

# Theology Matters

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## How Can Our Denomination Become What It Ought To Be?

By James R. Edwards

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Three years ago my son Mark and I were riding a cog railway in Switzerland that took us to a station called Eismeer—Sea of Ice. From there we began a two-day climb to the summit of the Eiger, famous for its dramatic immensity, its thousands-of-feet of exposure, its storms, its difficulty and danger. I had first dreamed of climbing the Eiger when I was seventeen. I was fifty-seven years old when I finally climbed it. It had taken me forty years to prepare myself mentally for the climb. It is a dangerous and demanding mountain face, a face on which one can either lose life or find life. After all the years of soul-searching, planning, and preparing, Mark and I curiously had very little to say as the train rattled upward through the Swiss Alps.

I have a similar feeling as I speak to you tonight. A vote stands before our denomination that, like the Eiger, has an ultimate quality to it. Also like the Eiger, we cannot say we have actually chosen this moment. Rather, we could not avoid it, at least if we desired to be faithful to what we perceive the call of God. What happens this week may well affect the destiny of the PCUSA. Like all ultimate moments, there are potential gains and losses—and both are large.

Our denomination has known that this moment, or something like it, has been coming for twenty-eight years, since 1978, the first year we voted on the question of ordaining persons who claim that homosexuality is an

alternative, God-willed form of sexuality that does not disqualify one from ordained ministry. Perhaps no issue in the history of our denomination—and certainly no issue since our denomination split over slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—has been so controversial and divisive. Nor has any issue been so thoroughly studied, debated, and prayed about. I have the same feeling tonight that I had on the cog railway: everything has been already said that could possibly be said. Some things, however, are so important that they need to be said again and again. I knew when I was asked to speak that I would have nothing new to say. Rather, I need to repeat the *ta diapheronta*, those things, to use Paul's word (Romans 2:18; Philippians 1:10), that we cannot forget without jeopardy to our salvation.

In 1970 my wife and I went to Europe for a year where I studied New Testament at the University of Zürich with Eduard Schweizer. Before arriving in Zürich we visited with Corrie ten Boom. Corrie lived a marvelously God-

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filled life. We asked Corrie, “What do we need to know that can make our lives like yours?” She answered, “You don’t need to know anything new. You need to live what you already know.” I believe Corrie’s advice is a guidepost for the present hour. Our most important choices and decisions as Christians are seldom made on the basis of new information. Rather, they are made in remembering what we already know to be true, and then acting on it. Tonight, I do not want to be novel or profound. This is not a moment for either. I want to recall four basic truths that we need to remember and trust—*remember* and *trust*—as we cast the votes that will be asked of us.

### **I. For those who think the Presbyterian Church’s ordination of women sets a precedent for its ordination of homosexuals.**

For many people in our denomination, the central issue with regard to the ordination of practicing homosexuals is that it is a parallel issue to the ordination of women. Since the PCUSA has “found a way around” the Biblical view of the role of women in the church, to put it in street language, to be consistent, it should also affirm the ordination of monogamous gays and lesbians. For many, this argument seems irrefutable and virtually requires the denomination to affirm the ordination of practicing homosexual persons. I want to be as brief and factual as possible in order to dispel needless confusion on this point.

First, ordination of women and ordination of gays and lesbians are not parallel issues. There are divergent voices in Scripture on the role of women in leadership positions in the church, but there are no divergent voices in Scripture on the practice of homosexuality. The Old and New Testaments do not present a uniform picture regarding women in leadership roles. On the one hand, there is 1 Corinthians 14:33-36, where Paul says that women ought not speak in church, and that this holds for all churches. On the other hand, there is Huldah, a woman prophet in the OT; Priscilla, tutoring and correcting Apollos; Phoebe, delivering the Epistle to the Romans to Rome, and, according to our best evidence, a woman apostle in Romans 16:7 named Junia. The PCUSA has sifted through the disparate evidence and made a *theological* judgment that the ordination of women is justifiable according to Scripture.

The denomination has studied the issue of homosexuality in greater length and depth than it has studied women in leadership positions, and it has never come to the conclusion that the ordination of practicing homosexual persons is justifiable according to Scripture. The reason is simple: there are no divergent voices in early Christianity regarding homosexuality. On the contrary, Scripture offers a clear and united voice against homosexual practice.

- Six texts in Scripture explicitly condemn homosexual and lesbian practices, and *no* text in Scripture affirms, supports, or condones the practice of homosexuality.
- It seems impossible to defend and justify homosexual practice in light of the Scriptural teaching on the *imago Dei*, the sexual complementarity between male and female which reflects the image of God in humanity—the image, in fact, that Jesus cited in Mark 10 as the sole basis of marriage.
- When the early Church encountered pervasive homosexual practices in the Greco-Roman world it did not accommodate such practices, but upheld its opposition to them. In fact, early Christianity frequently likened homosexuality to idolatry, one of the most serious offenses in Christianity.
- There is no text in Judeo-Christian literature from Leviticus to Constantine that affirms or condones homosexual practice. “Every pertinent Christian text from the pre-Constantinian period...adopts an unremittingly negative judgment on homosexual practice, and this tradition is emphatically carried forward by all major Christian writers of the fourth and fifth centuries” (Richard Hays, *JRE* 14/1 [1986], 202).
- Throughout Christian history, the practice of homosexuality has universally been understood to fall outside God’s will. The fifteen-volume *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1955) contains no entry on the subject. Nor does Oxford University Press’s 1992 authoritative two volume *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*. The reason there is debate over homosexuality today is not because the church has changed its position, but because society has changed its position in the wake of the sexual revolution of the 1960s.
- Despite debate on the issue in Europe and North America, the Christian church world-wide is unanimous that the practice of homosexuality falls outside God’s ordained will for human sexuality.

Those who advocate the ordination of practicing homosexuals are aware of this evidence. Thirty years of study and debate have confirmed and strengthened each of the above points. Why, then, do they set their sails in opposition to it? Over and over they say that the Holy Spirit is speaking to the church through culture. They believe that at root the ordination of practicing homosexuals is an issue of liberation and human rights. In advocating the ordination of practicing homosexuals, they believe they are adhering to a prophetic and transformational model of ministry that is essentially Scriptural.

All Presbyterians, I believe, are committed to a prophetic and transformational model of ministry as rooted in Scripture. But most Presbyterians do not believe that true transformation occurs by allowing culture to set our agenda. Biblical prophets stood *inside* the redemptive tradition of Israel, not outside it. They legitimated their word by saying, “Thus says the Lord,” not by appealing to culture. Prophetic transformation and liberation derived their power from stewardship and application of sacred

tradition, not from forgetting God's revelation within Israel, or denying it, or opposing it. How is it possible to argue that the Holy Spirit is moving the church to affirm the ordination of practicing homosexual persons when Scripture, which is the product of the Spirit, expressly forbids it? How is it possible to argue that the Holy Spirit is leading our particular church to ordain practicing homosexual persons when throughout history—and throughout the world today—the Spirit has led and is leading the church to affirm heterosexual marriage or abstinence in singleness? I know of no Holy Spirit that testifies *against* its own revelation in both Scripture and the church. An attempt to be prophetic apart from the revealed word of God leads to cultural captivity of the church. The claim to have special insight into the will of God has a bleak record in the history of Christianity. Whenever we hear a claim to a superior revelation not in accord with “the faith once-for-all handed down to the saints” (Jude 1:3), not in accord with the Vincentian canon of the church “everywhere, at all times, and for all,” we hear, I submit, the voice of another spirit than the Holy Spirit.

