

# What the Presbyterian Church of Australia Believes

## Doctrine

The highest standard by which the Church's belief and practice is to be measured is the Word of God; the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. So that others can clearly understand what the Presbyterian Church of Australia believes is taught in the Bible, **the Church has adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith (with two minor amendments) as a statement of its key doctrines.** While the Church believes the Confession sets forth Biblical doctrines accurately and reliably, the Confession is always referred to as the subordinate standard, and **the Bible is the supreme standard.** You will find the Church's doctrine of the Bible defined in Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Confession of Faith is quite detailed, and explains the Bible's teaching on God, Creation, the wonder of being human and the awfulness of sin, and the whole work of God in salvation. The Confession is careful to emphasise that this salvation is by the sovereign Grace of God. It also sets out clear positions on living the Christian Life, and worshipping as a part of the Church in society. The Confession ends with a simple statement on the expectation that Christ will one day return.

Copies of the Westminster Confession of Faith (as amended by the Presbyterian Church of Australia) can be obtained in modern English versions.

At the time the Presbyterian Church of Australia was formed, it also adopted a Declaratory Statement. The Declaratory Statement does not replace the Bible or the Westminster Confession of Faith, but was designed to show how the Westminster Confession of Faith is to be interpreted and used by this Church. The introductory wording from the 1901 Scheme of Union is given below, and shows how these are all related.

The Supreme Standard of the united church shall be the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments:

The Subordinate Standard in the united church shall be the Westminster Confession of Faith, read in the light of the following declaratory statement:

The Declaratory Statement has six clauses. Among other things, these clauses require the Church to be grounded on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation, to accept the events of the incarnation, life, death resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the events at Pentecost as real supernatural events, to be eager to preach the gospel to all, to hold out the moral law of God as binding on all people, to affirm the freedom of the Church from all civil headship and control, and to allow liberty of opinion on matters in the subordinate standard not essential to the doctrine it teaches so long as this liberty is not abused to the injury of the unity and peace of the Church.

When a minister or elder is first ordained (specially set apart for their work in the Church) they make a solemn declaration that they personally accept these doctrines, and they promise to keep on teaching and supporting these beliefs throughout their ministry. They also promise to fulfil

their duties as set down in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church. The promises are repeated each time they take up work as a minister or elder in another congregation. These promises are summarized in what is called a Formula which all ministers and elders sign. (available on request)

## **Worship**

The worship of the Presbyterian Church has always been marked by simplicity and reverence. It consists of praise, prayer, the expounding and preaching of the Word of God, and the sacraments. In the Presbyterian Church, the minister has the privilege and special calling to arrange the worship service and to preach, and this will naturally lead to some variations from congregation to congregation. The central purpose of worship is always to bring glory to God, and this must always control what happens in a worship service. Occasionally someone approved by the minister may be invited to preach, but the minister is always answerable to other ministers and elders (i.e. the Presbytery, see below) for what happens.

The Church believes that there are only two sacraments; Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These ought to be observed properly and carefully. Christian baptism is only to be administered to those who become Christians as adults, or to the children of at least one Christian parent. It is not a social or community ritual, and will almost always be administered as part of a regular worship service. Baptism is rightly administered by sprinkling or pouring of water, but those who have received baptism by immersion in other Christian Churches are also recognised as baptised. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is administered in all our congregations, more or less frequently, as the minister and elders may determine.

## **How the Church Functions**

Much of the discussion so far has dealt with key constitutional and doctrinal matters. These are important, because the way in which a Church functions will be governed by what it believes and teaches. Some aspects of how the Church functions at local, regional and State levels are discussed below.

### **At the Local level**

The Presbyterian Church is made up of individual congregations of people (including children), who gather in a particular locality to worship God, to be instructed from the Bible, to share in Christian fellowship together and to witness together to Jesus Christ. Each congregation is usually under the supervision of mature Christian leaders called elders, who are chosen by the members of a congregation. The Bible teaches that some elders have special responsibility to lead, (sometimes called Ruling elders) and some have special responsibility to teach as well as lead. These are sometimes called Teaching elders or Ministers. Because each congregation is different, congregations will naturally develop their own special character. However, despite this individuality, no congregation of the Presbyterian Church is completely independent of others. There is a responsibility to love, pray for and support other Presbyterian congregations and both

Ruling and Teaching Elders share the responsibility for making decisions on behalf of the whole Church.

