

# Theology Matters

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## Why Doctrine Is Inevitable – And A Good Thing Too!

By Alister McGrath

Doctrine has its critics, today as in the past. Why do we need doctrinal standards? Aren't they just a relic of the past, perpetuating past controversies and hindering present-day growth? In fact, why do we need doctrines at all? Surely we would all be better off by dumping them, and simply trusting and loving God. So what might we say in response to this? In this article, I want to explore some responses that we might make to these concerns.

### The Need For Doctrine

There has always been a strong anti-theoretical constituency within Christianity which argues that there is no need for any "theory of Christ;" commitment to his person is all that is required. Three points may be made in response to this.

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1. The demand for an "undogmatic" Christianity amounts to little more than a crude embargo on critical reflection in matters of faith. It represents a retreat from precisely the kind of intellectual engagement which makes Christian theology such a genuinely exciting and challenging discipline, and demands that we place in its stead an amorphous and shadowy account of things. Instead of encouraging Christians to think about their faith, it represents a demand that they suspend use of their intellectual faculties in any matters to do with God, Christ or human destiny. Precisely because human beings think, they will wish to develop theories or doctrines concerning the nature of God and Jesus Christ – whatever form these may take.

2. Some use the term "undogmatic Christianity" in a highly invidious manner, meaning something like "an

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understanding of Jesus Christ which is opposed to the official teachings of the Christian faith." There has never

been any shortage of individuals who have argued for such an “undogmatic” faith, seeing it as liberating individuals from the tyranny of ecclesiastical authority or outmoded ideas.<sup>1</sup> Yet the ideas which are held to displace these are generally as dogmatic as their predecessors. It is a new set of dogmas that is being proposed, not the elimination of dogma as such.<sup>2</sup> As Martin Kähler pointed out in 1892, it is impossible to avoid proposing doctrinal affirmations, whether one opts for the ontological exaggerations of Byzantine Christology, or the pseudo-historical Jesuology of the ‘Life of Jesus’ movement.<sup>3</sup> Both rest upon sophisticated implicit theoretical foundations.

“New presbyter is but old priest wrote large,” wrote John Milton, deploring those who declared themselves to have abolished certain things, yet in reality merely substituted their own equivalents. Theoretical statements, whether implicit or explicit, undergird all reflections on the nature of God or Christ; to pretend that they do not is to close one’s eyes to the pervasive influence of theories in religion, which must be honestly addressed and acknowledged at every point.

3. To demand an “undogmatic” Christianity often involves confusion over the *tone* and *substance* of Christian doctrine. “Dogmatic” can rightly be understood as meaning “enclosed within a framework of theoretical or doctrinal beliefs,” and in this sense, I must insist, reflects some integral themes of the Christian faith. Yet the term can also bear the meaning of “uncritical,” “unreflective” or “authoritarian” – referring, in other words, to the tone or voice in which Christian theological affirmations are made, rather than to their substance.

I have no interest in supporting shrill, strident, imperious and overbearing assertions of Christian doctrine, which demand silent unthinking compliance on the part of their audiences, and lead to conflict and tension. Yet I remain convinced that such statements are necessary and legitimate, while insisting that they can and should be stated in a more reflective tone. After all, the purpose of Christian doctrine is partly to inspire awe and worship, not to silence and threaten its audiences.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:2). Paul here sets before his readers two quite different ways of thinking. We can think in secular ways, in which we see the world in purely natural terms. Or we can allow the way in which we view and understand the world to be transformed by the Christian faith, which gives us a very different reading of things. Christians see the world as God’s creation, reflecting the divine wisdom and glory, a constant reminder of God’s goodness and power. Growing in our faith involves a discipleship of the mind, in which we learn to see things in a new light. And that means ending up with doctrinal statements which are publicly stated, and are to be tested against their grounding in Scripture.

## Responses to the Anti-doctrinal Trend

Given the continuing importance of an anti-theoretical trend within modern theology, I propose to consider four highly important responses to it, dating from the intellectual high water mark of the anti-theoretical movement within the British church in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> Many of the theologians involved will be well-known to American Presbyterians; their comments are, I think, extremely helpful and important in clarifying the issues.

In his 1891 Bampton Lectures at Oxford University, the leading Anglican writer Charles Gore set out an extended comparison of “the Christ of dogma” and the “Christ of Scripture.”<sup>5</sup> Responding to those who argue that the simplicity of the biblical witness to Christ is compromised and distorted by theoretical development within the history of the church, especially during the patristic period, Gore insists that these later theoretical formulations are to be seen as “the apostolic teaching worked out into formulas by the aid of a terminology which was supplied by Greek dialectics.”<sup>6</sup>

There was no distortion, no misrepresentation – merely the “gradual unfolding of teaching” of “an unbroken stream of tradition.”<sup>7</sup> The pressure to express the church’s witness to Christ in increasingly theoretic terms lies partly in the human desire to understand. For Gore, “Christianity became metaphysical simply and only because man is rational.”<sup>8</sup> Yet the pressure to enunciate theory also lies partly in the church’s need to defend its central teachings against misunderstanding and misrepresentation, which necessitated clarification and restatement of core beliefs in the face of their distortion by others.

Similar anti-dogmatic arguments were considered by the leading Reformed theologian James Orr in his *Christian View of God and the World* (also delivered in 1891). These lectures, which were three years in preparation, countered the predominant Ritschlianism of the era by insisting that Christianity combined both religious and theoretical elements; indeed, that these could not be separated.<sup>9</sup> For Orr, the dynamics of the Christian faith and the human intellect were such that theoretical reflection and conviction was an inevitability. Christianity is not simply concerned with religious affections; it possesses “definite, positive teaching; it claims to be the truth; it bases religion on knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> To lose sight of the cognitive aspects of faith is to surrender the distinctive shape of the Christian faith. “A religion based on mere feeling is the vaguest, most unreliable, most unstable of all things.” What is required for “a strong, stable, religious life,” Orr insists, is “intelligent conviction” – a notion which Orr clearly understands to possess both intellectual and volitional aspects.

It might, of course, be argued that Christianity “has its centre in living in Christ, and not a dogmatic creed.”<sup>11</sup> Orr concedes the obvious truth in this concern, distancing himself from any suggestion that Christianity is concerned with the mere revelation of abstract ideas. Yet the

incarnation affirms the importance both of God's engagement with history and of its doctrinal importance.<sup>12</sup>

The gospel is no mere proclamation of "eternal truths," but the discovery of a saving purpose for God, executed in time. But the doctrines are the interpretation of the facts. The facts do not stand blank and dumb before us, but have a voice given to them, and a meaning put into them. They are accompanied by living speech, which makes their meaning clear. When John declares that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, and is the Son of God (1 John 4:2, 15), he is stating a fact, but he is none the less enunciating a doctrine.

