

Minister's Message – February 2012

Prayer in Parliament

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon this Parliament, and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper the work of Thy servants to the advancement of Thy glory, and to the welfare of the people of Australia.

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil; for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Did you know that the President of the Senate reads this prayer when he takes the chair each day in Federal Parliament? No wonder we are such a blessed country! This prayer has been prayed in the Senate and in the House of Representatives (a slightly shorter version) since the formation of our nation in 1901. It was in 1901 that Senator Walker (NSW) presented a petition from General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW. His motion, that prayer be included in the Standing orders for each day 'was agreed to after a short debate' (www.aph.gov.au).

Through all the early years of establishing this nation, through two world wars and an economic depression, this prayer has been prayed in our Federal Parliament. It was almost 100 years (in 1997) before Senator Bob Brown moved to remove this prayer and replace it with 'a time of reflection'. Then in 2008 Harry Jenkins called for debate on the place of prayer in the Parliament. With the institution of a minority government in 2010 a statement acknowledging the 'traditional custodians of the Canberra area' was included after this prayer.

May Almighty God continue to be acknowledged at every sitting of our Parliament. We wonder where we might be today if the men and women in our Parliament were not reminded every day that God directs and prospers our way. Such prayers are not said in many parliaments of the world, or where there is no parliament at all, and look at the state of such nations today.

May we who pray 'our Father in heaven' in our home and in church remember to pray for our nation also. We cannot be critical of our political leaders if we are not faithful in prayer for them. In the Bible we are told that God has appointed the governing authorities (Romans 13:1), and to pray for 'kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence' (I Timothy 2:2-3).

You might wonder why it was that the Presbyterian Church was so concerned to have prayers in our Parliament. It is because of the Establishment principle that came out of the Reformation and is written into the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The relationship of church and state is viewed in different ways.

1. Some see the state as subject the church. This is the position of the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope once ruled many nations; now he has his own small state, the Vatican. Islam holds this position also.
2. The reverse of this, that the church is subject to the state, is called Erastianism. Having the Queen as head of state and head of the Church as in the Church of England reflects this position, a position rejected with blood by the Presbyterian Church in Scotland.

3. A third position is that of Voluntaryism. In this the church rejects any relationship with the state. Some like the Exclusive Brethren refuse to vote.
4. The Establishment principle under which the Presbyterian Church wanted prayer in the Parliament is that there are two jurisdictions, civil and spiritual. These are separate but yet connected as being under God the supreme Lord and King of the entire world. The state has 'the power of the sword' to maintain justice and peace, but it does not have power to direct worship. It is a case of 'co-ordinate jurisdiction with mutual subordination'. In the church we are to pray for our politicians as well as offer guidance in spiritual and moral matters, and correct them when they act against the word of God and the spiritual wellbeing of the people.

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