

# Short Statements

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ON ISSUES OF SIGNIFICANCE

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# Preface

From time to time short statements of biblical teaching on significant issues are included in reports to the Synod of Eastern Australia.

Although not to be regarded as statements approved by the PCEA, they have nevertheless been either commended or welcomed by the Synods who received them.

They do not claim to be the full or final word on the issues they address; rather they are, as described, short statements.

By gathering them together in this e-book format it is hoped that their value will become known and appreciated by a wider audience.

Read them for yourself, check them against the Scriptures (Acts 17:11), and allow them to challenge, change, or confirm you in your thinking.

M G Smith

February, 2013



# The Sanctity of Human Life

We believe that all human life belongs to God, the author and giver of it, and can only be taken in ways authorised by him. Each person is created in the image of God and should be nurtured.

We oppose all actions and attitudes that devalue human life. The unborn, the disabled, the poor, the aging and the dying are particularly vulnerable to such injustices. We and all people are called to defend the weak and speak up for the helpless regardless of colour, race or creed.

We believe that, subject to a proper judicial procedure to establish the guilt or otherwise of the accused, the death penalty for pre-meditated murder may be appropriate given God's words to the human family as recorded in Genesis 9:5-6.

We also stress that all are sinners, all stand in need of the grace of God, and that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour from sin. He will completely save all who come to God through him.



# The Stewardship of Creation

We believe that the universe and everything in it belongs to God the Creator. In God's bounty meat, fish, vegetables and fruits and all kinds of resources are available for the use of the human family, whom he has made stewards of his creation as alone creatures made in his image.

The unjust exploitation of the earth, its resources or its peoples is to be resisted. God does not commend self-indulgent living nor preoccupation with money and possessions. Christians are encouraged to live lives of simplicity and contentment even as they seek to bring out the potential of the earth.

Good stewards receive God's gifts with thankfulness and use them responsibly to meet human need and to bring glory to God. The Bible also teaches regular, cheerful, sacrificial and proportionate giving to the work of the Lord by God's people so that people of all cultures may come to know Christ and serve him in all things.



# Work, Rest and the Lord's Day

God's good creation had in view a higher destiny after a course of history had been completed. As God rested on the seventh day, so people are called to a regular weekly rest. Such rest expresses thankfulness for what God has provided, confidence in God's sustaining care, and anticipates the future rest in the better world to come.

Work and economic output are not ultimate values. All people should have humane working conditions and observe the weekly day of rest even though, through sin, much of the day's significance is not recognised.

Jesus, the promised Redeemer, brings about a new creation. Following New Testament example, the first day of the week, the Lord's Day is the day of rest and worship, anticipating the promised new heavens and new earth and the entry into God's eternal rest of all who put their faith in Jesus. On this day labour is limited to necessary work and deeds of mercy.



# Marriage and Family Life

We believe that God established the family relationship with marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman for life, and with sexual union taking place only within the marriage relationship. God is against sin but he is for the family. God intends that a secure and loving marriage relationship provide the context for the birth and nurture of children. We also recognize that God does not give all the gift of marriage and that the single state is to be respected and honoured as well.

We recognise that sin can fracture relationships so that divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality or irremediable desertion of marriage obligations is sometimes appropriate, the ultimate cause being the hardness of the human heart. We also recognize that the temptation to sexual relationships between persons of the same gender can exist and that yielding to such temptations is serious sin for which repentance is necessary. Pornography likewise is a sinful snare that debases and corrupts human life.

Given the way sin affects all our lives, compassion for those ensnared in improper relationships or addictions is necessary at the same time as a Biblical presentation of the solution in Jesus Christ. In the fellowship of God's family, the Church, married couples may strengthen their relationship, and the brokenness of all our lives may be overcome and healed through the love of Christ and the support of other believers.



# Living in the World as a Christian

The Christian's conflict with the world is described in just a few verses by John (1 John 2:15-17). "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." The problem confronting us as we seek to live for God in this world is not only external—"the world" (vv 15-17), and the "evil one" (vv 13, 14)—but also internal—"the flesh" (v 16, to translate Paul literally). Two ways of living are implied; a way which pleases God and a way which displeases him. But it is crucially important that we grasp the basis on which living to please God can even be contemplated.

The Bible says, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation," (2 Cor 5:17) and goes on to make it clear that "All this is from God", and "through Christ," (v 18). "What counts is a new creation" (Gal 6:15).

And so the Christian hope includes looking forward to "a new heaven and new earth" and a new city—"the new Jerusalem" (Rev 21:1-2). This change is described elsewhere in equally radical ways: a new birth (1 Pet 1:3), and new life (Rom 6:4). And it is emphasised that this is not a change we in any way brought about—we "were dead in our transgressions and sins"—rather it is all of God, through his grace, that we are made "alive with Christ" (Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13).

But this wonderful change which God has worked is to be reflected in our living. So, reflecting on the fact that "the first heaven and the first earth" will pass away (Rev 21:1), Peter asks, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" (2 Pet 3:11). And he goes on to answer his own question—"You ought to live holy and

godly lives.” Paul expresses it this way, “you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ...” (Eph 5:8). Paul exhorts the Ephesian believers, “to be made new in the attitude of your minds” (Eph 4:23). And to those in Rome he writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, ... Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Rom 12:1).