Orr insists that theology must constantly work to ensure that its doctrinal formulations are adequate to the "infinite truth" they seek to mediate. One of Orr's most distinctive contributions lies in his recognition of "progress in dogma" – in other words, doctrinal development. Noting the concern of some over a static understanding of doctrine, he argues that the entire theological enterprise must be dedicated to developing dogmatic formulations which are adequate to the revelation which they seek to express, yet which ultimately transcends them.<sup>13</sup>

The dogmatic moulds which were found adequate for one age have often proved insufficient for the next, to which a larger horizon of vision has been granted; and have had to be broken up that new ones might be created, more adapted to the content of a Revelation which in some sense transcends them all.

An equally robust defense of theory in Christian reflections concerning Christ is found in P. T. Forsyth's masterpiece *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (1909).<sup>14</sup> In this work, Forsyth directed particular attention to the idea that Christianity aimed to replicate the "religion of Jesus" rather than propagate theories about Christ.<sup>15</sup>

There is nothing we are more often told by those who discard an evangelical faith than this – that we must now do what scholarship has only just enabled us to do and return to the religion of Jesus. We are bidden to practice Jesus's own personal religion, as distinct from the Gospel of Christ, from a gospel which calls him its faith's object, and not its subject, founder or classic only. We must learn to believe not in Christ, but with Christ, we are told.

In response to these concerns, Forsyth offers a defense of "dogma" – by which he means "the specific theological constructions from the past which have been sealed with ecclesiastical authority as formally final."<sup>16</sup> Part of Forsyth's defense of theological dogma lies in his observation that other areas of intellectual inquiry are similarly committed to dogmatic statements. While his discussion of the matter suggests at best a very superficial knowledge of the natural sciences, the point he makes is still valid:<sup>17</sup>

Dogma is the science of faith. Every department of science has its dogma; and in the hierarchy of the sciences, these dogmas qualify and supplement each other. In one region we have the dogma of gravitation; in another that of evolution; in another that of affinity; in another (if it be another) the molecular dogma; and so on. Thus in the region of spiritual science, we have also a science. We have a science of faith.

If theoretical statements undergird other areas of intellectual inquiry, why should they not equally be applied in Christian theology?

Yet Forsyth is careful not to suggest that dogma, in his sense of the term, is a matter for individuals. Mingling sociological analysis with theological affirmations, Forsyth contends that the identity of the church requires definition if it is to continue in existence as a distinct entity within the historical process. Dogma, according to Forsyth, is essential to the life of the church, in that it both *arises from* and *expresses* that life.<sup>18</sup>

A Church must always have a dogma, implicit or explicit. A cohesive Church must have a coherent creed. But it must be a dogma the Church holds, not one than holds the Church. The life is in the body, not in the system.... The idea of a dogma, as the organized declaration or confession by any Church of its collective doctrine, is only the intellectual counterpart of the idea of the organized Church itself.

There thus exist two pressures which make dogma inevitable; the human desire to make sense of things and extend the horizons of understanding; and the social need for the church to offer a definition of its identity and boundaries – a matter to which we shall return presently.

An "undogmatic" Christianity is only a possibility if individual Christians cease to exercise their intellectual faculties and if the church ceases to regard itself as having anything distinctive to say to the world around it. As Forsyth points out, the faith of the church must be capable of statement – and that process of formulation of a statement inevitably leads to the development of dogma.<sup>19</sup>

Revelation did not come in a statement, but in a person; yet stated it must be. Faith must go on to specify. It must be capable of statement, else it could not be spread; for it is not an ineffable, incommunicable mysticism. It has its truth, yet it is not a mere truth but a power; its truth, its statement, is part of it.

The proper debate thus concerns which dogmas should be adopted, rather than the propriety of dogma itself.

A final discussion of note is found in a series of lectures delivered at Cambridge University in 1940 by the leading Presbyterian writer J. S. Whale, then Principal of Westminster College, Cambridge. While offering an overview of the basic ideas of Christian doctrine as a

whole, Whale repeatedly turned to consider why such doctrines were appropriate in the first place. In his discussion of Christology, Whale argues that two considerations point to the inevitability of dogma.<sup>20</sup>

First, the New Testament – which is the foundation on which Christian theologizing proceeds – is itself saturated with dogmatic statements concerning the identity of Christ. Theology thus cannot evade such issues without distorting what was there from the beginning of the Christian witness.

Second, there exists an intellectual imperative to wrestle with truth, even if that truth cannot be mastered. “We are meant to serve God with the mind, even where the mind is impotent to compass ultimate and ineffable mysteries.” For Whale, the determining factors are thus rational and sociological, and have nothing to do with the alleged influence of “Hellenistic” pressures. Doctrine is inevitable, having its origins in the basic facts of individual and communal life – namely, that human beings are inquisitive animals, and the church is a social organism.

In making this statement, Whale finds support from Brooke Foss Westcott, perhaps the greatest of England’s nineteenth-century scholar-bishops, often regarded as a liberal in some aspects of his theology. Not here! When asked why he chose to go beyond the modest statements of Scripture in his theological reflections, he replied<sup>21</sup>

... that we cannot but speculate: that we are so made that we must strive after some view of the relations and end of the system in which we are placed: that the advance of partial knowledge forces upon us more and more the duty of looking for a more comprehensive synthesis.

Westcott’s vision of the gospel is firmly anchored to an ecclesiology which insists that we are placed, historically and intellectually, within both a Christian community and a Christian “system,” a way of living within and beholding the world. We cannot help but want to explore its inner recesses and its hidden depths, any more than we can rebel against being human. To be human is to long to know more of God and the things of God in this world – in brief, to aspire to theoretical reflection.

Christian doctrine is thus an inevitability. The task of theological reflection takes place within a communal tradition, nourished by its communal beholding of the vision of God, which shapes and transmits a distinctively Christian understanding of reality – or way of viewing it – which is demarcated from other understandings of reality. Christian doctrine both elaborates the nature of that understanding, and aims to maintain the distinctiveness of the tradition. It keeps the Christian church *Christian*. Many of those who criticize doctrine either do not wish the church to retain its distinctive identity, or, if they do, have failed to appreciate what needs to be done in order to preserve this identity. Christian ethics, for example, depends upon Christian doctrine – and if we lose the latter,

we shall surely lose the former as well. In 1942 the then Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, wrote to a correspondent about the long-term effect on the fabric of British society of the dissolution of its spiritual foundation in Christian belief:

You would hardly find any theologian now who supposes that Christian ethics can survive for half a century in detachment from Christian doctrine, and this is the very last moment when the church itself can come forward with outlines of Christian ethics in the absence of the theological foundation which alone makes them really tenable. Our people have grown up in a generally Christian atmosphere, and take it for granted that all people who are not actually perverted hold what are essentially Christian notions about human conduct. But this is not true.

