

WORLD COMMUNION OF REFORMED CHURCHES

WORSHIPING THE TRIUNE GOD REVISED JUNE 2010

Receiving and Sharing Christian Wisdom across Continents and Centuries (2010 Edition)

Introduction

The sharing of wisdom is a common practice in many cultures – Eastern and Western, Southern and Northern – and is particularly suited for learning and sharing across cultures, generations, and centuries, both in oral and written forms. The sharing of wisdom comprises a significant strand of the biblical literature, including Proverbs and proverb-like Psalms, Jesus' beatitudes and several Pauline exhortations. To share wisdom is to knit together the sinews of Christ's body, the church. Sharing wisdom is, thus, a central practice for global Christian fellowships, like the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). When the wisdom that is shared is a faithful echo and appropriation of scriptural wisdom, a faithful testimony to the Word and "Wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1.24), then this sharing of wisdom can be a sign of Pentecost, not Babel – a gift of the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of wisdom" (Eph 1.17).

The purpose of this collection of proverbs about the practice of Christian worship is to build up the body of Christ for faithful service and ministry. This collection of proverbs is gathered by Reformed Christians. It is at once a *catholic* collection, reflecting participation in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and a *particular* collection, reflecting the unique history, theological convictions, and practices of Reformed communities worldwide. This document was drafted in response to mandates by both the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) at its 2004 Assembly in Accra, Ghana, and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) at its 2005 Assembly in Utrecht, the Netherlands, following a period of communication with member churches from both organisations. It was developed by the worship planning team for the 2010 WCRC Uniting General Council in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, in consultation with pastors, teachers, and other leaders throughout the world, both within and outside of the Reformed tradition, and was refined by the Worship and Spiritual Renewal Section of the Uniting General Council.

The document is designed to present a vision for worship and spiritual renewal in which we invite each other to deeper and more vital expression. It is not designed to impose a set of practices on member churches or to imply that worship in member churches already embodies the fullness of this wisdom. The document is designed for several uses:

- 1. The document can be used within a given congregation or denomination to shape a conversation about the gifts, challenges, strengths and weaknesses of local practices.**
Those leading these conversations could pause after each proverb and ask "how has God gifted us to practice this wisdom?", "in what ways is God calling us to embody this wisdom more faithfully?" and "in what other ways would we express the wisdom of our practices related to this theme?" Each proverb is designed to elicit conversations that explore the connections between theological convictions and practices, conversations of testimony and spiritual discernment that are indispensable for fruitful ministry in any context.
- 2. The document can shape a conversation between and among congregations, denominations, and believers from quite different cultural contexts.** Those shaping these conversations could pause after each proverb and ask "how is God gifting each of us in our unique cultural contexts to practice this wisdom?" and "in what way might God be calling us to practice this more faithfully, particularly in light of what we learn from each other?"
- 3. The document is an invitation to collaborative in-depth study and further refinement.** Each proverb is a summary of a field of research and Christian reflection, drawing upon work in biblical exegesis, theological reflection and historical scholarship. Each proverb could be fruitfully refined after continuing reflection in light of the challenges of faithful discipleship. Thus, this collection is not designed to be final or complete. It is designed to be open-ended: any member church or ecumenical partner can easily supplement this collection with its own materials. Future

WCRC gatherings could also amend this collection by adding proverbs to respond to unique challenges that arise in the future.

The ultimate goal of all of these uses, however, is not simply to enhance conversations or to result in a better document. The ultimate goal is nothing less than to elicit, by the Spirit's power, the faithful and grateful worship of the triune God. May God's Spirit bless these words and all who wrestle with them so that the church of Christ may be strengthened.

Note: for this edition of the document, the terms "church", "congregation", and "community" are used interchangeably, reflecting the different uses of our member churches. The terms "blessed" and "wise" alternate throughout the document, with the term "blessed" typically used to refer to blessings God gives when we follow biblical commands, and "wise" for judgments that congregations make in discerning God's will. We anticipate further refinement of this usage, following responses from member churches.

I. A Called and Forgiven People: Assembling in Jesus' Name

1.1 Called by the Triune God

Blessed are the people of God
who are deeply aware
that they are both called by and address *the triune God*,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit—¹
a God of splendour and majesty
perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ,
the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1.15).

Blessed is the community
that gratefully acknowledges
that the triune God not only receives our
worship,
but also makes our worship possible,
prompting us through the Holy Spirit,
and sanctifying our offerings
through the perfect priesthood of Jesus Christ,
who during his life on earth offered
praise "to the Father," "full of joy in the Holy Spirit" (Luke 10.21), and even now "ever lives to pray for us" (Heb 7.25).

Blessed is the congregation
that insists that believers gather to worship God
not first of all in order that God might bless
them,
but because God has already blessed them.

Blessed is the congregation that then discovers
that God does indeed bless them
as they worship the triune God
who nourishes, teaches, convicts, and corrects
them,

and strengthens bonds
that unite believers with Jesus Christ and with
each other
through the sanctifying actions
of the proclamation of the word and corporate
prayer,
through baptism and the Lord's Supper,
through fellowship, offerings, and testimony.