If we are changed people then our thinking and attitudes are to reflect that change; and that includes our attitude to possessions. So the Lord Jesus himself says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matt 6:19, 21). “You cannot serve both God and Money.” (v 24). “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. ... So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (vv 25, 31-33).

It is not that we are to do without all material things. Some are necessary, and “your heavenly Father knows that you need them”. However, our focus, our highest desire, our greatest concern is to be elsewhere—God’s kingdom and his righteousness.



# Responsibility in Public Office

The Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia affirms its commitment to the words of our Lord regarding those set over us in Public Office. In His words in the gospel of Luke 20:25a we declare that what we owe to our secular rulers we are obliged to give to them. Thus it is that we exhort our members to pay what they are legally obligated to do in the way of taxes, government charges, and the like. We are also called upon, as the apostle Paul says in 1st Timothy 2:2, to pray for “all those in authority, that we might live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

At the same time, though, we must also state our higher allegiance to a ruler above our secular rulers. The Lord in speaking of how we must honour the secular authorities also spoke of our honouring God (Luke 20:25b). This is why we pray for our rulers that they will rule for the common good and not out of selfish interest. They have been placed there by none other than God, whether they acknowledge Him or not. Naturally, we pray that many of them will be Christians seeking to serve God in the public sphere, and for those who do not presently believe that they will come to faith. But for them all we pray that whether they are federal, state, or local representatives that they will indeed represent the community as a whole.

It is with sadness that we note the laws which have been passed regarding abortion. We believe human life as that made by God and formed in His likeness, ought to be protected and sustained. We grieve that many thousands of unborn human beings have been murdered in mother’s wombs, and not for reasons of saving the life of the mother. Likewise we

are saddened by the departure from God's Word in the proposed changes to the laws redefining marriage. At the beginning of human time God created man male and female and ordained marriage as the way He meant mankind to propagate and so fill the earth and live before Him.

We believe that those employed in various government departments, hospitals, police, emergency services, the armed forces, and so on, are public servants and thus not there to lord it over the community or to serve their vested interests or the interests of their political masters. This also applies to any particular secular or religious ideology which they personally hold. The civil magistrate is also identified by us in this role. His calling is to uphold the law and not to rewrite it.

Furthermore, we plead that they may apply the law so that restitution and punishment is appropriate for the crime committed and the loss suffered by victims taken into account. As God laid down His concern for the widow and orphan in the Old Testament so we very much pray that those most helpless in society be cared for.



# Refugees/Asylum Seekers

## Scripture

Alienation, the sense of estrangement from one's traditional community or from others, is common in human experience and shows itself in a variety of ways. Christians are strangers and aliens in the earth because they are not yet in the place where their citizenship is held (1 Peter 2:11; Eph 2:19; Phil 3:20).

According to Exodus 12:43ff in Old Testament Israel you could have a social position as (1) a foreigner [nokri] not integrated into Israelite society and excluded from the Passover; (2) a temporary resident [tosab] or (3) an alien [ger] who has the opportunity to keep God's covenant and participate in the Passover; (4) a slave, who was eligible to participate in the Passover if circumcised; and (5) a native born Israelite.

In our society today, parallels might be foreigners who do not take citizenship, temporary residents, aliens who have come among us to live permanently, and Australian-born. In Israel the alien was to be treated with dignity and respect because the Hebrews had been aliens themselves (Deut 10:18-20).

## Australia

Each year about 50,000 persons who arrive in Australia by plane overstay their visas, but not much is heard about them. Another 4,000 arrive without legal visas, principally by boat, and there is great debate in the community. Most without legal visas are eventually found to be genuine

refugees, and of course these genuine refugees have committed no crime by seeking asylum.

Why the great debate? Is it because of the loss of life getting here and the danger of supporting a smuggling racket? That's a factor. Is it because of concern that persons of undesirable character will gain entry? That's a factor too, but it's why security screening occurs. Is it because it amounts to queue jumping by those with the money to the detriment of the many in refugee camps who have no money and languish in the camps for years? That's a factor too. However, I suspect much of the underlying attitude of recent years arises from the source of many asylum seekers in Islamic countries of the Middle East, and the fear they will not integrate.

It is true that there are legitimate fears, but we need to remember that people of the Islamic faith in Australia come from about 70 different ethnic backgrounds, and have wide differences among themselves. They do not form a monolithic block and many are seeking to escape oppressive regimes.

As Christians we may differ on aspects of immigration policy, but we should always remember that we are aliens too, and that the best way of helping refugees in a spiritual and physical way is to welcome and befriend them as those who are made in God's image. They share a sinful nature with us and need to know the salvation of God. The easiest way to make extremists of new settlers is to show hostility to them. That is not the Christian way.



# Euthanasia

The despair and torment that inevitably accompanies the desire to terminate one's own life is tragic. That some have and continue to do so is a concern that we all should bear in some way. For instance, we read in 1 Samuel 31:3-5 that both Saul and his armour-bearer took their lives in desperate suicide.

