

From true worship in the Church  
in the distress of the present  
– Seven Theses –

**Introduction**

The self-understanding of the Reformed Churches is essentially linked to the question of true worship. The orientation of true worship must be reconsidered again and again, because the social, political and economic conditions in which the church lives are constantly changing. We are encouraged to do so by constantly listening to the word of God, as witnessed to us in the Holy Scriptures, but also by the insights of the reformers, by the theological heritage of the reformed churches and by the fact that the form of the church of Jesus Christ is never static. The Church is in a constant process of change, which must always be kept under critical scrutiny (*semper reformanda*).

We are witness to dramatic changes in the world. We live in a time of irreversible upheaval and unbridled military aggression, in a time of irreversible human and cultural losses. Irreparable interventions in the order of nature, the ruthless exploitation of energy resources threaten the future of coexistence on our planet in the medium and long term. The erosion of almost all aspects of social life is no longer a marginal phenomenon, and the high level of social injustice and lack of solidarity, together with the aggravation of poverty and the increasing vulnerability of human existence, mean that an ever larger part of our contemporaries find themselves in precarious living conditions. The advance of authoritarian political regimes and the increasing erosion of democracies are creating space for political radicalization and ideological self-isolation, which offer a way out of the many crises. The breathtaking militarization of politics seems to be a mirror of the irreconcilable polarizations in social life. Self-assertion and confrontation are increasingly crowding out deliberate positioning and an amicable reconciliation of interests.

In this situation, the churches, at least in Europe, are increasingly losing their relevance as socially perceptible institutions. They are hardly expected to contribute to solving the big questions in life. And in the churches, too, the cultivation of their special fellowship in the celebration of the divine service has to bemoan a remarkable loss of importance. They live less from the power of their religious services and thus from the praise and appeal to God, and are primarily satisfied with their charitable functions. The number of churchgoers is decreasing, as is the number of church members. At the same time, there is a growing religiosity that lends itself to living out spiritual needs outside of the institutional church framework of the churches.

In view of these pressing developments, we as the council of the European region of the World Communion of Reformed Churches see it as our task to speak up and consider the current situation theologically as well. We want to raise our voice to give account to the hope that lives in us in the midst of present challenges (1Ptr 3:15), and to align our worship with the truth found in the Word of God. It is not enough to exchange views on the different perspectives of the dramatic situation, for it also requires explicit theological confirmation. We are convinced that the voice of the Reformed Churches can only be heard if we face the challenges of our time in the context of the confession of our Christian faith. This is done by focusing on the question of true worship in the context of present circumstances.

The Church does not celebrate its divine service in isolation from the world, but also not in an uncritical adaptation of the prevailing view of life. By listening to the Word of God and asking for the Holy Spirit, worship is always carried out in direct critical solidarity with currently prevailing and challenging living conditions. The Church always distinguishes between two forms of worship, namely the liturgical worship of the assembled congregation and worship in everyday life around the world. These two forms are distinctly different from one another, yet must never be separated from one another, as they belong together: a one-sided focus on liturgical worship could lead to a withdrawal of faith from the world, while a one-sided emphasis on worship in everyday life would entail a moral leveling of the gospel message. Both forms of worship have their essential purpose. In view of decreasing participation, we want to remind one another of the fundamental character of the liturgical service, which is more than a pleasant break from everyday life, namely the communal assurance in invoking God and in listening to his word. Worship in everyday life throughout the world remains dependent on this certainty, and gains its special orientation and determination from it. With seven theses, we want to encourage a new focus on the vocation, constitution and mission of the Church, as they are particularly envisioned in its worship:

### **1. Worship occurs in the living PRESENCE of God.**

True worship does not take place in the presence of an abstract and faceless God, who only takes shape in a worship service, as it is rather known that it is carried out through the living devotion of God in Jesus Christ, which has always preceded it. In it, he shows us his unmistakable face, just as he revealed it to his chosen people of Israel as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The worship service does not re-enact the visualization of God, but claims his presence. We do not decide for a God, but we testify, referring to the biblical testimony, in what special way God has decided for us. It is not up to us to interpret God in the most plausible way possible, but to follow the interpretation

that he bestows on us and our circumstances. Thus, in the presence of God, we learn to understand ourselves. Even if the certainty of his presence and companionship by no means always achieves the clarity we seek, it fundamentally surpasses our capacity for self acknowledgement. We are dealing with the God of the gospel, who also frees us from our bondage within ourselves. We remain dependent on the living presence of the Holy Spirit, which a congregation gathers to pray for in worship.