## **The Session**

**The ruling and teaching elders in a congregation are the spiritual overseers for a congregation.** In the Presbyterian Church, they are called a “Session” or “Kirk” Session. (The term Session comes from an old word referring to the sitting of a court and “Kirk” is an old Scottish word meaning Church.) Elders are elected from the communicant membership of the congregation, and must meet the biblical requirements for the office (1 Timothy 3, Titus ch.1). Once ordained, an elder remains so for life unless removed through a process of discipline. The Session has responsibility to protect and promote the spiritual life of their congregation.

## **Committee of Management**

Each year congregations choose some of their members and adherents to look after the Church finances and property. This group is usually called the “Committee of Management” or “Board of Management” or some similar name. The minister is usually the chairman, and the committee will elect a secretary and a treasurer. The number of managers is determined by the elders of the congregation and the elders are also members of the Committee or Board of Management (Managers). **The responsibility of the Managers is to maintain the property of the congregation, particularly its land and buildings, and to look after the financial requirements of the congregation.** It is the responsibility of the Managers to ensure that proper financial records are kept. An audited financial statement of the congregation’s finances must be submitted to the congregation every year.

## **At the Regional Level (PRESBYTERY)**

Although many congregations seem at first to function independently, each one exists as part of a wider network of congregations within which it is able to develop its own special character. However, congregations have a responsibility to care and pray for other congregations and their leaders share the responsibility of making decisions for the whole Church. The minister (teaching elder) and one ruling elder from each congregation in a particular region meet together as a **Presbytery** . It has the responsibility for overseeing all doctrinal and disciplinary matters in its congregations.

## **At the State Level (ASSEMBLY)**

Within each State, the Church has an **Assembly** which consists of all ministers who are members of Presbytery, an elder from each charge and the officers of the Assembly. The Assembly officers are the Moderator (who usually acts as the chairman in all Assembly meetings), the Clerk and various other office bearers. These usually include a Procurator (a Barrister) and a Law Agent (Solicitor). A deputy clerk may sometimes be appointed. **The Assembly is the highest court in each State**, and has the right to determine many matters affecting the life of the

Church except those matters which are determined at a national level by the General Assembly of Australia.

It is the responsibility of the State Assembly to superintend the work of the Church within its sphere and it is sovereign in all matters which pertain to the government of the Church. The Assembly usually appoints committees to carry out its ongoing work.

## **At the National Level (THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY)**

The General Assembly of Australia generally meets every three years, and is made up of Commissioners from every Presbytery and State Assembly. The Moderator of the General Assembly is called the **Moderator General**. As with a State Assembly, it receives reports from its committees which relate to particular areas of ministry. Some of these are the Presbyterial Inland Mission, Australian Presbyterian World Mission, the Reception of Ministers from outside the Presbyterian Church, and the College Committee [which supervises training for the ministry.] It is usual for all General Assembly of Australia committees to have representatives from every State.

The General Assembly hears any appeals or petitions within its area of jurisdiction which have so far not been satisfactorily resolved at a Presbytery or State Assembly.

Some parts of this taken from Presbyterian Church of Australia website.  
<http://www.presbyterian.org.au>

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## **The Presbyterian Church of Victoria's - Vision Statement.**

**(Approved by the PCV General Assembly 1997)**

As part of the redeemed people of God, having been brought out of darkness into God's light through faith in Jesus Christ, the Presbyterian Church of Victoria seeks to glorify and enjoy God - as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – serving, loving and obeying him, in the light of his revealed Word, the Bible.

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria holds the Bible to be the inspired and inerrant revelation of God, a book fully trustworthy to guide the Church in all matters of faith and practice. Embracing this particular view of inspiration of Scripture means that our work and witness has distinctive guiding values, these being expressed in what is known as:

- reformed doctrines and church practice
- the confessional position of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

### **We seek to serve and obey God by;**

- worshipping God in Spirit and truth;
- edifying God's people, by teaching God's Word, in order that they become mature in Christ, living a holy life;
- evangelising the lost through proclaiming and living the gospel;
- engaging in social witness, demonstrating God's love and righteousness in both word and deed.

### **By being faithful in these things it is our passionate prayer that, by God's grace:**

- lives will be changed according to the pattern of Christ's life;
- there will be growth and maturity in existing churches;
- the unsaved will come to faith in Christ;
- new churches will be planted;
- and in all this, churches will have an effect in changing society's values for good.

### **In pursuing this mission we seek to:**

- depend at all times on God's leading,
  - be aware of the culture in which we minister,
  - be prepared to take bold steps to fulfil this mission in the State of Victoria, throughout Australia and toward all parts of the world.
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