## II. For those who think it is not our place to judge.

One of the stumbling blocks in the controversy over the ordination of practicing homosexual persons is that those who oppose it are often called “judgmental,” “Pharisaical,” or both. This is a hollow cliché that should be challenged. The charge that it is “Pharisaical” to judge is a historical injustice. The Pharisaic tradition was the *one* tradition in first-century Judaism with which Jesus had most in common, and for which he had most respect. That is why he fought it so earnestly. Jesus approved much about Pharisaism: “Everything that [the Pharisees] say to you, do it and keep it,” said Jesus (Matthew 23:3). What Jesus opposed was not that Pharisees made judgments, but that they failed to hold themselves to the judgments they made.

This leads to the real issue, that it is thought unChristian to judge the behavior of others. This platitude is often said as a way of intimidating those who hold opposing opinions. UnChristian to judge? Tell that to Amos who judged the indulgence of Samaria's sophisticated women as “Cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1). Tell that to Jesus in his judgment of the religious leaders, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites...” (Matthew 23). Tell that to Paul who judged a man who was sleeping with his father's wife—and those who condoned it—in these words: “Hand him over to Satan” (1 Corinthians 5:5). With the single exception of the little letter of Philemon, every book of the New Testament contains explicit judgments of false doctrine and immoral behavior. Every book also commands readers likewise to judge false doctrine and immoral behavior. “I urge you, brothers and sisters,” says Paul in Romans 16:17-18, “to be diligent with regard to those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; separate from them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the

hearts of the simple-minded.” The word for “appetites,” the Greek word *koilia*, means that which appeals to them personally. There is, indeed, a wrong kind of judgment, namely, of imagining that we are without fault and above judgment. But there is also a right and Christian kind of judgment that guards the purity of doctrine and morality so that the gospel maintains its saving efficacy, and so that the faith maintains a positive witness to those outside it.

## III. For those who wonder how equally dedicated people can come to such divergent positions?

Almost twenty years ago I was debating a man and a woman on the subject of the ordination of practicing homosexual persons. After the debate the man said to me, “I think you won the debate, but you know it doesn't matter.” “I think it matters,” I replied. “No, it doesn't,” he said, “and I'll tell you why. We will either win this issue, or we'll take the church down—and we don't care which.”

Those who champion the ordination of homosexuals in our denomination are zealous; indeed, many, I believe, have the zeal of God. Even the zeal of God, however, may be mistaken. “I bear witness of the Jews,” says the Apostle Paul, “that they have the zeal of God, but it is not properly informed, for they are ignorant of the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:2-3). Godly zeal without Godly knowledge? How can that be? The Apostle Paul explains how in Romans 1. When people knowingly exchange the truth of God for a falsehood, they will sooner or later be unable to differentiate between truth and falsehood. Three times in Romans 1 (vv. 24, 26, 28), Paul repeats that when people anchor their worldviews to creation rather than to the Creator, to that which is made rather than the Maker, that God *hands them over* to preferred falsehoods rather than unwelcome truths. When God hands them over, says Paul, they honestly can no longer see the truth. Paul calls this condition *adokimon* noun (a mind that no longer corresponds to reality). Romans 1:28 contains a wordplay on this idea in Greek: “Since they did not think it fit (*edokimasan*) to acknowledge God, God handed them over to an unfit (*adokimon*) mind.” I have met people in our denomination who have an unfit mind on the issue of the ordination of practicing homosexuals, including the man above who was willing to destroy the church for a cause he believed in.

One of the reasons our church is so divided over the ordination of practicing homosexual persons is because we no longer believe doctrine matters. If doctrine does not matter, then the gospel does not matter. The gospel, after all, only reconciles and transforms life because it is *true*. If it were not true, it would bear no fruit. The gospel can only make me in God's image because *it* is a true image of God. This is precisely what Paul says in Romans 6:17. It is not we who determine the gospel, but the gospel that determines us. “Thanks be to God that you who were once slaves have now obeyed from your heart the gospel *to*

which you have been entrusted.” The gospel does not belong to us; we belong to the gospel.

The vote on the ordination of practicing homosexual persons is, in the final analysis, about whether there is such a thing as doctrine, and whether it matters. In his battle with medieval Roman Catholicism, Martin Luther recognized that it was no use fighting over morality alone, over lapsed and immoral lives. The important issue, the *only* issue, was on the proper knowledge and teaching of the Word of God. Listen to Luther’s words:

But when it comes to whether one teaches correctly about the Word of God, there I take my stand and fight. That is my calling. When the word of God remains pure, even if the quality of life fails us, life is placed in a position to become what it ought. That is why everything hinges on the purity of the Word. I have succeeded only if I have taught it correctly.

The title for this talk has been modeled after this quotation. “How can our denomination become what it ought to be?” In a nutshell, the issue before the PCUSA is contained in the last three sentences of Luther’s quotation: “When the word of God remains pure, even if the quality of life fails, life is placed in a position to become what it ought. That is why everything hinges on the purity of the Word. I have succeeded only if I have taught it correctly.” If the church wants to be prophetic, if the church wants to be a faithful steward of the faith once-for-all handed to the saints, let it believe those words, commit itself to them, stand for them, and if necessary, die for them.

#### **IV. For those who labor and are heavy laden.**

Finally, I want to speak to those who want the battle over human sexuality to be done with. They are weary of it, and they may have contingency plans for leaving the denomination. For those of you—no, for all of *us*—I want to recall the nature of ecclesial change.

Twenty-eight years (and counting) is a long time to fight over the issue of homosexuality, especially in a world that thinks in terms of zero-wait-states, instant replays, and increments of nano-seconds. We want this problem to be decided and resolved so we can “move on.” Much of our battle fatigue, I believe, is due less to actual time at the front than to frustration that the methods that rule the corporate world are not solving problems in the denomination like they do in the corporate world. We feel bereft and bereaved that our utilitarian methodologies have not worked. We also are tempted to follow another corporate reflex: to discard and dispense with the church (in this instance) because it does not conform to the system.

You may, of course, leave the denomination. Many have. But if you do, those who stay will be weakened by your abandonment. No one, however, can promise a quick “solution” to the issue of human sexuality. Since the Industrial Revolution, attitudes toward human sexuality have been undergoing seismic shifts in the Western world.

Stock prices can be regulated from corporate boardrooms, but the San Andreas Fault cannot be. Issues related to human sexuality are deep subterranean tremors in the geology of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. They have been with us for generations, and they will remain for the foreseeable future. If we hope to be instruments of God’s will in these tumultuous times, if we say to God as Isaiah said, “Here I am, send me,” then we must know that we are committing ourselves not to a single or momentary witness, but to a protracted witness that will last beyond our generation. If we have not counted the cost of this kind of discipleship, we shall have no witness to bear.

How long will the battle take?

- Perhaps it will take another hundred years, as did the Iconoclastic controversy of the 8<sup>th</sup> century;
- Perhaps it will take another two centuries, as did the Christological debates of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries;
- Perhaps it will take four or five centuries as it is taking to complete the Reformation begun by Luther and Calvin;
- Perhaps it will take eight centuries, as it took the Byzantine Christians in their struggle with Islam, a struggle, as you know, that they ultimately lost.

How long will the struggle take? We cannot say. Remember the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:19, “It is necessary that heresies arise among you, in order that the genuine believers among you may become known.” We can only say that God is using *this* struggle to prove our faith and to make of us what he wills to make of us.

Our generation is fond of appealing to Bonhoeffer, the Confessing Church, and the Barmen Declaration as models of bearing witness to Christ. Perhaps we should be more cautious about claiming such names. What right do we have to claim their names when we put our own reputations, our own prospects for promotion, our own standing with colleagues, our own striving for relevance and acceptance above our faith convictions? Let us beware of talking about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and acting like Neville Chamberlain. Perhaps we should declare a moratorium on names like Bonhoeffer and the Barmen Declaration until we are willing to bear witness to the faith in our time as they bore witness in theirs.

Three weeks ago I attended worship in the great cathedral of Berlin. The Bishop of Lübeck, Frau Dr. Barbara Wartenberg-Potter, preached on the necessity of giving a courageous and intelligent witness in a time of confusion, lest we mistake our virtual realities—the falsehoods that Paul speaks of in Romans 1—for the one true reality of God. I ask you to commit yourself to a courageous and intelligent witness in a time of confusion. I ask you

- not to think that serious theological differences in the denomination can be “managed” by ambiguous compromises.
- to beware of appeasement strategies, especially of appealing to peace over doctrine. That is a bet that has never paid in the church. Only when we adhere to the

One Lord and One Faith can we be united in one peace, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

- to guard against the temptation to make the faith “relevant.” The attempt to make the faith relevant almost always makes it trivial, ridiculous, and despicable. If we want to see the Holy Spirit empower our denomination—and I believe we all do—let us do the one thing the Holy Spirit always and everywhere blesses: let us preach and live with integrity the faith once handed to the saints.

It is important for us to bear a courageous and intelligent witness so that the world hears and believes the gospel. It is also important for us to bear a courageous and intelligent witness so that *we* will continue to believe the gospel to which we have been entrusted.

“My beloved friends, be steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord always, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Be on guard, stand in the Faith, be courageous, be strong; let all things be done in love” (1 Corinthians 15:58; 16:13).

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## The Renewal That Is Changing The PCUSA

### Presbytery of Boston by Rev. Richard Brondyke

Boston Presbytery is one of the smallest presbyteries, boasting only about 3500 members and 25 churches. It has experienced declines in membership in many congregations, but growth in other congregations in the last 20 years. The history of the presbytery of Boston begins later than many presbyteries on the East Coast—mostly arising from a wave of immigration from the Maritime provinces of Canada in the 1880s and 1890s. In recent years, those joining the presbytery have been a diverse group. We now have four ethnic churches and a number of congregations with significant ethnic diversity.

Our presbytery is not without its struggles, one I have now shared as pastor of Fort Square Presbyterian Church (Quincy, MA) for 21 years. As part of the rather liberal Synod of the Northeast, Boston Presbytery reflects many of the struggles currently found within the Presbyterian Church (USA) as a whole. The larger congregations here have traditionally been orthodox and evangelical, but votes in the presbytery represent diverse theological movements. We have several “More Light” churches, including one that has publicly announced its defiance of the constitution, specifically G-6.0106b. Votes on controversial issues have generally gone the way of progressive and liberal theology. All of the votes on

sexuality issues for the last 10 years or more have gone against the standard of fidelity and chastity in G-6.0106b.

But we have seen change that reflects the persistent engagement and involvement of many over the years. This year several votes on controversial issues were decided by one vote; the winds of change may be in the air. New ethnic churches in the presbytery generally reflect a commitment to orthodox theology and adherence to the constitution. Faithful presbyters have involved themselves in the work of theological renewal in the presbytery...and by God’s grace have had an impact. It is not that we have been without controversy, but somehow we have, by God’s grace, managed to continue to hold together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Reformed theology reminds us that all the glory for anything helpful belongs to God; nevertheless there are aspects of involvement that we have found important over the years in our efforts. Good attitudes, persistent prayer, and active engagement are at the heart of those efforts.

We have discovered that the mind of Christ is crucial if we are to have any influence (Phil. 2:5). We have sought to remind each other how vital humility is in our involvement in presbytery; adherence to Biblical orthodoxy should never be an excuse for arrogance or pride in our relation with others. Furthermore, a recognition that we do make mistakes, the willingness to apologize and keep good

relationships, as best we can, is vital if we are to work effectively.

We have tried to see others as real people, not just as people to convince. Caring for the concerns and needs of fellow presbyters fosters healthy relationships within the presbytery. That concern makes a difference in the midst of difficult presbytery debates. We have tried to treat those with whom we disagree with respect even while boldly standing for Biblical truth. Many years of active service have demonstrated to people that we care about the presbytery and its work even if at times there have been strong disagreements.

Prayer has, for many years, been at the heart of renewal efforts within our presbytery. A group of renewal minded pastors has met every other week for 10 months out of the year for many years now. Though not everyone is able to attend every meeting, the commitment to pray is there. Our prayer group has recently begun praying for each and every member of our presbytery. We support each other by sharing concerns and needs, and then uphold each other in prayer. Out of these relationships has come a desire to work together to see the Lord exalted in our presbytery. Naturally, we pray for “issues” before the presbytery, believing that God will do His work as we bring our concerns to the Lord.

One of the benefits of such prayer times has been a sense of what God might have us do to make a difference in the presbytery, as well as the courage to work together in many different areas. We do not see ourselves as “saviors” of the presbytery, but rather servants of the Lord who have made ourselves available to the Master.

We do stay in touch with issues in the denomination and how they may impact Boston Presbytery (at least one of our members is routinely involved in denominational renewal work). We do get involved in the presbytery, believing that it is only as participants in the process that we will make a difference; at times we have had to cajole each other (in a friendly way!) to get our members involved as well. Members of our group have served in significant and important positions within the presbytery. We have followed the simple rule that if we are not involved, we have no one to blame but ourselves. The polity of the denomination is a wonderful tool that should be valued as we seek renewal within the presbyteries. Our motto has been 2 Cor. 4:1-2, “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.”

Finally, we have been avid supporters of new church planting efforts, particularly ethnic churches and have seen fruit borne in the presbytery by such efforts. This is an area where we continue to hope to make a difference and be encouragers and supporters of efforts to reach out with

the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such efforts are always worthwhile! Ultimately our efforts at renewal are not a great secret; we have simply sought to be faithful to the call of God upon our lives to serve Him!

Bringing renewal to our presbytery is not a short term effort. It takes time, effort, wisdom, prayer, and the moving of God in our midst. Such renewal may not happen in the particular way that we might have planned. God is still sovereign and so we trust him with the future—our own and Boston Presbytery’s.

## **Presbytery of National Capital by Dr. Peter James**

National Capital Presbytery serves the Washington DC metro area. We represent 111 churches and 41,000 members in Northern Virginia, suburban Maryland and the District of Columbia. I have been a member of National Capital since I came to Vienna Presbyterian Church in 1979.

National Capital has long been regarded as a liberal presbytery. When confronted with the defining social issues of our day, National Capital turns left. Historically, our presbytery votes 80% liberal and 20% conservative on gay/lesbian issues. Our presbytery’s liberal majority is bolstered by the high number of specialized clergy serving the metro area.

But the ground is shifting at National Capital. Through the years, I have witnessed a steady swing from hard left to moderate. Nearly every pastor called to a church in Northern Virginia in the past ten years has been more theologically orthodox than his or her predecessor. Most votes are considerably closer these days; likely two thirds liberal and one third conservative. There was a time when conservatives were small enough in number to fit inside a phone booth (for those of you who can remember what a phone booth looks like!); now we are a minority to be taken seriously.

For all the denominational homage paid to diversity, conservatives evidence a growing ethnicity within our ranks. New immigrant Christians attending our churches are decidedly more conservative than American-born Presbyterians.

Conservatives meet monthly in our presbytery. The logistics of getting people together is formidable. Roads divide and traffic snarls. It’s no simple feat to rally conservatives.

The biggest challenge facing conservatives is not resistance from liberal minded colleagues; truthfully we don’t have our own house in order. Even among conservatives, there is division in the house.

Some within our ranks are loyalists. We are more conciliatory in tone and approach. We would rather stay and fight than leave. This group believes denominational structures can be redeemed.

Likewise there is a contingent of conservatives in National Capital who are restless and dissident. We are more willing to cut and run. We believe the denomination is already apostate and are ready to go a new direction.

Don't get me wrong, conservatives aren't at each other's throats, but neither do we present a united front to the church. I long for the day when like-minded Presbyterians can come together as one.

## **Presbytery of Elizabeth by Rev. Kenneth Macari**

Elizabeth Presbytery is a good place for ministry and mission! Elizabeth Presbytery is home to 50+ churches in the central to western section of New Jersey. Its boundaries spread from the cities of Elizabeth, Edison and Perth Amboy which are contiguous to New York City all the way west to the Pennsylvania border. Diversity is very evident with churches ministering to inner city, booming suburban, old industrial small towns and even, rural populations. Over one hundred language and people groups are to be found within the presbytery's boundaries.

Elizabeth Presbytery is one in which classic confessionalist evangelical witness can thrive and not just survive. The style and tone is moderate. Theological dialogue is sincere and effective. This is seen in classic confessionalist energetic participation in presbytery meetings, activities and committees or units other than just the "evangelism" committee. The current moderator of presbytery as well as the previous two moderators would be representatives of the broad evangelical viewpoint. Presbytery's Nominating Committee for commissioners to both General Assembly and the Synod of the Northeast intentionally seeks out candidates from the entire theological and ecclesiastical spectrum. This was true for me as I represented our presbytery to the General Assembly held in Long Beach, California in 2000.

The recent presbytery task force on the PUP Report was theologically and ecclesiastically balanced. Presentations were made during presbytery meetings. Discussion groups candidly brought to light the many concerns and trepidations of commissioners. A post-PUP dialogue leadership team will be formed to model the further articulation of the five theological premises affirmed in PUP. To complement this, a theology and worship group has been convened to plan for more creative, explicitly Trinitarian worship at presbytery meetings. I will be involved in both of these groups.

On another note, it is exciting to participate in presbytery's prioritization of immigrant new church developments and

other paradigms of cutting edge ministry. Currently, Elizabeth Presbytery has a strong commitment to Korean, Portuguese and Hispanic new church development. The presbytery also partners with member churches in outreach to recent immigrants from Indonesia, Ghana, Madagascar and Kenya. The latter group is the mission priority for my session at Edison Community Presbyterian Church.

Finally, there are frequent times when like-minded and like-spirited pastors gather for mealtime prayer and fellowship. These times focus on mutual encouragement and accountability. More activities like this are in the works. All in all, the Presbytery of Elizabeth is a good place for the classically confessionalist evangelical to minister.

## **Presbytery of East Tennessee by Rev. Malcolm M. King III**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a denomination in crisis. We are losing members at an alarming rate. Undesignated giving has dried up so much that the denomination has cut back on its missionary personnel and staff support for mission. And far too often, instead of working together to proclaim the gospel message to the world, PCUSA pastors and members find themselves apologizing for how "others" in this body are hurting the cause of Jesus Christ.

At some point I realized that I couldn't wait for someone else to do something to help the congregation I am serving, or this denomination in which I have been ordained. If I wanted change, if I believed that Christ our Lord was calling us to rise above our theological and institutional differences, and if I really wanted to experience the abundant life Jesus offers instead of drowning in this chaotic mess, then I had to find some way to act, if only on a very small scale.

And so I did.

We have 77 churches in the presbytery, and we are evenly split between conservative and liberal congregations. Generally, the smaller congregations are more conservative, while the larger congregations are more liberal, or "middle of the road," with the exception of Signal Mountain which is both our largest and most conservative congregation.

I began by inviting our Wednesday night Bible study group to examine closely the PUP report as it was being presented to the General Assembly, and I encouraged every session member to make this study a part of their Lenten journey. The study was difficult. We struggled to understand some very convoluted arguments and often found ourselves in deep disagreement with the PUP arguments we did understand. But we completed our task and one of the results of our journey was a congregation with many members who knew more about our

denominational connection (or lack of it) than they had known previously.

The session took this study as an opportunity to sit down and list what we think is essential for a Church of Jesus Christ that desires to be faithful to Scripture. And we shared that list with our congregation and asked them for input. We didn't stop there, however.

Acting on a challenge given by Gerrit Dawson at the 2005 Coalition Gathering, our small, nine member session contacted the session of the largest congregation in our presbytery (East Tennessee) and invited them to sit down with us and talk. We asked them if we could share with them our understanding of what should be essential for a Church of Jesus Christ. We had no intention of "converting" them, and no intention of setting up some para-presbytery alliance. Our only goal was to let a sister session know what we believed and why we believed it, so that our work together in the future might be more productive and faithful. And, after many attempts to find a place and a time that would be convenient to all concerned, it was agreed that our session would leave immediately after worship one Sunday and drive 3 hours to meet with our sister session.

We opened with prayer. Members of both sessions made opening comments about what we believed and how we thought of ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ. And then we gathered around tables to enable each session member to articulate his or her current thinking on the essentials of faith. After much discussion we offered everyone the opportunity to pray and then we gathered to break bread together.

That initial meeting encouraged me to contact other ministers in our presbytery to find out what their sessions were doing to determine what they thought to be essentials of the faith. So far we meet on a regular basis for a light lunch and heavy conversation about what God is calling us to do in this part of His vineyard. And we have tentatively set up an October meeting for multiple sessions to gather and discuss the essentials of our faith.

While presbytery meetings are opportunities for one or two elders of a session to meet and greet with elders of sister sessions, there is seldom room for doing theology or talking about faith. What I hope we will learn to do is find a place where a deeper understanding can be found regarding what we believe as Presbyterians and how we can live as members of this denomination.

Now that the PCUSA is post-Birmingham, a part of our conversation session-to-session will most likely take up some of the responses to the work done by the General Assembly—work that has perhaps deepened the crisis before us. Where this conversation will take us I have no idea. I appreciate, however, the recently published Declaration of the Constitutional Presbyterians to help us center our conversation around Scripture and the

Confessions, while being faithful to the Book of Order and its claims on us.

Our engagement with sister sessions and our plans for future engagements has energized our session and they have asked me to offer a 13 week sermon series based on the 13 affirmations made in the Declaration of Constitutional Presbyterians. It is our hope that as Ordinary Time winds down and we enter Advent, that this series will enable us to start the Church year with a new attitude and a renewed sense of hope that we are being faithful to our commitments to the God we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To Him be all glory, honor, and praise.

## **Presbytery of the Peaks by Rev. Dr. Robert McRae**

A little over a year ago a group of pastors and elders in the Presbytery of the Peaks began a support/network group which we call Believers United. We meet regularly as a group of about 20 or so folks to give encouragement and support to each other and to plan ways that we might move forward faithfully in the PCUSA.

With its office in Lynchburg and with 139 congregations within our borders, the Presbytery of the Peaks is the result of the merger of two former PCUS presbyteries, Fincastle and Blue Ridge, as well as eight predominately Black UPCUSA churches from Southern Virginia. Peaks is a mix of theologies and ideologies ranging from the very conservative to the extremely liberal.

If the decisive votes on ordination standards (particularly G-6.0106b) in recent years are any indication, the grass roots of Peaks hold firmly to Biblical standards. In 1997 we voted 139 to 86 in favor of Amendment B (G-6.0106b). In 1998 the vote was 68 to 160 to reject an attempt to delete G-6.0106b. In yet another vote in 2001 Peaks rejected a further attempt to delete G-6.0106b.

In Believers United we seek to be a Presbyterian renewal network for sessions and individuals within the Presbytery of the Peaks, as well as, an encouragement to those in other presbyteries. We held a presbytery-wide conference on sexuality and the PUP report in the Fall of 2005.

Since 80% of the congregations in the Presbytery of the Peaks have fewer than 100 members, and many have no pastoral leadership, we felt that communication was an important role for Believers United. We have sent out three one page, 8 1/2x 14 newsletters to every installed pastor and clerk of session in the presbytery informing them of important issues and suggesting resources. These can be viewed at our web site: [www.believersunited.org](http://www.believersunited.org).

In our presbytery, GA commissioners are nominated by the nominating committee but no information is given to the presbytery on their qualifications for selection. One of the sessions in Believers United passed an overture to

request that nominees be required to respond to questions about their knowledge of Scripture and the Confessions and whether there were any areas of the Constitution they did not support, specifically G-6.0106b. Although the overture lost in the vote at presbytery, we realize that many presbytery commissioners were unaware of the process and the need for the overture. We hope as the newsletter continues to raise issues, presbytery commissioners will recognize their responsibility to know and evaluate the qualifications of the GA commissioners they elect.

In the wake of the Birmingham GA, four regional gatherings were held in the Presbytery of the Peaks, at which time our general presbyter and one or more of our four commissioners sought to interpret GA actions. Our Believers United network was represented at each of the four gatherings and challenged the GA commissioners' interpretation that "nothing has changed." This, even though PUP member Barbara Wheeler was asked on the floor of Peaks Presbytery in November, 2005, whether an affirmative vote on PUP would make possible the ordination of unrepentant, practicing homosexuals and whether this would be a change in PCUSA standards. She said, "The short answer to that question is 'Yes'."

In seeking ways that we might move forward faithfully, one pastor in Believers United and the session of the church he serves has sent an overture to the presbytery affirming G-6.0106b as the standard for ordination/installation in Peaks Presbytery with no exceptions.

Regardless of the PCUSA stance or that of the Presbytery of the Peaks, at Believers United we are encouraging pastors and sessions to find ways to let it be known that we intend to hold to all constitutional ordination standards, especially G-6.0106b: "fidelity in the marriage of a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." We hold that the church as the Body of Christ in any age is forever called to raise up valiantly a standard against the erosion of an ever-changing culture. In the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever."

### **Presbytery of Middle Tennessee by Elder John Boone**

A loosely knit and organized group of folks have come together in the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee to try to foster the historical and traditional faith. We have met together for luncheon meetings and have used e-mail for discussion of issues and to stay in contact.

An overture to change our church's ordination standards and the potential effects of the Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity tended to actuate our coming together. A local chapter of the Covenant

Network active in our presbytery also caused some to feel the need for a countervailing presence in our presbytery.

We feel particularly blessed that our efforts to "get the church out" and encourage a "no" vote on the overture brought to our presbytery to change the ordination standards, resulted in a defeat of that overture by close to a 2 to 1 vote.

We have found that we are a diverse group in backgrounds, styles of worship, theological underpinnings and geographical settings. We have also found common ground for working together, however, with Scripture as our (and the Church's) guide for faith and practice. Our getting together and working together has encouraged us and has given us hope for the future. We anticipate our group staying together, staying in contact with one another and working together to effect a more Biblical position in our presbytery and the PCUSA.

### **Presbytery of Mississippi by Rev. Michael Herrin**

There seem to be quite a few folks in the PCUSA who say the PUP report didn't really change anything. They say that it strengthened presbyteries' abilities to examine candidates. They insist that the PUP report wasn't a big deal. If there are any of these folks in the Presbytery of Mississippi, they are a tiny minority. Before, during and after the General Assembly, this presbytery has been overwhelmingly united in its opposition to PUP, and to any dilution of our constitution's ordination standards.

Before the General Assembly, the presbytery submitted an overture suggesting some critical changes that needed to be made in Recommendation #5 of the PUP report. The presbytery's main concern was that, in allowing candidates to declare "scruples," the PUP report did not make any distinction between a candidate's belief and practice. Candidates have always been allowed some leeway in their beliefs, but they have always been required to "be governed by the church's polity and abide by its discipline." The presbytery offered amendments to the PUP report that would have restored this necessary and historic distinction between belief and practice, and the presbytery advocated strongly for their adoption. Neither the GA Ecclesiology Committee nor the General Assembly plenary took our advice, and PUP was approved, granting sessions and presbyteries the ability to allow candidates to ignore clear constitutional mandates.

In preparation for such an outcome, the presbytery also took steps, before the General Assembly even met, to mitigate the disastrous consequences of PUP. We approved a press release, containing a brief summary of the seven overtures that the presbytery sent up to the General Assembly. In the press release, we announced our belief that Scripture is the Word of God and God's guide to us for worship and life. We condemned the PCUSA's

one-sided attempt to punish Israel through a policy of divestment. We announced our stand on the Biblical and confessional standard of marriage as between one man and one woman. We announced our belief that life begins at conception and thus our firm opposition to abortion, except in the rarest of cases.

And, of course, we announced our intention to uphold Biblical, confessional, and constitutional standards for ordination. We stated clearly that we would “not allow practicing homosexuals, adulterers, or anyone engaged in sexually immoral conduct to be ordained and/or installed as deacons or elders in any congregation of the Presbytery of Mississippi.” We stated that we would “not allow practicing homosexuals, adulterers, or anyone engaged in sexually immoral conduct to be ordained and/or installed as ministers of the Word and Sacrament by the Presbytery of Mississippi.”

After the General Assembly’s decision to adopt PUP, the presbytery held a called meeting on July 13. At that meeting, we adopted the following resolution:

The Presbytery of Mississippi does hereby,

Declare that the action of the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in the passage of Recommendation 5 of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force Report, is a grievous error seriously lacking Biblical, Confessional and Constitutional integrity, and of such magnitude that it places the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in a state of constitutional crisis, requiring that the Presbytery of Mississippi re-evaluate the nature of its relationship with the General Assembly,

Reaffirm its strong conviction that all constitutional requirements for ordination, including G-6.0106b, are binding on all the sessions and presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.), and none are subject to being considered “inessential” by any governing body of the Church,

Reaffirm its resolution that no exceptions to the requirement that all deacons, elders and ministers must “live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness” will be allowed within the jurisdiction of this Presbytery, and

Resolve that any governing body of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.) which abrogates this requirement has broken fellowship with the Presbytery of Mississippi. Ministers from such unbiblical, unconfessional, and unconstitutional presbyteries will not be received for membership in this presbytery unless they personally affirm their belief in and their willingness to be governed by this requirement.

After adopting this resolution, the presbytery appointed a task force to explore what other steps we need to take during this time of constitutional crisis. The task force is

currently meeting and will report to the next stated meeting of presbytery on October 19.

## **Presbyterian Campus Ministry by Rev. Randy Bare, Westminster House Executive Director**

As recent articles in the New York Times and other papers around the country have demonstrated, there are some new wineskins in Presbyterian Campus Ministry. After decades of decline, God is breathing new life into decaying campus buildings and the ministries they house. Over a century ago, the PCUSA had a national strategy. Follow the students who have grown up in our churches as they enroll in the burgeoning State Universities. Invest major dollars into new facilities that will house programs for those students, the church’s future leaders. The PCUSA took great pride in campus ministry: “the oldest continuing mission beyond the local congregation.” Today, that pride has long since evaporated. Funding cuts, focus on congregational survival and intra-denominational conflict has led to a desperate situation. Land and buildings that our visionary forebears sacrificed to purchase so that campus ministry could happen have been sold. Those that are left are often crumbling, years of deferred maintenance having taken their toll.

But at the University of California, Berkeley, the story is different. The foresight of our Presbyterian predecessors gave the PCUSA a large property in a prime location in the heart of the campus. Coupled with new Board leadership and a campus minister with a vision for reaching students and faculty, this ministry went against the trend.

The Vision of Westminster House is inspiring:

- Engage the campus community with the good news of Jesus Christ.
- Encourage personal spiritual growth through Bible study, worship, fellowship, and service.
- Offer a welcoming residential community for students, staff and faculty in keeping with the Christian tradition of hospitality.
- Provide opportunities for students and faculty to act and witness for social justice in the spirit of Jesus and the prophets, through advocacy, seminars, conferences, travel to third world countries and work with the poor and oppressed.
- Create a flourishing center of cultural and theological exchange in which the great themes of “mere Christianity” can be celebrated, discussed, critiqued, embraced, and enacted.

The problem was how to find the funds to make this ministry happen.

The San Francisco Chronicle put it this way in a recent article on Thursday, August 24, 2006:

As college students across the country return to campuses over the next few weeks, more and more will be moving into church-sponsored dorms—a trend that can trace its roots to the corner of College Avenue and Bancroft Way in Berkeley. There, just across the street from the UC Berkeley campus, the Presbyterian Church renovated its Westminster House campus ministry building a few years ago and added a dorm for 125 students. Besides a room, students there are offered Bible study, theology classes and social justice projects.

It was a success at Cal, where student housing is always an issue, and soon religious denominations around the country took note. Mark Elsdon, the pastor of Pres House at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, which is building a 280-bed student residence hall, said many campuses looked to Berkeley and said that if it could be done there, it could be done anywhere. “Berkeley isn’t the friendliest to organized religion,” Elsdon observed. Now, a growing number of campus ministries—from UC Davis and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo to universities in Wisconsin and West Virginia—have added student housing or are exploring the idea. The movement has been fueled by a rising interest in religion and spirituality among college students and a push by campus ministries to find new sources of revenue to support their programs and to attract more students.

Many of the ministries saw the success the Rev. Randy Bare had at Westminster House and sought his advice—giving him an additional calling. He now works half-time running a consulting company that works exclusively on housing projects with nonprofit ministries and churches near college campuses. He said he is involved in projects all over the country, including in Berkeley at the United Methodist Church, which plans to open student housing with 112 beds in fall 2008. The church dorms generally house several students together in a suite, have student residential assistants as supervisors and offer much of the traditional programming that is found in campus dorms elsewhere. Westminster House is kicking off the year with an ice cream social and a group trip to Angel Island.... Although the ministries hope to attract more students to their programs and services, there is “no religious test” to live there, and residents can be anything from agnostic to a range of religions, from Catholic to Jewish to Muslim,” Bare said.... Those who think they will be giving up on the college experience shouldn’t fear, said Frances Loreto, 18. “I was sort of hesitant because I first thought it would be less social than the dorms,” she said. “But the parties here have been pretty exciting. I felt that I wasn’t missing out on any of the partying experience.” Some students and their parents said they were attracted by the ties to religion in the student housing. When Rosemary Lopez of San Diego heard that her son Gilbert wanted to attend UC Berkeley, she told him, “Over my dead body.” “We are born-again Christians,

and we had heard of it as a liberal, radical campus,” she said. Then a friend told her about Westminster House, which also opened a second location for 44 students nearby. “We felt a little more comfortable with that,” Lopez said. “It seemed like a safe environment. Knowing that there is a Christian presence on the Berkeley campus makes us feel more comfortable.” The cost for students—about \$10,700 for a double at Westminster House—is slightly more than that of traditional campus dorms. The housing provides a regular revenue stream for the ministries. With churches cutting back on funding for campus ministries, they are looking for other sources of revenue, and their valuable property near campuses provides the perfect opportunity.

Clearly, not every campus will be able to capitalize on this trend. But, in a field of ministry so strategic, yet so chronically underfunded by our denomination, the risk of developing student housing and new program space, like the risks our forebearers took a century ago when they purchased these properties, will make it possible for today’s college students to be tomorrow’s leaders in the church.

### **Presbytery of San Joaquin by Rev. Dr. Clark Cowden, Evangelist Presbyter/Stated Clerk**

The Presbytery of San Joaquin has begun the long, hard process of attempting to move from a regulatory agency model to a mission agency model. The most important issue facing the North American church today is its missional transformation. People, programs, services, conversations, and structures all need to be transformed. Since no one really knows for sure how to do this, where do we begin? We begin with prayer, with listening to the Scriptures anew, with listening to each other, looking to see what God is already doing in our communities and doing our best to join the missional work the Lord has already begun.

We began in January of 2005 by voting to take a year’s sabbatical from our regular presbytery meetings. We scheduled a series of conversations and begged for feedback from our congregations around missional issues. We spent a year learning, exploring, and listening to one another. At the end of the year, we shared what we had learned, and discovered three things:

- We still have a LOT of learning to do. We have only scratched the surface. Every time we gather, we need to spend time learning together.
- We are passionate about starting new churches. We have two New Church Developments that we are moving forward on, and we will work together to help these flourish.

- We needed to enter a new time of discernment around some confusing denominational issues.

So, in January of 2006, we formed a Denominational Cabinet. About 15 people met for two hours, once a month, for prayer, Scripture, and discussing the implications of the proposed PUP report. We learned a lot from each other, saw our differences, discovered differing viewpoints that we did not know existed, and tried to understand what God was doing. We wrote a paper to attempt to give guidance to our presbytery. This group concluded their work in June of 2006.

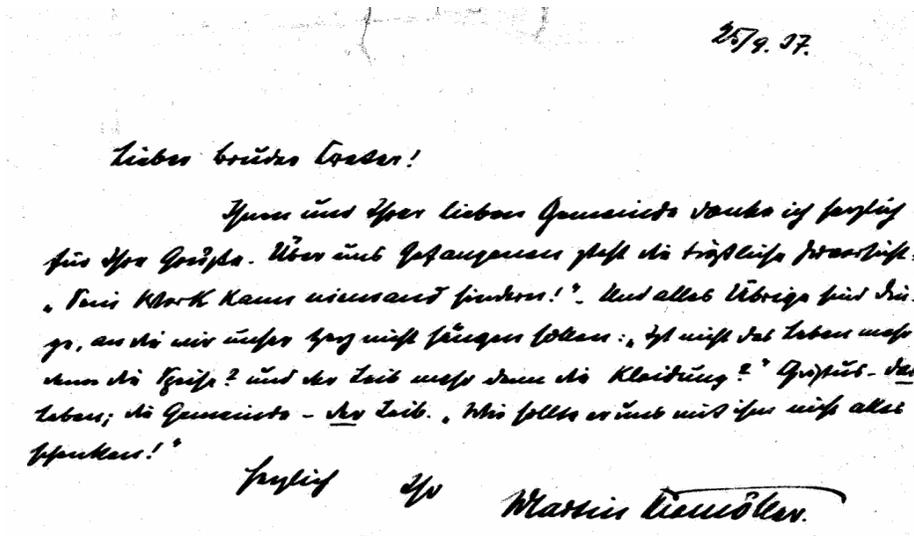
In August of 2006, we started our next phase. We opened up the Denominational Cabinet to others in the presbytery, brought in more people, and called it the Future Discernment Team. This team is meeting once a month for two hours, discussing the implications of the actions of the General Assembly. While greatly beneficial, it is like trying to get solid footing on shifting sand. Every few

weeks, new letters and opinions are produced that stir our emotions, that cloud our understanding, and that make us question why we can't seem to get clear, consistent answers.

We are learning to live together in a new way. We are building a new kind of connectionalism. We are trying to learn to live in ambiguity and uncertainty and faith. It's hard to be in ministry when you wake up every morning, just waiting for the "other shoe to drop." What will it be today? But, God is faithful, Christ is standing in the middle of the mess with us, and we are attempting to wait upon the Lord for our directions. In spite of the tornado swirling around us, we know Jesus is with us in the eye of the storm. We know that God is in control of the future, we know that He is in control of the church, and we know that He is in control of the future of the church. We put our hope and trust in Him!

## Postcard from Martin Niemoller from prison

Martin Niemoller was a member of the German Confessing Church that authored the Barmen Declaration along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth and others. Niemoller was imprisoned for his leadership in the Confessing Church. This postcard was sent from prison to Pastor Fritz Creter whose daughter Christa Drummond lives in Blacksburg, VA. His words from prison should encourage us in our struggles today.



Dear Brother Creter;

I thank you and your parishioners with all my heart for your kind words. Above us prisoners stands the reassuring word: "This Word no one can hinder." Everything else are things we should not "hang our heart on." "Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" Christ: the life, Church: the body. "How should he not give everything through him?"

With all my heart,  
Martin Niemoller

# The Church Militant

By Susan Cyre

This is a revision of an article that first appeared in *Theology Matters* in Jan/Feb 1997, Vol 3, No 1.

It would seem that society's expectations for peace have never been higher. People believe that peace is attainable in international relations, especially now that the Cold War is ended. Critics of the War on Terror argue that the war is unnecessary and may in fact be the cause of the terrorists' hostility toward this country or at least be the fuel that continues to enflame it. Peace, they argue, will come when the war is ended.

We demand peace in public discourse. We view personal peace as our "right" and we believe that the church should be a stronghold of peace.

In a world in which personal relationships appear more fragile, jobs are less secure and even our safety is at risk, people sometimes attend church in search of a "peaceful harbor" in the storms of life. They want peace *somewhere*. The church they believe may be the last stronghold of peace. The continuing debates and crisis over homosexual ordination means, however, that even the church does not offer the peace they seek.

Peace should indeed be a goal of human relationships. But, the natural human yearning for peace can also be so seductive that it becomes an end in itself rather than a gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. And visible peace will be ours when "there is no more mourning, or crying or pain" (Rev. 21:4). We should have a vision of peace. Scripture gives us a vision of the way things will one day be in Christ.

Our strong desire for peace, however, can cause us to deny the spiritual battle that Truth provokes until Christ returns and "every knee will bow" (Phil. 2:10). Jesus told his disciples for the here and now, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt 10:34). Peace is a gift from God and does not exist apart from the struggle for Truth. For peace to exist, Truth must reign, sin must be abolished, and every knee must bow.

## Revisionists Argue that Peace is Only Possible when Objective Truth is Denied

In the church, those who promote a revisionist truth-is-relative worldview insist that it is *not* when God's objective Truth reigns that we will experience peace. Rather, they hold that it is when the existence of objective Truth is set aside that a new era of peace will be inaugurated. They argue that peace will reign when people are free to define truth for themselves according to their own context and experiences. Each person must be allowed to pursue his or her own road to happiness. The PUP report hopes to achieve peace when every presbytery and every session does what is right in its own eyes.

The truth-is-relative worldview with its lure of peace has gotten a foothold in public politics, as well. In earlier days, the American public expected political candidates to debate and engage one another to peel away the layers of hyperbole, half-truths, and deceptions, to arrive at the truth. Today candidates that seriously engage their opponents are often labeled "mud-slingers." There is instead a demand that campaigns be "civil," which means never challenging another candidate's truth claims.

James Lileks, syndicated columnist, commenting on the election a decade ago wrote, "It's as though the nation's political discourse was being supervised by some incorporeal, all-seeing mom, Thou shalt hurt no feelings. Thou shalt play nice."<sup>1</sup>

It is this same cry for "civility" and "non-polarization" which permeates the church. We no longer pursue truth with vigorous debate and clear thinking. Instead, there is pressure from truth-is-relative folks that an accommodating peace and unity are preferable to the continuing struggle to witness to the Truth in word and action. Even the writers of the Presbyterian hymnal have done their part in helping us shape a new view of ourselves by eliminating hymns that describe the church as militant and its members as soldiers. No more "Onward Christian Soldiers." Instead, we are to re-imagine ourselves a kinder, friendlier people whose God wants us to experience peace and fulfillment.

## Truth-is-relative Seeks to Harmonize Dualisms

The truth-is-relative folks prop up their claims by asserting it is objective truth that causes conflict. Liberal theologians argue that belief in objective Truth causes wars and strife as competing truth claims vie for first place. In the past, they argue that men defined truth from their experience and then used their patriarchal power to enshrine it for all time as divinely revealed. Men's truth was dualistic: it spoke of truth and falsehood, righteousness and sin, good and evil, creator and creation. Men's truth drew boundaries and the boundaries caused division and the division led to bigotry, intolerance and ultimately to war.

According to Walter Ong this male perspective is built into their genes. Ong writes in *Fighting for Life* that "male hormones produce combative behavior." "Preaching Jesus' gospel of faith, hope, and divine love, the church has from the beginning been very much at home in the antagonistic male world...."<sup>2</sup>

The revisionist folks propose a god reflective of their experiences: a god without boundaries, holistic, nurturing, inclusive, emotional. Revisionists have found support for this new god in Chinese and other Asian religions that emphasize harmony—with oneself, with the earth and with the community.

## Biblical Faith *does* Draw Boundaries

Biblical faith, with its foundation on objective revealed Truth, understands that peace will come when sin is banished completely and Truth reigns. The revisionist truth-is-relative view argues that when we harmonize good and evil without distinction or boundary then divisions will cease and peace will reign. Biblical faith recognizes an earthly struggle between two forces; the revisionist view seeks to harmonize the forces.

A. W. Tozer, well-known 20th century pastor and author, eloquently described the difference in the worldviews,

Our fathers believed in sin and the devil and hell as constituting one force; and they believed in God and righteousness and heaven as the other. These were opposed to each other in the nature of them forever in deep, grave, irreconcilable hostility. Man, so our fathers held, had to choose sides; he could not be neutral. For him it must be life or death, heaven or hell, and if he chose to come out on God's side he could expect open war with God's enemies. The fight would be real and deadly and would last as long as life continued here below.

....How different today: the fact remains the same but the interpretation has changed completely. Men think of the world, not as a battleground but as a playground. We are not here to fight, we are here to frolic. We are not in a foreign land, we are at home. We are not getting ready to live, we are already living, and the best we can do is to rid ourselves of our inhibitions and our frustrations and live this life to the full.<sup>3</sup>

Biblical faith witnesses to a great spiritual battle being fought here on earth and the church is called to enter the fray and contend for the Truth. The Confessions proclaim, "[The church militant] still wages war on earth, and fights against the flesh, the world and the prince of this world, the devil; against sin and death." (5.127) And in Ephesians 6, Paul instructs believers to put on the armor of God in order to stand firm, "for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."

## Spiritual Struggle is Part of the Church's Call

Many in the church today are impatient over the struggle to ordain those in same-sex relationships; a struggle that has continued for three decades and has no end in sight. Clergy are weary of having had to engage in this struggle throughout their entire pastoral ministry. They long for peace so that they can do "the work of the church"—evangelism, discipleship and missions.

Scripture however, does not tell us that the church will be that "peaceful harbor" of spiritual growth and good deeds. Paul tells pastor Timothy to "command certain men not to teach false doctrines." Paul explains that "the goal of this command is love." After all, Paul says, "the church of the living God, [is] the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

Timothy had to take sides in the battle for the Truth. And he did. Fox's *Book of Martyrs* describes Timothy's murder by the mob as he testified to the Truth:

Timothy was the celebrated disciple of St. Paul, and bishop of Ephesus, where he zealously governed the Church until AD 97. At this period, as the pagans were about to celebrate a feast called Catagogion, Timothy, meeting the procession, severely reproved them for their ridiculous idolatry, which so exasperated the people that they fell upon him with their clubs, and beat him in so dreadful a manner that he expired of the bruises two days after" (Fox, p.7).

Timothy denounced the pagan celebration not because he was intolerant or had a pagan-phobia but out of love. He could have turned a blind eye. Love, however, demands commitment and commitment demands testimony. Testimony to the Truth that saves. Failing to contend for the Truth does not demonstrate love toward our brother or sister. It expresses apathy and hatred. Failure to contend for the Truth means we deny God's forgiving grace to those caught in a web of lies.

Unless we remember that objective revealed Truth by its nature draws a boundary—a boundary which the forces that reject God and His Word will seek to blur and destroy—we will allow our weariness at the battle's unending demands and our frustration at not achieving a final victory, to draw us into the fold of relative Truth or lead us to withdraw seeking quieter, more peaceful vistas. If we understand, however, the radical nature of the

Gospel that stands in judgment over us and our culture, then we will not be so prone to despair and weariness when the next skirmish begins.

Scripture tells us that while the power of sin in our lives is broken, its presence will not be blotted out until we enter glory. We face the spiritual war within ourselves every time the alarm clock goes off in the morning. We still have that old rebellious spirit which opposes God and his ways. It is no wonder then that the church is torn by struggle. It is a church militant, not fighting the forces outside itself, but fighting the sin inside. The issue of Truth was never one the world cared much about. The question, “What is truth?” will always be decided at the foot of the cross.

Presbyterian professor of church history, Richard Lovelace writes, “[Jonathan] Edwards, the foundational theologian of revival, held that any movement is more like a street fight than a Spring morning. That is because the essence of revival is spiritual warfare, taking ground away from the world, the flesh, and the devil.” He quotes, J. Edwin Orr, “When there is spiritual awakening, the first person to wake up is the devil.”<sup>24</sup>

The apostle Paul saw the struggle from God’s viewpoint when he wrote to the Corinthian church, “I hear that divisions exist among you: and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may become manifest among you” (1 Cor 11:19). The Second Helvetic Confession testifies, “For thus it pleases God to use the dissensions that arise in the Church to the glory of his name, to illustrate the truth, and in order that those who are in the right might be manifest.”

Lovelace observes, “There is a drama in the struggle of truth against error which apparently pleases God more than the peace of those who have left the battle to seek relief among the like-minded. Like jewels against dark velvet, real Christians shine best when they are confronting darkness.”<sup>25</sup>

There are, of course, rules to this warfare that are detailed in Scripture. We are to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, not bear false witness, let our actions give evidence of the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22); always remembering, “The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (Jas 1:20). This is definitely not a battle where the end justifies the means. For the Christian, the means are in fact the only thing we are called to attend to—the end is God’s purview.

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture describes the church as engaged in a great spiritual battle. No page of Scripture describes a church at rest. For three short days it looked as if the forces of rebellion had won. But then in the early light of dawn as the haze lifted over the battle

field, the cry went out that the tomb was empty—sin had been defeated, peace *would* one day reign.

Yet the skirmishes go on, and we are called to choose a side and not fear the battle or shrink back in search of peace and contentment because our goal is love. We dare not fear the battle within the church or within ourselves. To reject the spiritual battle is to reject our own battle as we struggle between our flesh and spirit—between our fallen nature and our new being in Christ. To reject the spiritual battle is to reject the special mission of the church as the “pillar and support of the truth.” Only the church can proclaim and defend the Truth. If we follow the One who is the Truth, then our warfare is as inevitable today as the cross was on Golgotha 2000 years ago. Not to understand that is not to understand the Gospel. To fear it or shrink from it, is to reject the One whom we claim to serve. The church is not a peaceful harbor away from storms. It is ground zero. Satan is the father of lies and will attack the Truth wherever it is proclaimed. As long as the church seeks to be the “pillar and support of the Truth”; it will be attacked.

## Practical Steps

Our calling, out of love, is to struggle for the Truth so that all men and women might hear the life-giving Truth of Christ. Some practical ways to testify to the Truth of the Gospel and bring renewal are:

- Protect the flock that has been entrusted to us by preaching the whole gospel, teaching the people to read and know the Word and the doctrinal truths of the faith. Don’t pretend that the church is a peaceful harbor. Teach people the truth that discipleship involves “picking up your cross” and following Jesus. Remind them that all of the disciples except John were martyred.
- Meet regularly with other clergy and elders in your presbytery who testify to the truth of Christ in order to pray, encourage and work together for the renewal of this part of the kingdom.
- Be an active member of presbytery by attending meetings and serving on committees.
- Make whatever changes to the process are necessary in order to insure that presbytery commissioners have an opportunity to elect GA commissioners who know Scripture, know and support the confessions, know polity, and are aware of denominational issues. It is our responsibility and calling to send GA commissioners who will seek the truth of Christ. We are not required to honor longevity in the presbytery or to seek theological balance or any other criteria that has been proposed by some in selecting commissioners. There has long been a disconnect between the actions of GA commissioners and the votes of presbyteries. In order for there to be renewal, we have to fulfill our responsibility and calling to choose leadership wisely.
- Work with denominational renewal groups to find qualified potential nominees for national level positions such as the GA Nominating Committee and the GA Permanent Judicial Commission. Work with national

renewal groups to write and pass overtures to the GA that will correct inequities at the denominational level.

1. James Lileks, "Voters Want the Candidates to Play Nice and Smile," The Roanoke Times, October 18, 1996, p A9.
2. Walter Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) p 52, 169.
3. Warren W. Wiersbe compiled, *The Best of A.W. Tozer: 52 Favorite Chapters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978) , pp 84-86.
4. Richard Lovelace, "The Ruin of the Church: Struggle as a Sign of Spiritual Revival" in *Renewal Life*, Fall 1995, Vol 2, No. 1,
5. Ibid.

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