Yet some are putting emotive pressure on governments to introduce the practice of euthanasia to end the suffering of individuals suffering pain and despair, beginning with those who are terminally ill but with the real possibility of termination being extended to those who suffer intolerable emotional or mental anguish. It is legalised suicide, and when assisted, it becomes also murder.

The term 'suffering' is coupled with the word 'intolerable' to justify euthanasia. Yet such an adjective wilfully ignores palliative care options today that ensure sufferers are given effective relief. What a tragedy to euthanise (such a polite term) a patient on the eve of the discovery of a superior palliative option, or in God's time and by His grace, even a cure. It is not unheard of for a patient known by current medical opinion to have only weeks to live, to far exceed all prognosticated life expectancy and even to regain quality of life. A physician assisting a suicide makes a horrendous decision on the basis of current knowledge and limited foresight; the physician blasphemously "plays god". Surely, the only qualification for terminating life should be omniscience and omnipotence, the prescribed experience eternal.

Euthanasia strikes at the very essence of our being. Promoters of euthanasia would have us acquiesce to the atheistic notion that our fellow man is a suitable arbiter of life and death. We refuse to do so. We maintain that there is in fact a higher authority vested solely in the Creator of life himself, the triune God. He has recorded his standards for life and death in Scripture. Exodus 20:13 and Romans 13:9 state the very clear standard for the sanctity of life: we are commanded not to murder. Life is to be highly esteemed and protected. The reason for this is given in Genesis 9:6 'Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man.' In spite of mankind's disregard of this divine warning in every age, the Biblical ethic of the sanctity of life is common to Christian and non-Christian alike in our society because God has placed it at the heart of His creation from the beginning (Rom. 1).

Pain and suffering are reminders of this world's guilt before God. To think that death might be an escape from intolerable suffering for those who will not acknowledge their Creator is extreme folly. Hebrews 9:27 states 'And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgement.'

The good news of the gospel however is that the Lord Jesus Christ suffered the extreme pain of death and then overcame death by rising from it so that he might give eternal life to those who believe in Him.



# Poverty

When the Lord brought his chosen people out of Egypt they suffered from hunger until God sent them manna and quail. Hunger is one of the outcomes of poverty. Lack of clothes and shelter are others (Luke 16:20,21).

When the manna was gathered each person had sufficient for their needs — no more and no less (Exodus 16:18). When they came into Canaan the manna stopped; their food came from the land. At this point we first read about the poor in the land (Exodus 22:25). The context is about charging interest. ‘There shall be no poor among you’ (Deut 15:4). God’s people in God’s land were each given a plot of land on which to live. The Mosaic Law anticipated some people getting into difficulty/poverty. They might get into debt and sell themselves into slavery. In the Sabbath year all debts were to be cancelled and slaves set free. Some might sell their land also, but this was to be returned in the Jubilee year.

There were also laws about gleaning. Such measures aimed at preventing persistent poverty. God commanded generosity towards the poor (Deut 15:11, Psalm 82:3). The Sabbath year and Jubilee were rarely observed (2 Chron 36:21). Rather the rich and powerful exploited and oppressed the poor in the land (Psalm 12:5). They charged excessive interest (Psalm 15:5). They denied justice to the poor. They took their land by force (1 Kings 21). The prophets condemned this disregard for the poor (Isaiah 1:17, Ezekiel 22:29, Amos 4:1). It was contrary to the commands given through Moses. ‘He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for his Maker; he who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord’ (Proverbs 14:31,

19:17). In Proverbs there is a lot of wisdom about poverty; wisdom about causes and treatment. Oppression is a sin; but the poor are not without sin. Sin is the basic cause of poverty (Proverbs 30:8,9).

Jesus came into this world of sin and poverty. He was born in a stable. He came to preach the gospel to the poor (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 61:1). He spoke of the consequences of neglecting a poor beggar; He told a rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor (Luke 16:19f, 18:22). It seems that his disciples gave to the poor from their common purse (John 13:29). But Jesus had come to deal with the cause of poverty, namely sin. The poor who were poor in spirit would be blessed. He did not glorify poverty as such, as done in the Roman Catholic Church.

From the very beginning the believers shared their possessions with poor members of the church (Acts 2:45, 4:34). Their focus was upon treasure in heaven not on earth. Deacons were ordained to manage the distribution of food to widows. Paul organised a collection from the churches for the poor believers suffering from famine in Judea. He urged generous and cheerful giving. He saw it a giving to the Lord. He operated on the principle of equality (2 Cor 8:5, 8:14). God is the one who graciously gives us all things (Phil 4:19). God is glorified in and through the giver and the receiver (2 Cor 8:12-15).

In Reformed churches we have deacons whose duty is to administer church property and finances. Part of their duty is to assess the needs of members and give help to those who have genuine need, such as widows, orphans and the like (James 1:27, 2:15f). Helping the poor is a responsibility and a privilege for all believers. It begins in the household of faith but does not stop there (Gal 6:10).