fruit of redeemed men and women who have been liberated from their sins and ushered into the kingdom of God. Those same men and women go on to serve and impact their neighbourhoods for the common good. And no one can pretend otherwise for the facts of history are irrefutable!

Its Fellowship

Consider also how when the fruit of redemption was produced in the first century, these new Christians gathered together in the most profound kind of fellowship the world had ever known:

Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.
(Acts 2:44–47)

In every generation since, the Church has provided that same kind of fellowship for those who are in Christ. **Its fellowship** is another thing that is right about the Church.

Its Future

Finally, we do not have to apologise about the Church. It has Jesus Christ as its foundation. It has the evangelisation of the world as its function. It has changed lives for its fruit. It provides a fellowship like no other source in the world. And Jesus said that even if all the forces of evil gather against it, they shall not prevail against His church.

We read in *The Revelation*,

After this I looked, and there was a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb! (Revelation 7:9–10)

The future of the Church is a vast multitude of people of all times and place gathered together for they have placed their faith in Jesus and lived a Christian lifestyle, despite the challenges and circumstances against them. They HAVE worshiped the glory of the Lord and WILL worship the glory of the Lord.

Therefore, along with its foundation, functions, fruit and fellowship, **its future** is also something that is right about the Church.

How Do We Love, Honour and Obey the Church?

A healthy, safe and functioning Church is the fullest expression of the kingdom of God on earth. While the Church and the Kingdom are not to be equated, the Church CAN live up to its calling and fullest potential IF it lives in and by the Holy Spirit.

Just as a disciple loves, honours and obeys Jesus, we do well to remember our discipleship is lived in and with a community of believers. Therefore, a local church is an expression of the worldwide and eternal Church.

How then do we bolster our own local church community to being healthy, safe and functioning, representing the best of the Church?

The first thing to do is **become a member**. The friends of Jesus are called by our Lord to live in community with one another. Placing our faith in Jesus and living a Christian lifestyle is not a spectator sport! Members love, honour and obey their local church TOGETHER.

This leads us to another way to express our covenant with our church, which is to **attend regularly**. Just as the depth of your relationships with others is dependant on the quality and quantity of communication and exposure —whether your family or friends— you will not benefit from the worship and community life of your church unless you are actually present regularly.

Similarly, we will not benefit from what you bring unless you are actually present regularly. We all benefit from being together in this place, for it is as Jesus declared,

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them. (Matthew 18:20)

Another thing you can do to bolster the health, functioning and safety of your church is to **contribute as you are able**.

As was mentioned at our Congregational Meeting last week —and I hope you all have read the minutes of the meeting, as good members should— we are in a deficit budget, we are not at least matching our expenses with our income.

The income of our church comes primarily from the regular tithes and occasional offerings of our members and friends. We also generate some income through the rental of our

facility and other minor sources. We cannot step into our vision without at least balancing our budget. Until then, our attention can only be on our capacity to maintain our operations and I am sure you can appreciate that is not a good head or heart space to be in.

Becoming a member, attending regularly and contributing as you are able are ways of loving your church. One way of honouring your church is to **speak often of your church**. Invite others to our programs and events. Talk about the features of our church and the benefits of being in membership here. Your honest and appropriately glowing reports will encourage others to belong to this community in order to believe the claims of Christ on their own lives.

And I was greatly encouraged by those men who brought friends with them to yesterday's Mentoring Men Breakfast!

Speaking often of your church and inviting others are ways to honour your church. And, finally, a disciple of Jesus obeys his or her church by **serving on a team**.

A friend of Jesus worships AND serves. There is much to be done here and all of us have a part to play, from welcoming at the door, to working the audio and visuals, to playing an instrument, reading the Bible or praying the Prayers, to helping with our Forge Minis and Kids programs, to serving the morning tea, to leading a Connect group, etc. The vitality of our church really is dependant on having a variety of activities and you and I and we all benefit when we all contribute when we can and serve however we can.

And doing so with joy. Serving should not be a drudgery! If you are doing too much, back off and let someone else step up. It is not your duty to serve but you should find pleasure in serving. This is one way of obeying your church.

Conclusion

In all of these ways and more, we love, honour and obey our church, as an expression of how we love, honour and obey Christ. In doing so, we are moving our church toward being healthy, functioning and safe, and thus maturing into the fullest expression of the kingdom of God on earth we can be.

Together, we CAN live up to the calling and fullest potential of the Church for we are a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19–20). Let us live like it together, so that no one has any reason to criticise us or limit our activity for the common good.

In one accord, let us stand and declare together that we believe in God our Father, Christ the Son, the Holy Spirit, that our God is three in One...

Endnotes

- 1 For more information on these issues, visit the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) website at <https://replug.link/4cbc4d50>.
- 2 Rodney Stark, "America's Blessings: How Religion Benefits Everyone, Including Atheists" (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2013).
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 4 "Son of God' is a matter of revelation, echoing the heavenly voice at Jesus' baptism (Mt 3:7), his own self-confession of 11:27 and the disciples' previous confession of 14:33, and will be confirmed by the heavenly voice of 17:14." —M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew", *New Interpreter's Bible*, Leander E. Keck

(ed.), vol. 8 (Nashville, TN, USA: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), pg 344.

- 5 “All the disciples have already received a similar pronouncement of blessing in Mt 13:16–17, just as all have already confessed Jesus as Son of God in 14:33.” —ibid.