## **2. Worship takes place in the context of the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me!"**

True worship aims at sanctifying God's name and not at affirming God's utility for our religious inclinations and needs. "Thy name be hallowed!" As it is part of the substance of the first commandment, it calls us out of bondage to all other gods and world views (ideologies) and places us in the freedom of the covenant established and realized by God. With the self-revelation of God as the creator of the world, a consequent "de-godification" and desecration of the created world takes place. The first commandment is directed against the worship of success and prosperity, as well as against belief in progress, glorification of identity or naive enthusiasm for pluralism. Whatever our golden calves may look like, we have no homage to them, much less dance around them. In prayer we turn to God so that he rejuvenates our belief in the powers that be without a master (in politics, business, society, etc.) and lets us experience his liberating power. This shows the subversive character of invoking God. In it, our eyes open to the many idols we keep that cause their devastating mischief in the world.

## **3. Worship awakens hope beyond the challenges of human existence.**

True worship lives from the promise of God's presence, according to which God does not leave his creation to itself and remains faithful to his covenant. "And, lo, I am with you always, even unto to the end of the world." (Mt 28:20) True worship affirms the "nevertheless" of faith (Ps 73:23 "Yet I am always with you"), even when it cannot rely on any demonstrable experience. It is at the heart of the Christian creed and it is a seemingly contradictory hope that God "shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps 121:4). Without the assurance of that hope, which is affirmed in our worship services, all our appeals to God come to naught. It is precisely this encouraging hope alone that can save our afflictions and doubts from despair. What remains is the special self-disclosure of God in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which frees us from the temptations of the desperate search for meaning from their helplessness by opening up our

demonic entanglements with the hostile powers of this world, and allowing us to live out of God's reconciliation with us.

#### **4. Worship contradicts the power of death**

True worship is always a rejection of the self-impression of death as the ultimate authority of our reality. It takes place in the certainty of the presence of the Risen One, whom death can no longer reach. In doing so, he contradicts the authority of the powers summoned by death, even if they are still trying (and by no means unsuccessfully) to take hold of us. Indeed, we still live in a world where the forces of death try to pose as the final authority, but the profession of faith invokes that we are already carried by life. Even stronger than the medieval death warning "in the midst of life we are surrounded by death", is the Reformation reversal "In the midst of death we are surrounded by life". Hence, there is every reason, even in such adverse circumstances, not to give up the encouraging power of joy about the fact that the masterless powers are limited by the power of God and will ultimately only prove to be apparent realities. True worship is fundamental to the assurance that man need not let death push him about. The unconditionality of humanity for the design of our living conditions must be opposed to material constraints that are presented as having no alternative. The good news of the "completely different possibility" in the face of problems, crises and injustices in the world is not only presented to us, but at the same time it is a possibility that we can rush towards it in asking for the power of the Holy Spirit. The subversive power of this request is none other than the power of the gospel. In principle, true worship cannot participate in servitude hostile to life which is committed to the power of death, but it is known that life opposes the usurpations of death. This is the central and crucial certainty that comes from believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

#### **5. Worship encourages active anticipation in the kingdom of God**

True worship takes place in the hope of coming to the kingdom of God, which is directed against the misery and violence of this world, and thus in resistance to the powers and forces that still and sometimes dramatically effectively stand in the way of the coming of this kingdom. It is not up to us to establish the kingdom of God, but we should not stand in the way of the hope that emanates from him with our confession and actions, but draw from it the formative power for our lives. By acknowledging that the kingdom of God has already come, we are encouraged to carefully and mindfully accommodate it in our lives. The hope in the kingdom of God, which is as realistic as it is active, contradicts its localization in the afterlife just as much as its displacement at the

eschaton. When we ask for the coming of God's kingdom, we trust in God's promise. This trust stands both against escapism and against resignation, and implies an ethical instruction for a corresponding commitment to witness hope in the true rule of God in contrast to the rule of the rulerless powers eroding our living conditions.

