

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE? AN ANALYSIS OF THE PCUSA

INTRODUCTION

Presbyterian Church History

A decision to divide the church, the Body of Christ, is a monumental and grievous decision.

Such a decision within a Presbyterian church or in the larger denomination is especially dangerous because Presbyterians understand themselves to be a connectional church extending beyond an individual congregation.

Presbyterians are not Baptists or Congregationalists, believing the church to be a voluntary association. This understanding is reflected in how Presbyterians begin and plant churches. The Presbytery's New Church Development purchases land and invests large sums of money in paying the initial startup. We understand that New Church Development is an expression of the mission of the PC(USA) out of which a new congregation is born. Our doctrine teaches that God has placed us in the church through no decision of our own, an understanding shown in our practice of infant baptism. Presbyterians do not repudiate that connection lightly.

In the history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States there have been divisions, but in every case in which divisions have occurred (1741, 1810, 1837, and 1861) it has been the result of the majority excluding (excommunicating) a minority.

Such divisions have been disastrous for our denomination and its mission. In all these previous divisions ultimate reconciliation has prevailed (1758, 1909, 1864 and 1869, and 1983) with the recognition of the sin that produced the division.

Only the division of the PCA from the old Southern Presbyterian Church in 1973, a schism carried through voluntarily by a minority, is an exception.

Unity and Division in Scripture

There is a reason that our church has such great reluctance to countenance division either in the denomination as a whole or through a single congregation leaving the fold. The New Testament is adamant for unity.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is a hallmark of this position. *Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no division among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose....Has Christ been divided? (1 Co 1.10, 13a). And 1 Corinthians 3.3-4, 16-17: For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, 'I belong to Paul' and another 'I belong to Apollos,' are we not merely human?.... Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy and you are that temple.*

Paul bases unity in love and charity, both of which remain the bedrock of our community: *....love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way....(1 Co. 12.4-5).*

Even when Paul is most distrustful of other Christians, he does not advocate separation. *Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.....the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely....What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in this I rejoice (Phil 1.15, 18).*

This theme of unity is also central in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. *For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.* (Ephesians 2.14)

Reconciliation in Scripture

The foundation for unity lies in the important biblical and Christian understanding of reconciliation. As Paul states in 2 Corinthians 5.18-20: *God ... reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation..... So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. As the Confession of 1967 (9.31, 34) states: To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as his reconciling community.... The unity of the church is compatible with a wide variety of forms, but it is hidden and distorted when variant forms are allowed to harden into sectarian divisions, exclusive denominations, and rival factions.*

Basis for Separation

For these reasons, **division can only be countenanced if there is overwhelming evidence that the church, or a minority in the church, has forsaken ESSENTIAL doctrines of the church.**

These essential doctrines are most readily located in our most historic creeds, the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds (Book of Confessions 1.1-1.3, 2.1-3.) A summary of these **ESSENTIAL BELIEFS AND DOCTRINES** include: the trinity, the incarnation, salvation by grace through faith, and acceptance of Scripture as the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ. Central affirmations include the sovereignty of God, election of the people for salvation and service, covenant life, faithful stewardship, and a recognition of the human tendency toward idolatry and tyranny. (BOO F2.03, 2.04, 2.05)

It is at this point that the **criticism of the PCUSA** tries and fails to find divergence from ESSENTIAL doctrines of the Christian Faith by the PC(USA). An examination of the charges presented against the PC(USA) will demonstrate this failure.

Certainly there may be "endless debate" about many issues facing our church but none of these other issues constitute a basis for schism.

Often anecdotal evidence is given (citing conferences and seminars and publications that do not reflect the orthodox positions of the PC(USA) as evidence that somehow the PC(USA) is deviating from traditional essential beliefs. This is certainly not the case. None of the church's **ESSENTIAL** beliefs have ever been altered in the thirty-year existence of the PC(USA).

In discussing controversial issues, our denomination has been guided by the following principle:

In essentials, unity

In non-essentials liberty;

In all things charity.

These principles recognize that we may disagree on non-essentials but we should do so with charity and a recognition that good Christian people, over the centuries, have differed on such non-essential issues. **These issues are never grounds for dividing the body of Christ.**

The Lordship and Authority of Jesus Christ.

A *Document* has been created by those who wish to leave the PCUSA and it claims that the 2001 General Assembly "refused to affirm that "Jesus Christ, as he is proclaimed in Holy

Scripture, is the only Savior of humanity and the world.” In fact, the General Assembly only refused to pass a resolution that simply restated what was already in our creeds and confessions. Instead, the 2001 General Assembly passed a resolution for a deeper study of Christological issues that threatened to divide the church. Most criticism of the PCUSA’s belief in the Lordship of Jesus Christ fails to mention that the statement passed at the next General Assembly was a result of that study. That study resulted in the following Resolution that was adopted at the 2002 General Assembly:

“Who is the Lord Jesus Christ?’ We declare that as the 214th General Assembly (2002) we lift up the for the whole church these words from the document that we so strongly affirmed; **‘Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.’** Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to the place of their faith, hope, and love in Him. No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness or admirable living, ‘for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God’ (Eph. 2:8). No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet, we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of God our Savior, ‘who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (I Tim2:4). Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.

“Can only followers of Jesus Christ be saved?” Can the Lordship and Authority of Jesus only be maintained if one believes that salvation is limited to “followers?”

While Presbyterians believe in the Lordship and Authority of Jesus Christ, many Presbyterians do not believe that the Lordship of Jesus Christ allows **followers** to determine whom God chooses to save. It is **not** all about we followers, it is all about God, for followers of Christ would not exist but for the grace and mercy of God. We cannot assume that we (followers of Jesus Christ) know who will be saved and who will not, only God can determine that.

All who are saved are saved through Jesus Christ, but Christians cannot know the expanse of that salvation. Only God knows. Only God knows what we are saved to.

The PCUSA Believes in the Authority of Scripture.

The **Document** uses **five arguments** to state that the PC(USA) “has made statements and taken actions not consistent with biblical belief.” But those claims fail to substantiate these “statements” and “actions.”

The **first argument** claims that the failure to use the word “obedience” somehow lessens the authority of scripture.

Obedience is a fine word, but the new charge that “[the ordinand’s] manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian Gospel” expands the meaning of true obedience to include joyful response. All candidates for ordination in the PC(USA) must answer the question: “Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?” (BO W-4.4003b).

The **second argument** claims that the decision to remove “fidelity in marriage” or “chastity in singleness” from the requirements for ordination have limited the authority of Scripture.

It should be noted that these two requirements (fidelity and chastity) were only added to the ordination requirements in 1997. Apparently then, our denomination had been violating the authority of scripture for over 250 years by leaving such a requirement out of the ordination standards

These additional requirements were removed fifteen years after they were added to empower presbyteries to make decisions for ordination on a case by case basis.

This was hardly a radical decision. The authority of presbyteries in making ordination decisions was affirmed by the old Southern Presbyterian Church **75 years ago**, in 1941.

The **third argument** used by supporters of division, is that support of same-sex marriage is a violation of the authority of scripture.

It is at this point that one might wonder what the authority of scripture entails.

We may agree on what **scripture says**, but what **scripture means** is a matter of interpretation.

It is here that the Presbyterian concept of liberty must play a role.

The church is currently struggling over gay ordination and gay marriage, issues that do not involve the essentials of our faith **if** one can entertain the possibility that there is more than one way to interpret scripture on such issues as marriage.

Over the years all the churches in our denomination have had to look beyond **what scripture says** to discover **what scripture means** in order to find spiritual and ethical guidance for our own time and place.

The *Document* extols the ECO, saying that they “ordain women and are committed to diversity.” And yet **Scripture never says** that women should be ordained to church office. Only through interpretation is the PC(USA) and the ECO enabled to proclaim that the message of **Scripture means** and permits the ordination of women.

The Southern Presbyterian Church reached this position **50 years ago** when it took the meaning of scripture over what scripture strictly says and ordained a woman to the ministry.

Another example of interpretation and Scripture’s deeper meaning is found in the issue of divorce. Prior to 1959 (**55 years ago**) the Southern Presbyterian Church prohibited ministers from remarrying divorced individuals unless the cause for divorce was adultery. Scripture is clear on what it **says** about divorce.

A deeper understanding of divorce in Jesus’ day, when it constituted a terrible discrimination against women, and divorce in our own day allowed the church to find within scripture a meaning that recognized in modern culture that all marriages are not blessed and should be dissolved where spousal emotional and physical abuse are involved. Certainly this understanding does not violate the authority of Scripture.

Perhaps liberty should be allowed full sway as our denomination struggles with what scripture says and what it might mean on the issues of gay ordination and marriage.

The **fourth argument** is that the PC(USA) violates the Lordship of Christ and the Authority of Scripture doesn’t involve scripture at all, but only charges that General Assembly violates “the Confession’s constitutional authority.”

This is a mystifying argument because it never makes clear what exactly the General Assembly did in 2012 that violated the Confessions, although it seems to be related to ordination standards.

In fact, the General Assembly does not have the power to change the ordination requirements (or any part of the Book of Order or the Confessions) without the subsequent

approval of a majority of the presbyteries, a position established by the Presbyterian church in 1927 and 1941 (**85 years ago** in the “Northern” Presbyterian Church and over **70 years ago** in the “Southern Presbyterian Church.”)

The **fifth argument** that the PC(USA) violates the Lordship of Christ and the Authority of Scripture criticizes the educational material of the church and summer youth conferences at Montreat.

Once again there is a quibbling over words in the educational material. (It is perhaps noteworthy that although the Gospel of Matthew states “poor in spirit,” the Gospel of Luke, in that gospel’s version of the Beatitudes, states “poor,” a broader definition that might well involve “material things.”)

The “political action” expressed at the youth conference is never specified.

In its **conclusion** to these arguments, the **Document** finally recognizes the need for interpretation of scripture, but then goes on to state, “there is a growing intolerance for conservative interpretation, and the message is that one must conform to the progressive view.”

This statement is unsubstantiated.

Trinity Presbytery and the church at large have offered opportunities for all views to be heard and respected, most recently on Christian Marriage, a dialogue presented at Lake Murray Presbyterian Church last September.

Alternate Designation of the Trinity

The **Document’s** charge, concerning the designation of the Trinity, is based on the fact that the General Assembly “received” a paper containing optional names for the Trinity. **These options were never adopted by the denomination.**

The **argument against the PCUSA** would advise separation of the church based on the simple reception of a report by the General Assembly. The **claim** would advise separation of the church because of a comic strip’s ridicule.

Any Christian denomination, including our own, which promotes liberty of conscience will suffer ridicule and misunderstanding in the culture at large, which does not understand that *expressions of opinion* within a denomination are not doctrinal decisions.

Universalism

Although the **Document** addressed this issue under the authority of Scripture and the Lordship of Jesus Christ (see above), it is reintroduced here.

Universalism is a belief, *never accepted by the PC(USA)*, that God will ultimately redeem and save the entire universe. Universalism is rejected by the PC(USA) because it claims a knowledge that we cannot have.

The **Document** then cites a section from the Book of Order that it claims endorses Universalism.

However, the passage actually resembles a passage from Isaiah 49.6: *I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*

The passage criticized by the **Document** is scripturally a task of the church as well as the mission of Christ.

It is not a statement about Universalism.

Mission

Here the **Document** criticizes the PC(USA) for using “time and resources on many...one-sided and divisive political issues...”

Apparently the authors of the **Document** believe that the church should have nothing to say on issues of justice in our society as long as those issues are controversial.

For eighty years, the Southern Presbyterian Church held a similar position that the church's *only* mission is to save souls.

This understanding of the church's mission led our denomination to ignore the sins of slavery and segregation as “political” issues. The church escaped controversy to its shame.

This policy was reversed in the Southern Presbyterian Church in the 1930's with the church finally taking a position on racial inequality in 1948.

Indeed, the PC(USA) does fund The Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C.. This office also addresses issues of hunger, domestic violence, poverty and seeks to be a voice for the voiceless by attempting to speak the priorities of Scripture to power. Indeed the hour-long documentary mentioned by the **Document**, “TRIGGER: the Ripple Effect of Gun Violence”, was created with the goal of shifting the conversation about gun violence away from polarizing extremes. The film frames the debate as a public health issue. This documentary supports responsible gun ownership, while it also advocates stopping the illegal movement of guns from gun shops to the streets.

Certainly all do not agree with the actions of a particular General Assembly, but our denomination embraces liberty of conscience on these issues and encourages Presbyterians to apply authority of Scripture to ALL areas of human activity. *In each time and place, there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Holy Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, works to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations.* (Confession of 67, 9.43)

The **Document** is mis-informed when it says that General Assembly “changed the rules to require that presbyteries send in the entire apportionment, even if the churches withhold those funds, thereby silencing our voice.” In fact, these rules have not been changed. Presbyteries have always been required to send in the entire apportionment. In recent years, Trinity Presbytery has not sent those funds for apportionment to GA that some churches have withheld. So, General Assembly has heard their voice. Given our polity, the only way for their voice to be silenced is for the congregation and Session to stop communicating with both Presbytery and General Assembly. Presbytery has received no overtures, amendments, or communications of any sort from **ANY** church that were intended to be debated by Trinity Presbytery or to be sent on to the larger denomination in twenty years. Where is their voice?

The **Document** states that continued affiliation with the PC(USA) compromises the individual church's unity. The allegation is made that the positions of the General Assembly on controversial issues “creates difficulties for members and makes it difficult in inviting people...to visit our church.”

However, there are churches within the PC(USA) that have been growing and continue to do so. One may wonder how difficult an obstacle liberty of conscience has been for them. However, there is evidence that these growing churches have concentrated on the preaching and teaching of the Gospel and have not been totally engrossed in the issues of the denomination at large.

The denomination's General Assembly takes positions on a variety of issues and receives many papers and reports, but actions on these reports are the actions of the General Assembly and do not affect the governance of the local church.

Perhaps those facing "difficulties" in explaining such issues to their friends might tell them that Presbyterians allow discussion and debate, liberty and freedom of conscience, on all non-essential issues facing our denomination

CONCLUSION

When one remembers the guideline of unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity in all things, an examination of the *Document* urging separation from the PC(USA) fails to make its case.

- * It ignores the gravity and dangers of separation made in Scripture and in the history of Christianity, a decision so monumental that it has rarely occurred voluntarily.

- * It is unable to find credible evidence that the church has deviated from ESSENTIAL doctrines of the Christian faith, the only basis for a consideration of division.

- * It seeks uniformity in non-essential beliefs and perhaps unintentionally deprecates the Christian liberty that allows Presbyterians to discuss theological disagreements openly and to express and promote within the denominations issues of justice and peace.

Created by: Rev. Dr. Peter Hobbie, Rev. Dr. Ellen Skidmore and Ruling Elder Jim Rowell – Trinity Presbytery.
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