1.2 Corporate Assembly, the Whole People of God

Wise is the worshiping community
that "does not neglect meeting together" (Heb
10.25),
but joyfully gathers in Jesus' name,
eager to proclaim the Word of God,
to offer praise and prayer,
and to celebrate the sacraments,
each of which are actions of the whole people of
God,
"the royal priesthood" (1 Pet 2.9).

Blessed is the congregation
that invites all worshippers—
including those which our cultures
may label in different ways as "disabled"—
to full, conscious and active participation in
corporate worship,
engaging heart, soul, and mind in devotion to
God,
deeply aware of how their own personal
worship
participates in a much larger chorus of praise to
God.

Blessed is the congregation
that expresses in its worship
the communion in the body of Christ,
the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,
the oneness that is the gift and calling of God,
that unites the young and old,
and believers of every time and place

¹ Belhar Confession and Heidelberg Catechism

*who share a common calling by the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ.*²

1.3 The Holy Spirit

Wise is the worshiping community that recognizes how the Holy Spirit works through both reason and emotion, through both spiritual disciplines and surprising events, through both services that are prayerfully planned and through moments of spontaneous discovery.

Wise is the worshiping community that recognizes that the lasting value or spiritual power of worship does not depend upon our own creativity, imagination, intellect, or emotions, but comes from the Holy Spirit, who may choose to use any or all of these things. For truly, worship is a gift to receive, not an accomplishment to achieve.

1.4 Affirming and Resisting Culture

Wise is the church that seeks to be “in” but not “of” the world, (John 15.19) resisting aspects of the culture that compromise the integrity of the gospel, and eagerly engaging its culture with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ who comes to each culture, but is not bound by any culture.

Wise, then, is the church that is grateful that the gospel of Jesus is at once transcultural, contextual, cross-cultural, and counter-cultural.³

1.5 The Goodness of the Redeemed Creation

Wise is the congregation that makes clear that its worship participates in the song of praise that is offered by all creation.

Wise is the congregation that celebrates worship as an embodied reality, grateful for the gestures and postures that express our praise and prayer, and the book, water, bread, and wine, that God ordains for our use—

² From WCRC materials for the Grand Rapids event

³ Lutheran World Federation Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture

the gifts of God for the people of God.

1.6 Leading God’s People

Wise is the community that calls, trains, affirms, and responds to those gifted for leadership in all genders, ages, races, abilities providing formative training and mentorship for them in the theology and practices of worship.

Wise are leaders in worship who equip all the members of the community for full, conscious, and active participation,⁴ taking care to express hospitality to those who are not yet a part of Christ’s body, the church.

1.7 Artistic Expression

Blessed is the congregation in which the Word is proclaimed and prayers and praise are offered not only through words, but also through artistic expression: through gifts God has given to each local community in music and dance, in speech and silence, in visual art and architecture. Blessed are the artists who offer and discipline their gifts so God’s people may testify to the goodness of God, offer thanks and express repentance.

Wise are artists who are grateful both for the limitations offered by the second commandment, and also for the example of the biblical artists called by God and equipped by God’s people for service according to God’s commands. (Ex 35.30ff)

Wise is the church that gratefully receives the gifts of faithful songs and artworks from other centuries and other cultures, celebrating the catholicity of the church, and cultivating creativity through new songs and works for worship.

II. Joyfully Proclaiming God’s Word

2.1 Word and Spirit

Blessed is the congregation in which the Word of God is proclaimed with conviction and joy surrounded by expectant prayers and profound gratitude

⁴ Cf. Vatican II

for the Holy Spirit's work
to illuminate the hearts and minds of God's
people.

2.2 The Breadth of the Christ-Centered Word

Wise is the congregation
that nourishes believers
with readings and sermons that engage the
breadth and depth of God's Word,
Old Testament and New Testament,
always proclaiming the fullness of the gospel of
Jesus Christ.

2.3 Calling Forth Rest and Witness, Justice and Peace

Blessed is the congregation
in which the proclamation of God's Word
comforts those who mourn
and confronts those who oppose God's reign.

Wise is the preacher
who invites hearers to receive God's lavish
grace,
to repent from sin and evil,
to turn toward Christ,
to proclaim peace,
"to do justice, to love kindness and to walk
humbly with God" (Mic 6.8).

2.4 Resisting Idolatry

Wise is the congregation
that proclaims the Word of God
in ways that actively expose and resist
both the idols that we are tempted to worship
instead of God
and also the idols of our distorted
understandings of God.

Blessed is the congregation
that challenges these distortions
by contemplating the person and work of Jesus
Christ,
"the radiance of God's glory and the exact
representation of God's being" (Heb 1.3).

2.5 Credo: The Response of Faith

Wise is the congregation
in which the proclamation of the gospel
is accepted as the word of God,
which is at work in you who believe (1 Thes
2.13),
leading to both confession and praise,
both repentance and a commitment to service,
both compassion and a passion for justice,
both personal and communal actions,
both new obedience and profound gratitude.

Blessed is the congregation

that invites believers to testify to the goodness
of God
by expressing the faith of the church
that transcends and forms our individual
experiences
and unites us with believers across cultures and
centuries,
and by testifying to the work of God in the life
of the local community.

