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WHY STAY IN THE PCUSA?

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Dear Trinity friends,

It was the summer of 1956 and I and two of my best friends decided to travel from our home in Amarillo, Texas, to Okla. City, Okla., to hear Billy Graham. In our first year of university we had each come to a deeper faith in God. It was a thrilling time for me to have my two buddies with whom I had grown up from childhood to come to share my faith. They encouraged me and I encouraged them. It was a formative season. My parents had given to me a new Chevy and we were having the time of our lives.

That Saturday evening was youth night at the Graham Crusade. I still have that evening branded into my memory and heart. He preached on a text from Ezekiel 22:23-31. Ezekiel the prophet had been commissioned by the Lord to speak a word of prophetic truth to the nation of Israel. He spoke of the unfaithfulness of Israel. He called the people to a spiritual repentance that was both good news for the nation's soul, but also a call to social justice and righteousness on behalf of the kingdom of God.

The key verse that Billy preached on was verse 30,

"And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one." Ezk. 22:30

Billy said that the Lord was still seeking for young men and women who would have the courage to publicly commit themselves to repair the broken walls of Jerusalem, who would stand in the breach before the Lord on behalf of the land. When Billy gave the invitation for us to come forward with the promise to stand in the middle of the brokenness of his people and to rebuild the life of the church and the nation, I heard the call. But if it had not been for my friend Mike nudging me in the side and saying to me, "Jerry, we have to go forward", I would not have gone. I had some reserve about embarrassing myself before others. It took the Lord poking me in the side to get me to promise my life to serve as a peacemaker at the center of the world's conflicts and to seek to heal the wounds and to rebuild the walls of the world and of the ruined life of humanity.

The three of us went forward. As I stood before the platform looking up at Billy, I began to see in tunnel vision. Suddenly, I knew I was in a watershed moment in which my life would change forever. I stood there crying my eyes out realizing what a dangerous calling I was receiving. For years I had been pressed by my parents to stand between them for the sake of mediating their marital disputes and wars. I had learned a lot about mediation and conflict resolution. I had become a raging co-dependent. I had succeeded, but now I think I realized that I had been providentially prepared for a call to a ministry of peacemaking, of standing in the breaches and in the midst of deep conflicts, anxiety and fear, for the sake of healing the human condition. That calling has put me in painful places of vulnerability. This evening I feel

like I standing in another breach hoping to repair the wall, to be an agent of God's reconciling love.

I am honored to share my convictions with you about staying in the PCUSA. Over the past 40 years you have been a valued colleague in ministry and in helping to develop the mission of the Presbytery of Los Ranchos. I have admired your leadership, your evangelical passion, and theological vision. I went to India and to Kenya with Dick Grace and with others of your congregation. Laguna Presbyterian Church is grateful to you for training and sharing with us leaders like Kathy Sizer and Linda White. When I heard that Trinity was one of the congregations seeking dismissal from LRP, I felt the loss and realized that our presbytery life and mission would never again be the same if you left. I am sure that the majority of your congregation has already decided its future course. My thoughts about staying in the PCUSA will likely have little impact upon those who are determined to leave, but since I was invited to do this I will speak my heart and mind to you.

First, why stay in the PCUSA? Because there are important biblical and theological reasons to remain in this part of the Reformed body.

We affirm what the Biblical revelation has taught us and that is that God has a purpose and plan for our cosmos, for human history, and for his people. From the beginning of the human story we learn that the humans fell away from right relationship with God and with one another. They hid from the presence of God and were burdened with shame and guilt. The first couple was driven from the Garden of Eden to live East of Eden. They were cut off from the Tree of Life. The family was divided. They were separated, estranged, alienated from God and from one another. They lived under the bondage of sin and death. Soon Adam's family grew into a civilization and culture that was divided into hostile families, tribes, peoples, and nations. God's original intention of a peaceable kingdom had been transformed by unbelief, pride, disobedience, and rebellion, into a fallen world in which peace had been lost and violence characterized human existence. The tempter seemed to have won a great victory.

The good news was that the Creator God did not give up on all that he loved and created. The rescue was begun. The story of salvation took shape in the midst of human brokenness and sin. The Lord God called Abraham and Sarah to become the father and the mother of a multitude of nations and promised to bless them and to make them a blessing. From the beginning of God's initiative it was God's grace that was at work in the midst of human sin. The Sovereign God was committed to fulfilling his covenant promises to reconcile the world to himself and the human family with itself.