Temple’s words were true of Britain in 1942; they are equally true of the United States today.

But I end by considering one of the most common criticisms of doctrine – that it encourages people to become fixated and obsessed with minute points of theological detail, fussing about words, and developing an excessive preoccupation with “theological correctness.” The suspicion that theory robs reality of its wonder has been a constant refrain of the last three centuries. Does not theological reflection on the person of Christ evacuate him of his mystery and personal dignity? How can the immense complexity of the person who drew people to him by uttering the simple words “follow me” ever be captured in metaphysical formulae or dogmatic slogans? How can the mystery of God ever be expressed in human language? C. S. Lewis notes precisely this concern in recalling a talk he once gave to the Royal Air Force.<sup>22</sup>

In a way I quite understand why some people are put off by Theology. I remember once when I had been giving a talk to the R.A.F., an old, hard-bitten officer got up and said, “I’ve no use for all that stuff. But mind you, I’m a religious man too. I know there’s a God. I’ve felt him: And that’s just why I don’t believe all your neat little dogmas and formulas about Him. To anyone who’s met the real thing they all seem so petty and pedantic and unreal!”

These are familiar concerns, which must be taken with the utmost seriousness. If theology is concerned with evoking the praise and adoration of God, is not the pursuit of doctrine contrary to this goal? How can anyone immerse themselves in a textbook of systematic theology, and rise up to behold the glory of the living God?

Yet we must not confuse words with the reality to which they point, or shirk from the task of identifying and defending the best possible way of representing in words the wonder of what God has done for us in Christ. Let’s explore this a little, using the English poet George Herbert to make an important point. Herbert’s poem “The Elixir”

explores how the Christian faith transforms our perceptions of the world. One of its stanzas runs like this:

A man that looks on glass,  
On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
And then the heaven espy.

Herbert here makes an important point about looking through God's creation, in order to discern God himself. To help appreciate his line of thought here, we may explore his image in greater detail.

Herbert proposes that we consider a window as an analogy for Christian doctrine. It is an analogy that is as familiar to us today as it was in Herbert's time. A window can be considered as a work of art in itself, especially if it is decorated with colored panes of glass, or painted illustrations. We can easily focus our attention on it, appreciating the intricacy of its construction, or noticing dust and grime that need to be cleaned away. Yet the window has served its purpose properly only when we look *through* it, and see what lies beyond – perhaps one of the exquisite gardens that ornamented the great houses of the early seventeenth century, or a beautiful landscape leading to the mountains in the far distance. If we merely look *at* the window, we miss what lies beyond.

Herbert's analogy is of direct relevance for our purposes in this article. It can be applied to the entire body of Christian doctrines, as set out, for example, in the Creeds. These can be studied in some detail – after all, theological libraries are full of works dealing with the historical development of the doctrine of creation, or the intricacies of some prominent theologian's doctrine of the church. Yet that is to allow our eyes to "stay" on doctrine, and to fail to appreciate the new way of seeing things that doctrine makes possible. Doctrines are like lenses or prisms, that make it possible to see things in a new way. We need to look at the world *through* a doctrinal framework, rather than allow ourselves to become fixated on doctrines themselves. We need to ask what difference doctrine makes to the way we see and understand the world and ourselves. For example, it makes a huge difference to see nature as God's creation.<sup>23</sup> And it makes all the difference in the world whether we see Jesus Christ simply as a human teacher, or as the son of God incarnate, who died that we might live, and be liberated from sin and death! Doctrine matters profoundly. And we can't do without it. The only way in which we can get rid of doctrinal statements is by ceasing to think, or ceasing to value being Christian. Neither of those are realistic options! Doctrine is a joy to study and a joy to apply. Without it, we would be adrift on a relativist sea, unable to find a harbor. We need people who can preach doctrine, people who can teach doctrine, and people whose lives radiate the truth of what doctrine points to. But to suggest that we give up on doctrinal standards is to erode the distinctiveness of both the Christian faith and the Christian church. What use is salt, if it loses its saltiness? And what, other than doctrine,<sup>24</sup> can preserve that saltiness?

In the end, doctrine matters precisely because Christ matters, and we have an absolute duty to give the best possible account of his significance. It energizes and guides our prayer, worship, reflection and evangelism. It undergirds everything. We owe it to our Lord to take this rational trouble over the mystery of his person and work, and ensure that we proclaim him for all his worth to this lost and fallen world.

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- <sup>1</sup> An excellent example is provided by Robert J. Campbell, *The New Theology*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1907. For a useful analysis, see B. G. Worrall, 'R.J. Campbell and his New Theology,' *Theology* 81 (1978), 342-8. See particularly the vigorous response by Charles Gore, *The New Theology and the Old Religion*. London: John Murray, 1907. For my own reflections, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
  - <sup>2</sup> See the contradictions on this issue which litter the pages of John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1998.
  - <sup>3</sup> Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964, 43.
  - <sup>4</sup> Useful background material may be found in Alan M. G. Stephenson, *The Rise and Decline of English Modernism*. London: SPCK, 1984. For related movements in the American Presbyterian scene, see Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists and Moderates*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
  - <sup>5</sup> Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God*. London: John Murray, 1922, 80-112. For details of this writer, see G. L. Prestige, *The Life of Charles Gore*. London: William Heinemann, 1935; Michael Ramsey, *Charles Gore and Anglican Theology*. London: SPCK, 1955.
  - <sup>6</sup> Gore, *Incarnation of the Son of God*, 96.
  - <sup>7</sup> Gore, *Incarnation of the Son of God*, 96, 101
  - <sup>8</sup> Gore, *Incarnation of the Son of God*, 21.
  - <sup>9</sup> James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World, as Centering in the Incarnation*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908, 16-26. For his detailed assessment of Ritschl's views, see James Orr, *The Ritschlian Theology and the Evangelical Faith*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897. For details of Orr, see Glen A. Scorgie, *A Call for Continuity: The Theological Contribution of James Orr*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988.
  - <sup>10</sup> Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World*, 20.
  - <sup>11</sup> Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World*, 22.
  - <sup>12</sup> Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World*, 22.
  - <sup>13</sup> Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World*, 25.
  - <sup>14</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*. London: Independent Press, 1909. For detailed studies, see John H. Rodgers, *The Theology of P.T. Forsyth: The Cross of Christ and the Revelation of God*. London: Independent Press, 1965; Archibald Macbride Hunter, *P.T. Forsyth: per crucem ad lucem*. London: SCM Press, 1974.
  - <sup>15</sup> Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 35.
  - <sup>16</sup> Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 213.
  - <sup>17</sup> Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 215.
  - <sup>18</sup> Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 213-14. For further exploration of such points, see H. R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913, 285-305; 345-62.
  - <sup>19</sup> Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 15.
  - <sup>20</sup> J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941, 109-12.
  - <sup>21</sup> B. F. Westcott, 'The Gospel of Creation', in *The Epistles of St John*. London: Macmillan, 1892, 285-328; 325-6.
  - <sup>22</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. London: Collins, 1952, 130.
  - <sup>23</sup> For details, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology 1: Nature*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.
  - <sup>24</sup> Liturgy might be mentioned here, in that it both rests on doctrinal assumptions, and embodies such assumptions in its texts. For a good introduction to this vast topic, see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life: A Systematic Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

