



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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Greetings Church Family!

This coming week I leave to attend the General Assembly of the PCA in Saint Louis. Some have likened the current state of the PCA to being at a “crossroads.” I am not sure that is entirely accurate, but it is a helpful image to explain the nature of the Saint Louis Assembly as well as next year’s Assembly in Birmingham (remember: it takes two Assemblies to make any significant changes in the PCA).

I. Understanding the Background

An awareness of the history of the PCA is helpful to make sense of the debates currently taking place within the courts (Sessions, Presbyteries, and General Assembly) of the PCA.

Theological liberalism is not a problem within the PCA. Theological liberalism was an attempt by some in various faith communions to render Christianity more palatable to the culture by de-emphasizing and denying key doctrines such as the resurrection, the virgin birth, and the inerrancy of Scripture. In a nutshell, the liberals wanted a slimmed down Christianity that focused on moral and civil good rather than transcendent and eternal truths.

While there is undoubtedly overlap between theological liberalism and the more progressive elders within the PCA, it is simply inaccurate to describe the issues dividing the PCA as a debate between theological liberals and conservatives. There are no elders in the PCA who deny miracles, the virgin birth, etc. so suggesting there are liberals within the PCA is not a helpful way to understand the troubles facing our beloved communion today.

If the issues plaguing the PCA are not matters of theological “liberalism” versus theological “conservatism,” what are they? It is an ongoing debate between elders in the PCA who are Reformed and elders in the PCA who are merely Evangelicals.

This is a bit over simplified, but (theologically speaking) there are generally two types of elders in the PCA.

On the one hand there are elders who have a robust commitment to the Reformed heritage of the PCA, who love our Confessional standards, and are committed to a vision for church life, worship, and ministry that would be clearly recognized by our Puritan forefathers and the Apostles. These elders are not overly concerned to accommodate to the culture, because they understand the Church is most relevant to the culture when she presents a strong contrast to the culture. These elders are committed to being Reformed and Presbyterian.

On the other hand, there are elders who likely have a Calvinistic understanding of salvation (summarized in the TULIP), but who believe our Confessional standards and Puritan heritage - while perhaps venerable - have less relevance for church life, worship, and ministry today. Rather than celebrate the distinctiveness of Reformed Theology, they have a vision for the church that accommodates to the culture and broader evangelical Christianity as much as possible without compromising a few core fundamentals of the faith. These men are more broadly Evangelical rather than they are Presbyterian.

When we understand the discord along those lines (Reformed Christians versus Broad Evangelicals), it clears up the debate and enables us to rightly understand the issues.

II. A Word on Factionalism

Perhaps at this point you're thinking, "doesn't the Bible warn against factionalism?" Or "shouldn't we just get along with each other?" Indeed, the Bible does warn against factionalism:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Cor 1:10-13 cf. Psalm 133)

What sort of factionalism Paul is condemning? It's rivalry and division based on devotion to various personalities. In fact, Paul urges the church to have the same mind and the same judgment. The divisions in the PCA are not mere petty rivalries between the devotees of various preachers, but divisions flowing out of different theological commitments.

On the one hand are those who are robustly committed to Reformed faith, practice, and worship, and who believe the Westminster Standards faithfully summarize the teaching of the Scripture. On the other hand are those who may have a Calvinistic understanding of salvation, but have significant differences with the Westminster Standards and reservations about its ongoing relevance for the 21st Century.

III. The Work of the General Assembly

Because the different commitments amongst the elders of the PCA are not petty, they will result in contrasting visions for ministry and priorities within the PCA. Those differences of vision and commitments become apparent at the General Assembly annually.

Here is a quick rundown of some of the more significant action items before the Assembly. These three areas may see a great deal of discussion and will reveal the differing visions of ministry within the PCA.

A. Human Sexuality and Sanctification

1. Study Committee Report on Human Sexuality

While I believe the report will be adopted by a wide majority, adopting the report itself will not resolve issues within the PCA. The report is a faithful summary of the Bible's teaching on human sexuality with twelve "affirmations and denials." Its relative brevity will enable it to be accessed and used by the Church for many years to come.

Nevertheless, Study Committee Reports - despite their great expense - are not binding church law and cannot require any church court to change its practice or elder to change his views.

To read the report visit this site: <https://pcaga.org/aicreport/>

2. Overtures Addressing "Gay Christianity"

Perhaps the biggest single issue troubling the PCA right now deals with our doctrine related to repentance and sanctification. While there is no one advocating for practicing homosexuals to be ordained to church office in the PCA, there are a number of elders in prominent positions who argue a man who identifies as a "Gay Christian," if he is also committed to celibacy, may be ordained to church office.