Even in exile, God had not forsaken his people. He sent Nehemiah to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem in the midst of surrounding dangers and warnings. In anxiety and fear, the people under Ezra/Nehemiah rebuilt the destroyed Temple of God.

God's salvation story in the history of Israel came to fulfillment in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In his perfect obedience he reversed Adam's disobedience. In his death upon the cross God made peace through the blood of Christ, the Second Adam, and bore the judgment our sins deserved. He broke down dividing walls of hostility, and reconciled us to the Father. Jews and Gentiles, male and female, educated and uneducated, slave and free, rich and poor, were reconciled into one new believing humanity and baptized into the one family of Christ for the sake of being ambassadors for Christ in taking the message of healing to all the nations.

I believe that the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Ephesians clearly stated the purpose and plan of God at work in human history. Listen,

"With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up, or unite, all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Ephesians 1:9-10

Therefore, the church was constituted as one body of Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, called to become who God had created us to be from the beginning, a bright shining light of truth, justice, grace, holiness, and love. To fulfill God's mission the fellowship of the church would need to live into the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The members of the church were to live with humility, gentleness, and with patience, bearing with one another in love.

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." Ephesians 4:1-6

Each member of this family was blessed with the mind of Christ, the new life of the rule of God, the reality of the indwelling Christ, who promised over time to conform us to his own image and to empower us to be the children of God living in peace, unity, and purity, in the holiness of

God's gift of new life.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 17, we are allowed to listen in to the very heart of the Son of God as he prayed for those who were to be his disciples. His central concern was that we might be one, even as he and the father were one. They were one in fellowship, one in love, one in peace, one in mission. Yes, the unity within the very being of God was the fellowship of love into which all God's people were invited to enter. To do so was to abide in Christ and to manifest the fruits of the Spirit. We worship the Holy One of Israel, the one triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The reason that I recapitulate this biblical theology of the unity of God, the unity of the people of God, and the unity of the mission of God is that we may be reminded of what is at the very heart of the movement of the reign of God in human history. Paradise was lost, walls of the City of God breached, but God acted to restore paradise in and through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus. He purchased us with his own blood. Now we belong to him and to his body. His passion and mission must become the passion and mission of God's people. God's promise is of a New Creation in which the original righteousness of the unity of all creation will be perfectly restored and all will be made right to the glory of God and the joy of heaven and earth in the New Jerusalem.

As we consider our staying united as one people of God in the PCUSA these great biblical themes ought to be first and foremost in our believing and doing the will of God. In fact, this Reformed tradition is confessed in our Book of Confessions, the first part of the Constitution of the PCUSA. Some say that there has been a theological drift in the PCUSA. Not so, if we seriously read the Confessions. Discerning the will of God must place God's purpose and plan for creation and history at the forefront. One of the essential tenets of the Reformed tradition is the unity of the one God and reflected in the unity of the people of God. To act to sever this unity within any fellowship will have profound implications for the congregation, presbytery, and surrounding community. The unity of the church is central to our witness to the gospel in a fragmented, chaotic, and lost world. The world will know we are Christians by the integrity of our love for one another.

Secondly, why stay in the PCUSA? Because we promised in our ordination vows to remain faithful to the covenant with God and our covenant as the people of God.

We live in a culture of promise breakers, not promise keepers. Somewhere deep in the recesses of our minds, we carry a vision of loving someone else as long as they are young enough, rich enough, smart enough, thin enough, well enough, and agreeable enough. When the other does not meet our needs we decide we will trade the old model in and move upward to a new model that will love us as we need and who will fulfill our "wish dreams". Then we set about seeking to conform the other to our expectations. When that fails, we begin the process again. We divorce and seek a new relationship.

Kay and I just celebrated our 46th wedding anniversary. On our wedding day we made covenant promises to God and to one another that we would faithfully live together as husband and wife throughout our life journey. It is an amazing thing that a man and a woman can make such promises. This journey takes place one day at a time in the midst of happy and trying circumstances, as long as we both shall live. Those who have been married for a while know that relationships are not easy. In fact, none of us on the basis of human will has the capacity to keep the promises we made. Why? We are sinners.

But the Christian covenant of marriage is a commitment and act of the will. "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church." Ephesians 5. What this means to me is that when two Christians make covenant promises we are trusting the power of God's Spirit of love to inform and to inspire our loving.