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# Reform From Within

By Terry Schlossberg

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Every one of us, I suspect, understands the emotions that underlie a desire to break with the troubles of this denomination and seek to establish something better and more faithful to our Lord. We all understand the desire to concentrate fully on our call to mission and evangelism; to the proper and faithful proclamation of the Gospel and the building up of the body that initially brought our pastors into ministry and our members to join our churches. We understand the fatigue over battles fought and refought. We understand the discouragement over problems too numerous and too big. We understand the desire to concentrate on what seems to come more naturally to our calling and that feels more rewarding. We understand not wanting to fight political battles and not even feeling equipped for it or good at it. There probably is not one of us who hasn't asked, “What am I doing here in the midst of a battle over orthodoxy?”

But, we are not the first to face serious troubles in the Church of Jesus Christ. And just like those who have fought similar battles before our time, we know the unpleasant reality of how easily human beings and institutions fall into sin and decay. And we know, too, that the way to restoration is often long and difficult and unpleasant.

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We really do seem to be in one of those critical historical moments in the Christian Church. We are not simply looking for new ways of doing church, as some express it—for ways to adapt age-old truths to a new generation in order to make the truth relevant in our own time. Rather, what makes our situation exceptional, if it is, is that we are

up against aggressive forces that wish to so change Christian Faith that what would be passed down to future generations would be very different from what we have received.

Some of us are wondering whether we ought to spend our energies to preserve an institution—a denomination—a particular expression of the visible church. When we talk about this, though, we need to separate discussion of what we think may be outmoded forms from discussion of corruption in the current forms. We in the Reform From Within work group are focused on the latter—on ways in which the intent of our community life as a denomination has been corrupted so much that orthodoxy itself is threatened.

## Loving What We Seek To Change

We Presbyterians may claim adoption into both the invisible and the visible body of Christ. As a part of the visible body we need to consider our Lord's demands of love on us. One of Charles Schultz's posters has Snoopy declaring “I love mankind. It's people I can't stand.” Many of us have a deep love for the Presbyterian Church—for its roots and its history and its ministry in our personal lives. But we are shocked and disgusted by its current condition, even to the point of wanting to part company with people in it (cf Haggai 2).

Maybe we have a Jonah syndrome. He ran because he really didn't want to see repentance come to Nineveh. And when his ministry was successful he went off and pouted. A note in my Bible says “The magnanimous heart of God, forgiving the repentant heathen, appears in strong contrast to the narrow, bigoted and unforgiving spirit of Jonah.” At the end of the book God expresses his pity for Nineveh

“the whole city” because, he says, in it “are twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left....” We ought to consider the extent of our pity for those in our “city” who do not know their right hand from their left.

King Solomon’s prayer for God’s people in 2 Chronicles anticipates their future rebellion against God. Solomon prays for them, that God will hear their prayers of repentance and forgive and restore them. It’s a prayer that expresses a leader’s deep love for an errant people, a desire for their restoration, and confidence in the power and the will of God to restore them. That body of people, like every form of the visible church, was an institution. The visible church doesn’t exist without institutional form and the institution has never existed without need for reform. In some periods, and I think this is one, the need for reforms reaches a critical level.

### **Are We Going Backward Or Forward?**

We face difficulties that our predecessors in similar exceptional times also faced. We can analyze our problems fairly well. But what we cannot do well is judge our progress. I have a couple of favorite examples of this difficulty. One is William Wilberforce, a central figure in the reform of English society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wilberforce professed to have two calls from God: to end slavery in England and to improve the morals of his country. He spent 40 years working to accomplish an end to slavery. But at the end of his life, Wilberforce thought there had been no improvement in the morals of his countrymen; that, in fact, conditions were worse than ever. But historical study shows a marked transformation during his lifetime in nearly every area of English society. Such things as public drunkenness, crime, child labor, illiteracy, general immorality, church attendance, conversions to faith in Jesus Christ and overall order in the society all improved significantly and much of it as a direct result of his own work. He was just too close to it to see it.

The second example comes from a conference on the persecuted Church that was held in 1990. Jane Ellis, now deceased, was a scholar and expert on the church under communism. She was asked by one of the conference participants if she saw any hope for change ahead for the churches in communist-dominated countries. Her reply was that unfortunately she saw absolutely no prospects for change. Only months later to her complete surprise—along with the rest of the world’s—the Berlin wall fell.

These accounts illustrate that human beings do much better at reading the signs of the times in retrospect; we’re better historians than prophets. They also illustrate that long periods of very bad conditions *can* change suddenly: what is, is not necessarily what has to be or what is going to be. We often are not cognizant of all the forces at work influencing outcomes. Just by selection of events, we may perceive that our situation is improving or deteriorating.

### **Understanding Our Calling**

So, how shall we understand our calling in these times, in this denomination? First, it’s important for us to realize that the difficulties we face permeate our whole culture today. Every institution of our society is facing similar efforts at deChristianization. And every mainline denomination is dealing with efforts to redefine the faith and practice of Christianity. I read again recently that the next major field of conquest targeted by the religious homosexual lobby is the non-mainline evangelical denominations. When we have this discussion of our problems and our response, we are not discussing an isolated situation. We are discussing a period in history, a situation common to our whole culture, and a challenge to the whole of the Christian Church.

We are called to *this* conflict in *this* church. It is necessary for us to comprehend the nature of the conflict in our own church so that we can work on becoming as wise as serpents and innocent as doves as we seek the reformation of our own body. We need to give ourselves to the restoration of righteousness right where we are and thereby hold up hope that we are contributing to the restoration and not to the demise of the whole church. We need to care about the people both inside and outside the church who are so vulnerable to being led away from that “faith once delivered.”

It is difficult not to see our situation in the PCUSA as rather dire, but we must be careful not to think of ourselves as two churches. We are one church under one constitution. Some of us wish to see that constitution upheld and others wish not only to change it but to reverse it, and some by any means possible. We are not two parties of equal standing who cannot agree. Rather, some among us mean to be true to revelation and to the ordination vows we have taken and others are willing to break those vows and reconstruct the truth to conform to a human agenda.