## **6. Worship enables rejuvenated perception and life-serving shaping of reality.**

True worship is "proper worship" (Rom 12:1) in a world that likes to appeal to reason with self-confidence, but incessantly puts it at the service of dubious or even highly dangerous undertakings with which man engages in his idiosyncrasies, and finally tries to present itself as the creator of a new world. Reason is not an innocent force per se, because it is always deployed in the service of certain priorities and interests, which by no means always pursue life-serving perspectives. Precisely because of its remarkable possibilities, reason has proven time and again to be extremely seductive, in that it has devoted itself to particular possibilities while losing sight of the whole. What it actually is, what we call reality, is neither obvious nor can we know it on our own, because the given circumstances do not tell us what they are for, nor does reason have any corresponding knowledge of its own. Every understanding of reality follows an assumption that fundamentally goes beyond its phenomena, and as such can only ever be believed either doubtfully or with a limited certainty. Ultimately, the question of reality does not open up due to our reasoning, but can rather only be answered in a credo that gives a definition and perspective to the given circumstances that we perceive. It will be important that reason neither serves ideologies nor follows illusions with which man tries to align himself as the creator of his own reality, which is the case in the impressive narrative of the Tower of Babel. Although it has devastatingly collapsed a number of times, as evidenced by the numerous man-made historical catastrophes, the Tower of Babel obviously remains an attractive project. It is always to be hoped that it will come to an end before the devastating collapse occurs. "Proper worship" does not stray after the possibilities of instrumental reason with which man contests his attempts at self-empowerment, but in the light of the first commandment, the world is sobered up against its idols and seductions and places reason in the horizon of the well-considered, life-serving answer to God's care for his creations and his faithfulness to his covenant.

## **7. Worship bears witness to God's reconciliation with people and places it at the service of reconciliation.**

Proper worship always takes place in light of God's reconciliation with people. It corresponds to the free inclusiveness of God, who remains faithful to his covenant, so that worship is not celebrated in exclusivity and delineation, but is always to be understood as a devotion of solidarity towards contemporaries. Just as God's reconciliation counteracts the devastating consequences of our unfaithfulness and godlessness, the congregation's solidarity with its contemporaries cannot be limited to those with whom we can or want to certify good will. The Church will fundamentally be unable to participate in the deepening and cementing of rifts and antagonisms, and will abhor the tools, such as informational selection and polarization, that fuel these destructive tensions. The community of Jesus Christ will keep a fundamentally different path in mind here, which will not be dominated by current moods, but has to prove itself - for example, keeping in mind insights of the ethics of peace - precisely where they are called into question by circumstances. In principle, communion will support the realization of living conditions that make it possible to return due thanks for the free grace of God, and thus to keep a renewed distance from all political system ideologies. Whether the churches can participate in shaping the world and human society in a way that actually creates freedom will depend on how thankfully and freely they can live with Christ's spiritual gifts and whether they dare to trust the new-creating power of the Holy Spirit. They rely on the promises of the shalom of the kingdom of God (as well as received and hoped for by God), which are already orienting their confession and their actions today.

Even if the churches, with the freedom given to them in Christ, only partially manage to effectively give the word to a renewed reason and an objectivity consistently oriented towards humanity in the irrational madness of the dynamics of our world affairs that are currently being served in many places, they will certainly continue to do so totally dependent on forgiveness. Yet, there could possibly be a minimally faint glimpse of the fact that the Church is in the world, and not simply outside it. In this way, with the encouragement of renewed vigilance, it could become a sign of sustained hope. Proper worship, both in its liturgical celebration and in everyday life throughout the world, will be recognizable in the world through its free and clear commitment to a resolute life in the horizon of God's reconciling action. The fact that the Bible and newspapers always belong together will not find a special place in the invocation of God at the least, especially in intercession, when the challenges we face overwhelm us and place us into painful embarrassment. Even when we feel powerless, we are not alone.