This will mean that over many years there will be both success and failure. What will matter is if we cast ourselves upon the mercy of God, accept one another in our differences, forgive one another in our failures, and patiently endure by God's grace the long journey. The miracle is that love heals and joy is restored. I remember hearing Tony Campolo speak to the National Presbyterian Pastor's Sabbath gathering. He shared the journey that he and his wife of many years had experienced. In particular, he said that she was strongly in favor of gay ordination and same gender marriage. He said he was on the opposite side. But he said, they had not divorced over this difference. Why? Because they loved one another and were not about to let this ruin their marriage, even though it was important to each of them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the classic book on Christian community. It was entitled, LIFE TOGETHER. He celebrated the gift of Christian community. But he said all of us come into community with "wish dreams" of what we expect the community to be. We work hard to make our brothers and sisters to conform to our "wish dreams". Finally, we discover it does

not work. Our "wish dreams" are shattered and we are profoundly disappointed. I was stunned to read that Bonhoeffer said that the sooner our "wish dreams" are shattered the better. Why? Because then we begin to discover that we have life together only in and through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I was ordained 50 years ago as a 26 year old assistant pastor at a church in Los Angeles. I was green, right out of Fuller and Princeton Seminaries. I thought I had all the answers. One day my wife of five years told me she no longer loved me and she disappeared. I was 26 and wanted nothing more than to make that marriage work. I thought my life and especially my ministry were over. I had failed. I had sinned. I knew all about the grace of God in my head, but I did not believe that the church was big enough and gracious enough to hold on to me, one of its wounded servants. What happened was life transforming. The Presbytery of Los Angeles that had ordained me a few months before investigated, counseled, prayed, and voted to affirm my continuing status as a pastor. In that act the church gave back to me my life and calling. I received grace, not cheap grace, but life transforming grace, the costly grace of God.

For over 40 years I have given thanks to God whose love would not let me go. It was the PC that mediated grace to me a sinner and picked me up with hope. God has been faithful to me and to the church. My heart is ever bonded with the PCUSA. It did not divorce me. I will not divorce it in its brokenness and painful diversity.

Thirdly, why stay in the PCUSA? Because the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ, have never been perfect.

Billy Graham was right when he said that if you are seeking to join the perfect Christian church, the moment you join it, it will be imperfect.

Check out the history of Israel in the Old Testament. The people were called to be the holy people of God, yet, Israel's history is a history of both faithfulness and unfaithfulness. At times it seemed that there were none who were righteous. But along the way, there was a righteous remnant. The prophets called the whole nation back to God and covenant faithfulness, but not once did they ever call the remnant to separate from the larger covenant community. Through the prophets words the Lord held the nation accountable and in God's mighty acts in Israel's history the Lord disciplined his people. But there was never an exodus called for from the covenant family.

Likewise, Jesus did not separate from Israel. He worshiped in the Temple and synagogue. He interpreted the law of God. He proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand in the fulfillment of God's promises in his life. He called people to take up their cross and to surrender themselves to a disciplined life together and mission. In losing their lives they would find their lives. He allowed persons the freedom to choose if they would follow him. He called people to go and sin no more. To the very end he knew his disciples were debating among themselves which one of them was the greatest. He told them that Satan was sifting them, dividing them, under the rubric of religious leadership, veiling their sinful ambitions. He taught them that they were not to weed the garden of the kingdom of God. The wheat and the tares could only be separated by the angels of God on the last day. If his disciples tried to do the job they would rip up the good and the bad plants. (Matthew 13:24-30)

At the end of his journey, it was the religious leadership of the people that he loved that demanded that Rome kill him. Better for one person to die for the nation than for the nation to be destroyed!

The Apostle Paul prayed for the unity of the church of Christ. In Corinth he faced a church that had almost every manifestation of sin within its fellowship. Nevertheless, Paul addressed them as saints. He confronted their sin and called them to repentance, to faithfulness and to transformation, but not once did he seek to divide that church. He knew the church was filled with forgiven sinners who still struggled with the weaknesses of their sinful hearts. Yet, they were one in Christ. Christ could not be divided. The Apostle applied the sharp edged sword of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. Paul's shattered "wish dreams" for the church never made him strike out in an anger that would have been more of his flesh than the Spirit of Christ. So he suffered for and with the church. He was perplexed. He prayed for the church. He taught the church. He worked for the reconciliation and healing of the church. He never gave up. Why, because love never ends. (See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, chapter 1.7-29)

Paul understood what Bonhoeffer later taught that when we begin judging and accusing one another we end up accusing God who has given to us our brothers and sisters.