We are in a situation that calls for the exercise of church discipline. We who are committed to the work of renewal are charged by some with lack of progress in reforms and lack of a will to discipline, and the charges have validity. But we should not think that those in previous reform efforts had stronger wills or made faster progress. And we should not kid ourselves into thinking that we can go somewhere else and not find our own weaknesses facing us squarely wherever we go. Separation is a course that admits defeat and yields to the temptation to believe that God is not with us. It calls us to act in response to our weakness, to the length of the struggle, to our fatigue and sense of futility, rather than to declare our weakness and call out to God for help.

### **Help From The Bible**

The truest analogies for our situation are found in the New Testament letters to the churches. Those letters are replete with every problem we face in our denomination, and more: Galatians with its other Gospel; Corinthians with its sexual immorality are examples. Those letters show how

many disagreements and problems of polity, morality and doctrine early church leaders addressed. Let us recall, too, the early chapters of Revelation and what the Spirit said to the churches. Let us read them and weep over the state of the New Testament church. The situations were surely as troubled as our own. And the response was a constant call to repentance, to reform and to correction; never to passive acceptance or to abandonment.

The Old Testament, too, is full of the prophets' listings of the evils committed by those God elected as his own beloved people, along with the repeated calls for repentance and the constant promises of restoration. Recall Ezekiel sent as a watchman to a people who would not listen and would not repent. Recall Jeremiah and Micaiah, imprisoned for repeating God's words to Israel's leaders. Recall King Jehoiakim defiantly slicing and burning the words dictated by God to Jeremiah. Yet these prophets, even reluctantly, sought no escape. They continued faithfully to deliver God's revelation and stayed with the people, even into exile.

Those are the models for dealing with apostasy, heresy, and even structural power plays in the church from the very beginning; in times, like our own, of intense controversy in the Church. And those are the models that the Reformers followed. They didn't leave the church voluntarily. They were forced out by a price put on their heads.

### **The Picture Is Not Completely Black**

So, let's take a realistic look at our own situation. We must be careful not to overstate the negatives. It would be good for us even briefly to rehearse some of the positives. For example,

Consider:

- that we have faced and met the challenge to the biblical understanding of sexuality for more than a quarter of a century. While officers and members are engaged in sinful sexual behaviors in numbers much larger than we even want to think about, our standards remain biblically faithful.

Consider:

- that we have faced and met the challenge of ReImagining and other similar theological heresies regarding the Trinity and our Savior. Constitutionally, we hold an orthodox theology, in spite of the active pressure for what my husband calls "crooked-doxy" in various quarters of the denomination. If the affirmations by General Assemblies have not been as strong as we would like, neither have they been the repudiations that those promoting the heresies wanted.

Consider:

- that we have not gone further backward morally on the issues of the meaning and value of human life since the disastrous abortion policy of 1983 and, in fact, have made advances both on issues at the beginning and the

end of life. There has been no capitulation to the abortion rights position even though some public figures have declared again and again over the years that this issue has been settled.

Consider:

- that, after decades of ignoring Scripture, the confessions and catechisms, there is a rather pronounced return of attention to all three, and a kindling of interest in doctrine at virtually every level of our denomination.

Consider:

- that, despite efforts to redefine terms and finance a one-sided "justice" agenda as a substitute for evangelism and mission, nevertheless evangelism and mission continue to be matters of high priority for Presbyterians and efforts in both these areas meet with great support and enthusiasm as evidenced by the growing work of the validated mission organizations and the success of efforts like Knox Fellowship.

### **Signs of Progress Against Formidable Odds**

In their upbeat *Christianity Today* article (August 2003), Hamilton and McKinney tell readers about recent successes of renewal efforts in the mainline denominations and opine that "new sociological studies show that evangelicals may well succeed at renewing wayward Protestantism." The writers hold out hope for success based on the active ferment at the grass roots of our denominations; in our congregations where orthodoxy thrives. In an even more recent article, *CT* discusses the developing strategies of renewalists that are having increasing impact on the governing bodies of all the mainline denominations.

Renewal efforts in our denomination are not ancient. They are relatively new. When I began my work in the PCUSA less than two decades ago, we faced an entrenched bureaucracy that had an intractable grip on our denomination with a number of leaders who radically opposed orthodoxy. The opposition is still there in many quarters, but the grip no longer exists, and we have seen many positive developments. We have had to go through a process of making lots of mistakes as we learn how to be effective disciples not only in mission but also in the political process. And we are still learning.

However, the challenges before us are formidable. But, instead of a view of our situation that emphasizes the length of the struggle or the strength and entrenchment of opposing forces, we ought to see that we are in one of those important historical moments when what we chose to do; the stand we take and the witness we give—will affect the future of the Church for a very long time.

It is repentance and restoration—not separation—that are needed. We have taken vows ourselves. We are the Church Militant, as the confessions describe us; at war with the spirit of the age and with our own besetting sins. The road to recovery of the faithful church is marked first

by repentance; the confession of our sin and the simple decision to stop doing what is wrong and start doing what is right. John Calvin says in the *Institutes* that repentance is our first calling and it is a calling to the end of our days.

And secondly, the road to recovery is marked by the exercise of church discipline. I suspect that we ourselves have been more than a little deficient in both these areas. And separation will not substitute for either one.

## The Way Forward

On the matter of a way forward, as on many other things, we will not have complete agreement. On some matters we have significant differences. But John Calvin says in *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* that the Reformers sought only to improve the condition of the church a little. He was no utopian. However, to give leadership, we need to come to agreement and a plan of action on our priorities.

Scripture emphasizes the importance of both congregational life and a structure that provides for unity among the congregations. In the New Testament church, there was both the establishing of ministers, elders and deacons in the churches, and the sort of oversight and communication among the churches provided for by the apostles. The Reformation retained the need for a unified theology and polity.

As problematic as our current structure in practice appears to be, we will have to move toward reforms that restore the proper role of the higher governing bodies of the Church in order to avoid becoming congregational.

The most important reforms we need are those that transform life in our local governing bodies, in our congregations and presbyteries. Without changes there, the efforts for change at the higher levels of the church can be counterproductive. For example, changes in the process of the General Assembly Nominating Committee at the top will be of little effect if we do not have godly leadership equipped and ready to put forward from our sessions and presbyteries.

We also must exercise with much greater care the responsibility of our sessions and our presbyteries to examine candidates for elder and minister. We need to ensure that those we ordain and install into ministry meet the theological standards of orthodoxy.

We should be looking for reforms that have potential for the greatest impact for the amount of energy and resources expended. We should be looking for reforms that have the largest ripple effect.