As a result, there are overtures (i.e. proposals to the General Assembly) seeking to prohibit those who identify as “Gay Christians” from church office. The reason for this is that our identity as Christians comes from our union with Christ not any of our sinful desires.

There are those within the PCA who have argued along the lines of 1) unwelcome homosexual desires are not sinful unless acted upon and/or 2) homosexual desires are not something that we can expect to be diminished or destroyed in this life. In fact one elder emotionally asserted at the 2019 General Assembly that homosexual desires are a product of the fall and as morally neutral as being born disabled. Since Scripture teaches that not all sins are equally heinous, the views summarized above represent a deficient understanding of sin.

That view also represents a deficient view of sanctification. While Reformed Christians do not believe the Bible teaches we will ever be fully sanctified (made holy) in this life, we rejoice that the Bible promises increasing victory over sin and growth in grace in this life.

Thus it is argued by the advocates of these overtures that a man who identifies as a Gay Christian is unsuitable for ordained office in the church because he does not believe his unnatural and sinful desires are, in fact both sinful and capable of being diminished and even changed in this life.

Remember: no one in the PCA is arguing for the ordination of practicing homosexuals. However, Church history demonstrates that when churches allow for the normalization of “gay but celibate” officers, they quickly move to accommodate homosexual practice.

Instead of accommodating or softening our view of sin, we must call all people to repentance of every sin and disordered desire so all people may live free in Christ.

For a list of the overtures to the Assembly visit this site: <https://pcaga.org/resources/>

B. Ordination and Ministry

As Presbyterians, we believe God cares for His church and equips His saints for ministry by ordained elders (i.e. *presbyters*). As such, presbyterians have historically had a robust commitment to ordain called and qualified men to church office so that God might bless His Church through them.

However for some time now the global mission agency of the PCA called *Mission to the World* has been weakening its commitment to a robust doctrine of ordination. The agency has allowed unordained men and women to be placed in positions of leadership and authority supervising ordained men on the mission field.

This practice not only goes against our historic Reformed and Presbyterian commitments, but also the example we see in the Scripture (e.g. see Acts 13) that missionary endeavors, like congregations of the church, are led by men ordained to church office.

Because MTW has not been following this practice, there are overtures to force a change to the *MTW Policy Manual* to require that those appointed to exercise authority over church planting and development must also be men who have been ordained to the office of elder (either teaching elder or ruling elder).

C. Presbytery Examinations

As noted above, the PCA is quite diverse in terms of the views held by her elders related to their commitment to the Westminster Standards. However, our standards are our standards. For that reason, many presbyteries have allowed an elder who holds views that deviate from

the Westminster Standards to enter the presbytery, but at the same time also forbidden him from teaching his view that deviates from the standards.

In recent years, the Review of Presbytery Records Committee has objected to this practice. The committee insists a presbytery may not restrict what a man teaches even if it deviates from historic Reformed theology. The position of the Records Committee is relatively new to the PCA and seems to undermine the role of the presbytery in ensuring sound doctrine is promoted and taught within the PCA.

This is a debate to watch closely. Does a presbytery have the right to require that the teaching taking place within the bounds of the presbytery is Reformed? The outcome of this debate will have profound implications for the future of the PCA.

IV. Praying for the Assembly

It is impossible to overstate the importance of prayer for the commissioners to the Assembly. Ask God to preserve the PCA both in terms of purity and peace and that she remain grounded in the truth of the Scripture. Ask God to keep the assembly free from emotional outbursts, manipulative displays, and petty divisions, but to enable clear debate on the issues before us in light of the doctrine set forth in His word.

Please pray also for safe travel especially for Wil and me (and our families) as we make the trek up to Saint Louis and return home.

V. Looking Toward the Future

This Assembly will be difficult, and the votes may go the wrong way or they may go the right way. If they go the “wrong” way, we must remember the Church belongs to Christ and He will preserve a faithful remnant for Himself even as we look to associate with those who share our commitment to the Reformed Faith and the Scriptures.

If the votes go the right way, we can rejoice, but we cannot cease to be diligent in loving the truth. There will be other Assemblies in the future and the opportunity to compromise and accommodate will be presented yet again. We must continue to vigilantly hold fast to the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Thank you very much for allowing me to be your pastor and sending Wil and me to Saint Louis this year.

Your pastor,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ryan Biese', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Ryan Biese