The PCUSA is not a perfect church. We have major disagreements. We read the Bible through different eyes and grids. We have our heretics. We have our noted sinners on the left and the

right. But we also have a multitude of faithful, forgiven, disciples who have worked for this church, prayed for this church, given to this church, since the beginning years of Presbyterian history. The great events of American history have divided us. The imperatives of unity have drawn us back together until the next crisis.

I have listened to former moderators of the GA loudly fighting in the halls of the GA. There have been times in which I have questioned how I could stay in covenant with this family. I wanted to separate, but the better angels of my nature have always whispered into my soul to be patient, to forbear, to forgive, to stay in fellowship, even when every human inclination has been to run. I am so glad that I chose to stay. I do not want my legacy as a pastor to be that of leading an exodus out of an imperfect church that will never arrive at perfection until the fullness of the New Creation. To leave would be to betray God's calling in my life.

In between the first and second coming of Jesus we will need to speak the truth in love, to agree, to disagree, to argue, to debate, to dialogue, and to patiently wait until God's Word and Spirit brings about a resolution to heartfelt differences. No church can escape this challenge. Those who withdraw from the PCUSA seeking like-mindedness will inevitably confront their differences and be required to patiently forbear as they work together to build their fellowship. The truth is that all who seek release of their churches into other Reformed denominations will also transfer their strengths and weaknesses, their gifts and their sins. Until the New Creation of God's kingdom comes there will be no realized utopia on planet earth.

Fourthly, why stay in the PCUSA? We need to stay for the sake of God's mission in our broken and wounded world.

God needs a united witness and service, not just for those inside the church, but also for those who are waiting and watching from the outside of the church's life.

In this regard, I find myself agreeing in several ways with Pope Francis of the RCC. He has confessed that his church has been preoccupied with issues of Christian morality, i.e., "abortion, homosexuality, same gender marriage, ordination standards". Sounds like the PCUSA. While we have struggled with our internal divisions and arguments, we have neglected to see that there is a wounded world laying beside the road and left for dead. The walls of the City of God have been breached. Is there anyone who is willing stand in the breach for the sake of healing the church?

The Pope has argued in his recent interview in the Jesuit magazine, America, that the church needs to open its eyes and ears to the needs of our world for the mercy, compassion, and grace of God that are central to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not that morality is unimportant, but that moral passions can so capture our attention that we fail to see that our world is filled with sheep without shepherds. Pope Francis has asked the church to consider if anyone can fulfill the claims of Christian morality if they have not first been converted to Christ and begun to live their lives under the Lordship of Christ? Therefore, he has called the church to a new Christ-centeredness, to the good news of the gospel, to a servant mission of finding the lost and restoring them to wholeness in the fellowship of a people who live by God's amazing grace.

He said the church is a field hospital in the battlefield of this sin-sick world. The cries of the wounded are everywhere. People need the balm of Gilead who alone can heal the sin sick soul. Francis said of his church that we have gone about checking the cholesterol of the wounded when what was really needed was the immediate healing of wounds, the proclamation of Jesus Christ in whose touch sins are forgiven, bodies made whole, and hope restored.

Over the past 41 years in Laguna Beach as a pastor I have found my mind and heart stretched and transformed. I have come to a deeper appreciation for the work of pastoral ministry. I have placed myself under the authority of Jesus Christ as he is revealed through the Word of God. He is my Savior and my Lord. From the San Diego GA in 1978 I have been at the center of the human sexuality debate. I have not changed my mind about God's intentions in creation for the faithful union of one man and one woman in the covenant of marriage. Nor am I willing to change our ordination standards. The only difference now is that each presbytery and congregation will have to study, pray, and decide its convictions on this matter.

Some will disagree with my convictions. In fact, some of the most gifted and committed disciples of Christ at LPC disagree with my reading of the Bible. But I am not about to separate from them. I need them and they need me. I am not prepared to divide my beloved congregation over this. A sizable group of our families have gay or lesbian children. All of our neighborhoods have same gender families. We know them. They are human and they have the same aspirations as others. How will we reach them if they perceive that up front they will be rejected in the name of God?

The larger church has never required me to do anything that violates my conscience as it is

informed by the Word and the Spirit of God. I do not believe it ever will. The issues that trouble us will need to wait for resolution. In this moment we ask for the fruits of the Spirit to grow in our lives so that we can be the faithful people of God.

Rev. Dr. Jerry Tankersley

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