Here are four that meet these criteria:

1. Restore proper representation to presbyteries and General Assembly.
2. Reform the nominating and election process so that elections at all levels of the church are moved as far

down in the governing bodies as possible and there is full disclosure of candidates in term of fitness for service, commitment to the constitution, and experience suitable to the office or committee.

3. Press for a Stated Clerk committed to and willing to use his/her influence to see that the constitution is upheld and obeyed.
4. Concentrate effort to carefully, strategically, and consistently exercise church discipline, particularly in cases of refusal to obey the constitution.

A decision for reform will require the commitment and support of each one of us. It will require serious focus on identifying the priorities for action that we will press for in the next few years. It will require the development of a strategy, financial support, recruitment, and preparation of those to do the work; encouragement and activation of our churches in the effort; and perseverance and patience for God's timing.

## Conclusion

We face nothing new in this current struggle and we dare not regard it as if God were absent and not at work among us. We ourselves are being tested by these current troubles. Our situation calls for patience and a willingness to try and fail, never losing faith that God intends ultimately to bless and care for his church and will not abandon her or us, but rather, will bless and nurture us and bring all this trouble to the best possible outcome. These are times that challenge our determination to reclaim the church for orthodoxy. Let us, then, declare, as David did when he faced Goliath, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied...that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand" (1 Samuel 17:44-47).

We, like William Wilberforce, may wonder if our efforts are having any effect while God is carrying out his will in and through us. We should learn from Wilberforce's foolish misreading of his time in history not to judge our own prematurely. We should allow his error to chasten our own lack of faith in God whom we know is working everything for his own good purposes. That is not being a Pollyanna; that is expressing the hope we are called to have because of the promises we have from the God who governs the whole thing, and who declares that nothing is too hard for him!

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# The Lord Saves

By James D. Berkley

*One day Jesus got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they put out, and while they were sailing, he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, "Where is your faith?" They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?" (Luke 8:22–25NRSV)*

We find a progression in this story. First, Jesus and the disciples are in the same boat. They are on the same mission together, a team. Second, Jesus was very calm, so calm that he actually fell asleep, taking himself out of the action and leaving the boat in the disciples' hands. Next, a terrible windstorm arises. This furious squall of outside forces brings real peril: The waves are not imaginary. They fill the precarious boat with real water. The boat and its passengers are in genuine danger of sinking.

So what happens among these disciples, literally in over their heads in peril? They panic. "We're perishing!" they shout to slumbering Jesus over the very real howl of the very deadly wind. "We're gonna die out here on this lake!"

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However, the disciples had missed something: Jesus was yet in control. Calmly and quickly, without panic or what appeared to be major effort, Jesus calmed the storm. Just like that, the raging waves ceased, and calm prevailed.

Jesus turned to the disciples and asked, "Where is your faith?" They were acting as if he wasn't present and in control all along, as if the whole situation on that lake depended solely on their wits and their strength and their

actions, not on their faith, not on their confidence in Jesus doing what he is so capable of doing.

And then the disciples exchanged one form of fear for another. Where at first they were afraid of death in the storm, now they were afraid of Jesus and amazed: "What kind of force *is* this that we have in Jesus in our little boat on the lake? This doesn't conform to our human expectations and experience!"

## Our Leaky Little Boat

It just so happens that we Presbyterians concerned with denominational issues are likewise in a leaky little boat with Jesus, just trying to get to the other side of a rather perilous lake. We want to arrive safely, with the boat intact and the faith secure. I suspect that, unlike us, Jesus is calm about *this* situation, too, with a calm only one who knows the final chapter of the story can have. Jesus, inexplicably to us, has put the boat in our hands, despite our inexperience and shortcomings.

Of course, the windstorm assails us, too. Various forms of real peril blast our little boat and threaten to swamp us, destroying our boat and keeping us from delivering it intact on the far side: grossly inadequate and even blasphemous theology tries to swamp us, the winds of a thoroughly secular society blow fiercely to take us off course, and even our own oarsmen squabble over which way to pull the oars. We feel that we, too, are sinking in the midst of a terrible tragedy.

So, do we panic like the disciples? Every man for himself! Save yourselves! All is lost! Abandon ship! I certainly pray that we don't. That's foolish. Jesus is yet in control. He can and will lead us, calmly and without panic. He remains perfectly capable of stilling the storm, and he will do so at the time and in the circumstances that he wills. The outcome of our journey is not in doubt, not with Jesus aboard. Jesus's boat will get to the proper destination, having carried us and its cargo there safely. Do we want Jesus to turn and ask us, "Where is your *faith*?"

Jesus is yet present and active in our midst, yes, even in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Thus, we can relax our death grip on the oars and calm our pounding, anxious hearts. We can rely on him more and on ourselves less. It's his boat. He'll get us there.

I wonder, when we see what Jesus accomplishes through us—and sometimes in spite of us—in the PC(USA), will we, too, be afraid of Jesus, amazed? Or will we by then have sufficient experience with Jesus to know that this is how he operates, and we just hang on for the exciting ride?

### **Another Story**

You know the story of David and Goliath. It's the classic case of the heretofore invincible enemy versus a little boy with five smooth stones and God. They meet on the battlefield, and this is the exchange that takes place.

*When the Philistine looked and saw David, he despised him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." But David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the*

*Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand" (1 Samuel 17:42–47).*

David faced a fierce enemy with woefully inadequate weapons—except for one thing: the Lord was with him. And the battle is the Lord's, who does not save by sword and spear but instead, gives the enemy into the hand of the faithful.

Indeed, the Lord saves the PC(USA) not with brilliant evangelical strategy and dazzling evangelical footwork, not with our sweating and worrying and caucusing and scheming. Why? For the battle is the Lord's. Ultimate victory comes only because *he* gives the PC(USA) into the hands of those who remain faithful to him and to his will.

*Lord God, give us perspective. Teach us that this is not an equal battle, not with your power on our side. Help us to row the boat and bail out the water appropriately during our stint on the crew—without panic, without discouragement, without impatience, without weariness. Remind us that you always win, and you always will. Cause us to row and bail when that's your desire, and to sit back in awe and watch you work, when that's your plan. Please keep us working together and headed in the direction you have charted. Lord, we pray that you would get us to the other side as faithful disciples accompanying you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

just need to understand that Jesus is not the only way to God and the sooner they get over this idea of exclusivity, the better off everyone will be."

## **A Child Shall Lead Them!**

In response to that statement, one of the student panelists, a sixteen year-old girl, said, "Excuse me, but like that doesn't make any sense."

### **A True Story Told by Edward A. Kazmarek**

"Why do you say that?" asked the theologian. The young girl replied, "Because if there's more than one way to God, why would God come up with another way involving the death of his own son?"

A Christian school in Atlanta, defending its decision to add non-Christian teachers to its staff, recently held a meeting of parents, faculty, and students. As part of the program, there was a panel discussion among two or three parents, faculty members, and students, with the panel being moderated by a prominent, Ph.D. theologian and

One could see the audience perk up and nod to one another as they all came to the same conclusion: "That's not a bad question."

"No," said the theologian, "My point is simply this, if you want to get from Atlanta to New York, you can take a train, you can take a plane, you can take a boat. The point is that you get to New York, not how you get there."

The young girl replied, "Well, I mean, like, no offense or anything, but that still doesn't make any sense. If you can take a plane, or a train, or a boat, or whatever, like why would God make his son get out and push the car?"

Episcopal priest from Texas. Early in the proceedings, the theologian said something to the effect that, "Christians

I could see that the theologian had had about enough of this conversation. She said, "Look. When you're young, you want everything to be neat, and tidy, and simple, but when you get older you realize that the world doesn't

always work out that way. When you're older, you'll learn to accept ambiguity and complexity."

At that point, another high school student in the audience spoke out, "Wait a minute. You cannot write her off just because she's a kid. She's asked a good question, and you've got to answer her." Several voices in the audience could be heard to say, "Yeah!" Instead, we went on to another topic.

What a wonderful evening. My own impression is that we could not have asked for a better apologetic device than to watch the child confound the scholar.

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# The Stewardship of Selecting General Assembly Commissioners

By Bob Davis

Declining memberships, decreasing budgets, defiance of the Constitution, and threats of separation—all of these are common topics of conversation within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

What they all represent—simplistically—is that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has lost its sense of collective purpose. There is a sense that the denomination is struggling to survive. It has lost its identity. The image is one of a drowning man. On the extremes, the man is

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gasping and his limbs are thrashing about, trying to hold onto anything. In the center, the man is not moving, lamenting that he is sinking and the extremes won't get along to preserve his life.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, a life preserver is within reach.

The life preserver is this: the people of the church being good stewards of the covenant they have entered. We have covenanted to "Be active in government and discipline, serving in governing bodies of the church" (G-14.0405b(9)). We have taken on the stewardship

responsibility for our covenant life together. A big part of that stewardship involves men and women in local congregations and presbyteries picking those who represent us in our higher governing bodies; that is, where our covenant life together is worked out.

Unfortunately, we have abandoned our responsibilities to each other. Then, we wonder why someone else, somewhere else, is doing something that really bothers us.

## Stewardship of Picking Leaders

Scripture, the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* all speak to the need for careful selection of leaders. The principles involved are applicable beyond the walls of the local congregation and beyond the boundaries of a presbytery.

### A. Scripture

I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 both include the need for discernment of the community within the characteristics of those seeking the calls to church office. Consider what the qualities of leaders are to be and then ask *how* are the decisions regarding the selection of leaders to be made?

The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of overseer desires a noble task. Now an overseer must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way—for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he

take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.<sup>2</sup>

I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint overseers in every town, as I directed you: someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, the standards for leadership did not begin in the Pauline epistles. Consider the counsel of Jethro to Moses:

[Jethro] said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace."<sup>4</sup>

The point is this: men and women who are called to be overseers are not chosen by a random process or simple longevity. Not everyone is equally gifted. Different gifts are needed for "judges of tens" than for "judges of thousands." These qualities must be contemplated. An evaluation needs to be done. A sense of calling needs to be discerned.

## B. *Book of Confessions*

The *Book of Confessions* is consistent with this scriptural exhortation. Most on point comes from the Second Helvetic Confession:

MINISTERS ARE TO BE CALLED AND ELECTED. Furthermore, no man ought to usurp the honor of the ecclesiastical ministry; that is, to seize it for himself by bribery or any deceits, or by his own free choice. But let the ministers of the Church be called and chosen by lawful and ecclesiastical election; that is to say, let them be carefully chosen by the Church or by those delegated from the Church for that purpose in a proper order without any uproar, dissension and rivalry. Not any one may be elected, but capable men distinguished by sufficient consecrated learning, pious eloquence, simple wisdom, lastly, by moderation and an honorable reputation, according to that apostolic rule which is compiled by the apostle in I Tim., ch. 3, and Titus, ch. 1.<sup>5</sup>

Related are the "notes" or "marks" of the true Kirk from the Scots Confession:

The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished.<sup>6</sup>

That last line, "whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished," includes an understanding that ecclesiastical discipline is not a blind process. Discipline is not always reactive; in fact, in its most positive manifestation, it is creative and active. "Virtue is nourished" by the exercise of good stewardship *before* problems arise.

## C. *Book of Order*

The *Book of Order* stands in conformity with Scripture and the *Book of Confessions* on this issue. There is an extensive process for ordaining and installing officers in the church. A listing of church officers appears right after the section regarding membership, in the Form of Government, G-6.000 *ff.* The process of ordination, certification, and commissioning of men and women as officers is in G-14.000 *ff.*<sup>7</sup> Included among these processes are times of preparation, evaluation, and examination. Other specific citations will be noted below.

## Abandoned and Failed Stewardship

When we look at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and wonder why it is in decline—and by all objective measuring standards, it is in decline—a part of the

responsibility has to be set at our own feet in the way we select men and women to serve as commissioners to the General Assembly.

Why can I say that? The General Assembly is comprised of commissioners from 173 presbyteries. Every year there is a time of orientation during their first session together. Commissioners are instructed on how the electronic voting will take place. Part of that orientation includes asking some questions in order that commissioners can practice using the voting pads.

Every year in recent memory the results have been similar:

- 70-80% are first-time GA commissioners.
- More than half have read less than half the papers sent to them.

These two things—by themselves—almost guarantee that the status quo will not be altered. The vast majority are not prepared to exercise leadership. Instead, they need to be told what to do. And that is exactly what happens.

Unfortunately, when a more complete picture is drawn, it becomes clear that the current system *cannot* effect the kinds of reform necessary to alter the downward spiral. Indeed, it functions to *prevent* systemic oversight and reform. How so?

- **Most commissioners have limited exposure, knowledge, or experience in dealing with the matters they are asked to decide.** Most have not spent time working with, reviewing, analyzing, and/or being engaged in the programs and work of the national denomination which they are asked to oversee. Most are not aware of what previous General Assemblies have done with respect to the issues they are being asked to evaluate. Thus, they are asked to make decisions about things with which they have no personal experience or historical perspective.
- **Most commissioners have limited exposure, knowledge, and/or experience in the city in which they are serving as a commissioner.** It takes time to figure out where they are and where they are supposed to be. It is disconcerting to be in an unfamiliar place with brand new responsibilities, a lot of pressure, and a short period of time to make it all work.
- **Most commissioners have limited exposure, knowledge, and/or experience in the process followed in, and energy required for, an eight-day meeting.** It takes commissioners time and energy to find their committee. It takes time and energy to figure out who is on their committee. It takes time and energy to become familiar with the issues that are to be discussed on their committee. It takes time and energy to figure out how to speak to issues that will be handled by their committee. It takes time and energy to figure out how to vote. It takes time to figure out

what to do if they disagree with the vote of their committee. By the time the committee process is over on Tuesday, many commissioners are already exhausted. Thus, during the floor process Wednesday through Saturday, they are struggling to keep up, to keep focused, and to stay awake.

Why does this keep happening?

The overwhelming majority of presbyteries have processes for selecting commissioners that guarantee that the most inexperienced commissioners possible are sent each year. Some do this by “**seniority**” systems, where those who have been in the presbytery the longest without ever serving as a commissioner have priority in being elected. Some do this by a **rotational** system where the nomination involves picking someone from a different region within the presbytery each time. Some presbyteries have **point** systems, where individuals become eligible by attending more meetings and serving on more committees. Some presbyteries have a combination of systems that make the NFL playoff system look linear. Even those presbyteries where open elections are the norm, one of the factors *against* a candidate is whether that person has recently served as a commissioner. As a result, all of the elements are lined up against commissioners actually effecting reform.

Two other errors are predominant in the selection process: “fairness” and “random selection.” It is true that commissioners are not bound or instructed by their presbyteries—their consciences are free. However, it also is true that presbyteries choose how those commissioners are selected. Many presbyteries err badly in trying to be “fair” or “random” in their selection of commissioners.

- **Blindness to views is an error.** “[T]he great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior’s rule, ‘By their fruits ye shall know them.’ And that no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man’s opinions are.” (Preliminary Principles, Book of Order, G-1.0304). If we select commissioners without considering what the nominee’s opinions are, we act as if it is no consequence what they believe.
- **Blindness to gifts and skill as a commissioner is an error.** “While the ministry is one, specific forms of ministry may emphasize special tasks and skills...” (Book of Order, G-6.0104). As with officers of the church, commissioners should be selected by a discernment of “the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired...[they should be] persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world.” (Book of Order, G-6.0106a) Choosing candidates without reference to a sense of calling, skills, or understanding of the business to be handled simply

drops the ball on the kinds of mutual accountability and stewardship we are called to exercise.

Further, commissioner to General Assembly is the only position in our connectal life that I can think of where experience is considered a factor *against* a candidate.<sup>8</sup>

We do not send missionaries into the field without examining and commissioning. The community of faith looks at the candidate's background, training, and preparation. In addition, the community of faith looks at the individual in order to help discern whether Christ has called him or her into this particular mission to this particular people group.

We do not rotate preachers in the pulpit each Sunday. We do not select preachers based upon the length of residency in a particular region. We do not select preachers based upon a point system at meetings. Instead, the community of faith does an evaluation of both the individual and the community in order to discern whether Christ has called the candidate to serve in that particular congregation.

We do rotate elders. We do so only—again, *only*—after a process by which they are examined and installed. The sole criteria is more than the length of residency in a particular region. It is based on more than a point system of meetings attended. The community of faith does an evaluation of both the individual and the community in order to discern whether Christ has called the candidate to serve in that particular office.

We also rotate deacons. We do so based upon the same process; that is, *only* after a process by which they are examined and installed. The community of faith does an evaluation of both the individual and the community in order to discern whether Christ has called the candidate to serve in that particular congregation.

## Regaining Good Stewardship

The steps to regain control of this system are remarkably simple, though that does not indicate that they will be achieved without a struggle.

**First, some widely held assumptions must be addressed.** What follows will run contrary to the currently prevailing conventional wisdom:

1. It is good stewardship to send gifted commissioners to serve at the General Assembly. This includes recognizing that experienced commissioners may go frequently rather than rarely.
2. It is good stewardship to examine those who are nominated to be selected as commissioners to the General Assembly about their faith, their knowledge and support of the constitution, their gifts, their sense of call.
3. It is good stewardship to be intentional in selecting those who are nominated.
4. It is good stewardship to send candidates whose views are representative of the presbytery.

The converse is also true:

1. It is poor stewardship to continuously send inexperienced commissioners whose gifts are not consistent with service as a commissioner.
2. It is poor stewardship to blindly accept rotational systems, point systems, and seniority systems. It is poor stewardship and an incorrect assumption to believe that ordination as an officer automatically translates into a calling to be a commissioner. Service at the General Assembly level is a calling, not an honor or a vacation rewarded for long service.
3. It is poor stewardship to ignore the responsibility to participate in the selection of those who will represent the presbytery at the General Assembly level.
4. It is poor stewardship to send candidates whose views are not representative of the presbytery or to send a “balanced” slate of commissioners (that is, intentionally sending commissioners with contradictory views).

**Then, it is important to engage in ordinary ecclesiastical discipline.** Here, discipline is being used in the Scots' Confession sense of “nourishing virtue.” The selection process is entirely within the control of the presbyteries doing the selecting. Again, it is true that commissioners are not sent with instructions; but the process by which they are chosen is something that is the responsibility of the presbytery. Continuing in the status quo of poor stewardship is a manifestation of the abandonment of the third note or mark of the true “Kirk.” Persisting in this fashion will guarantee further thrashing by the extremities and further disillusionment of the middle.

A life preserver for the drowning denomination is within grasp. It is time to recover the responsibility for being good stewards of the covenant we have entered with each other. That responsibility has substance; it requires discernment. Failing that, we will be full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. We are assured of continued flailing and thrashing. Accepting the responsibility holds the promise of reform, restoration, and—dare I say it—the reclaiming of the third note of the true Kirk.

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<sup>1</sup> This illustration is limited specifically to the denomination, distinct and separate from the “Church.”

<sup>2</sup> I Timothy 3:1-7.

<sup>3</sup> Titus 1:5-9.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 18:14-23. These citations are illustrative, not exhaustive.

Consider also: Acts 1:8; Acts 6:1-6; Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11-13; I Peter 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Book of Confessions* 5.150.

<sup>6</sup> *Book of Confessions* 3.18. This, too, is meant to be an illustrative, not exhaustive, look at the Confessions. Consider also: 5.155-5.168; 6.140-6.146; 6.169-6.172; 8.04; 9.39.

<sup>7</sup> Given that the first four chapters of the Form of Government are “preliminary principles,” it is significant that the definition, discernment, preparation and selection process are given two full, lengthy chapters (out of a remaining 14).

<sup>8</sup> Inevitably, someone reading this will think of something else; but my memory is not the point.

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