III. Responding to God in Prayer and Offerings

3.1 Praise and Gratitude

Blessed is the church that
offers praise and thanksgiving (cf. Ps 50.14,
Heb 13.15),
not only extolling the beauty and glory of God,
but also contemplating, reciting,
and celebrating all that God has done
throughout history.

Wise is the congregation
that draws upon and learns from
the Bible's own narratively-shaped prayers of
praise and thanksgiving (e.g. Ps 136)
as it gives form to its own prayer.

3.2 Praying in Jesus' Name, Through the Spirit

Blessed is the church that prays in Jesus' name,
acknowledging our union with our ascended and
ever-present Lord.

Blessed is the worshiping community
that prays in and through the Holy Spirit,
desiring the gifts of the Holy Spirit,
and acknowledging that as we pray
the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness,
interceding for us according to the will of God
(Rom 8.26-27),
and resisting the "cosmic powers of this present
darkness" (Eph 6.12).

3.3 Full Range of Human Experience

Wise is the church that,
following the example of the Psalms,
encourages honest and trusting prayers to God
that express the full range of human
experience—
the "anatomy of the soul"—
spoken, sung or silent,
danced, dramatized or visualized—
prayers of celebration and lament,
trust and desperation,
supplication and intercession,
thanksgiving and confession,
healing and hope.

Blessed is the church that prays not only for its own needs,
but also for the needs of the world that God so loves.⁵

3.4 Gifts and Offerings

Wise is the church that gratefully practices the giving of gifts, time and talent, as an act of dedication and worship

Wise is the church which affirms that all of life is lived in service to God and neighbor,
and that believers are called to be stewards of every gift of God.

IV. Baptizing and Feasting

4.1 Jesus' Commands to Baptize and Celebrate the Lord's Supper

Blessed is the church that faithfully obeys Jesus' commands "to make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything Jesus has commanded (Matt. 28:20) and to "eat and drink in remembrance of me," (Luke 22.19-20) receiving these signs as occasions in which God works to nourish and sustain, comfort and challenge, teach and transform us.

4.2 Baptism

Blessed is the congregation that announces that their true identity is found in Jesus Christ.

Blessed is the congregation that proclaims how the waters of baptism are a sign and seal of God's promises to wash us clean, to adopt us into the body of Christ, to send the Holy Spirit to renew, empower, and resurrect us a to new life in Christ.

Blessed is the congregation that proclaims how the waters of baptism are also a sign and seal of God's call to renounce sin and evil, to embrace Christ, and our new identity in him and to live a renewed and holy life.

Wise is the community who celebrates baptism joyfully and remembers that baptism is a means of grace and encouragement to live out our vows of covenant faithfulness.

4.3 Lord's Supper

Blessed is the church that regularly celebrates the Lord's Supper as a feast of thanksgiving, communion, and hope.

Blessed is the congregation that not only gratefully remembers God's creating and redeeming work in Jesus Christ, knowing his presence in the breaking of the bread,
but also gratefully receives the gift of union with Jesus Christ and Christ's body, and looks forward to the feast of the coming kingdom.

Blessed is the congregation that shares this meal by "discerning the body of Christ" in its manifold oneness,
by expressing hospitality for one another with grace and truth (1 Cor 11.29-33), and by reflecting God's hospitality for us in ministries of hospitality in the world.

V. A Blessed and Commissioned People Serving in Jesus' Name

5.1 God's Sending

Blessed is the congregation in which believers are encouraged by God's gracious blessing, and challenged by God's gracious call to proclaim the good news of Jesus and to live as a healing presence in the world in the name of Jesus.

5.2 Daily Worship

Wise is the community that nourishes faith by encouraging daily worship for all believers, with emphasis on reading and meditating on God's Word,
seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, offering prayers of praise and petition, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, listening for God in "sheer silence", (1 Kings 19.12) and living every moment before the face of God.

⁵ The phrase "Anatomy of the Soul" is from John Calvin's commentary on the Psalms

5.3 Hospitality and Evangelization

Blessed are communities
in which hospitality
is practiced in both public worship and in
personal lives,
where strangers and guests are welcomed and
embraced,
where the poor and marginalized, diseased and
forsaken,
can find refuge under the shadow of God's
wings.

Blessed are communities
in which all people are invited and challenged
to become disciples of Jesus,
receiving baptism and formation in the faith (cf.
Mt. 28.19)

5.4 Formation for Worship

Wise are congregations
that invite and challenge believers
of all ages and abilities
to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our
Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 3.18).

Blessed are congregations
that nurture the faithful interplay
of scripture, doctrines, practices, and the fruit
of the Spirit.

Wise are congregations that deepen worship
through reflection on and teaching about the
meaning of worship practices.

5.5 Worship, Compassion, and Justice

Blessed are congregations
whose public worship points to Jesus Christ,
and Jesus' message about the
kingdom of God.

Blessed are congregations
whose corporate worship and public witness
are consistent with each other
and faithful to God's Word,
whose worship and witness are
a testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit.