

Theology Matters

The Crucifixion of Ministry

by Andrew Purves

If Jesus is understood to be a continuing moral influence, but nothing more, then everything in faith, life and ministry is now up to us to actualize and achieve. Jesus, in fact, becomes more or less powerless, with no continuing ministry. He has become abstract and theoretical; he is an idea which we have to en flesh as best we can to make him and his cause actual. We have to incarnate him in order to make him effective. Having given us the moral code and the ministerial imperatives, he now sits on the sidelines of the cosmos, arms folded, as it were, waiting for us to do something, even though he might cheer us on when we do well. A cheerleader Christ is the best we can hope for. But he is not involved in the “game.” This is the devastating consequence for ministry of reductionism in Christology. And it is a tragic recipe for a ministerial experience that is now inevitably located between guilt and burnout. We labor under the weight of the ministerial imperative: do it. But we soon discover we can’t do it at all.

Get Jesus wrong by consigning him to be only metaphorically alive as a continuing moral influence and what is left is an experience in ministry of which many of us are all too familiar: depression, guilt, and exhaustion. We get trapped into the grind of thinking

that it’s all up to us. The prospect is daunting, to say the least.

Alternatively, Jesus is God active in the life of the world, in our personal lives, and in ministry at every turn. The problem is we rarely think radically enough concerning Jesus. We have him tamed, boxed, and safe. But as he is the living and reigning Lord, the question now becomes: What is he up to and how do I get in on whatever it is that he is up to? The answer is twofold: the classical doctrines of the vicarious humanity (and ministry) of Christ and our participation in Christ through the bond of the Holy Spirit. Everything is cast back on to him, on to God who is present for us by the Spirit in, through, and as Jesus Christ, yesterday, today, and for ever. In this case, because ministry is what he does, ministry is properly understood as gospel rather than law, as grace rather than as obligation.

The first and central question in thinking about ministry is this: What is Jesus up to? That leads to the second question: How do we get “in” on Jesus’ ministry, on what he’s up to? The issue is not: How does Jesus get “in” on our ministries?

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Rev. Andrew Purves, Ph.D., is Hugh Thomson Kerr Professor of Pastoral Theology, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and author of numerous books and articles.

This is my way of restating a very old doctrine, thought to have been stated first by Ignatius of Antioch from the period at the end of the first Christian century at the close of the apostolic age: where Christ is, there is the church (*ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*). Or to put that in a way that mimics how Karl Barth once said it: it is not Jesus Christ who needs our ministries; it is our ministries that need Jesus Christ. So my dictum is: wherever Christ is present (real presence!) in ministry, there my ministry may be found. This is the meaning for ministry of John 15:5, “Apart from me you can do nothing.”

Exploring these issues brings us to the difficult awareness that our ministries must be displaced by the ministry of Jesus. This is more than relinquishment, however. We must be bumped aside, firmly, perhaps mortifyingly. For us, this means the death of our ministries. The reason is that this displacement is not an invitation to let Jesus take over by letting him “in” on our territory. Rather, this displacement has the character of mortification—otherwise, most likely, we would never let go of our grip on our ministries. What we think we should do, and can do, and in fact do in ministry, is put to death. Why? Simply put: too often they are in the way. Our ministries are not redemptive, even when conducted from the best spiritual, therapeutic, and moral motives. Only the ministry of Jesus is redemptive.

I am calling this process of displacement “the crucifixion of ministry” in large measure because crucifixion carries the notion of redemption in Christian thought. As the crucifixion of Jesus is staggering good news of our salvation, now also the crucifixion of ministry by the process of painful displacement by the ministry of Jesus, likewise, is staggering good news—for us, the ministers, and for the people we minister among. The crucifixion of ministry is the ground for the redemption of our ministries, and for us, the ministers, the source of hope, joy, and peace in our service.

None of this should come as a surprise: Jesus, after all, told us to take up our cross daily—to die daily—and follow him (Luke 9:23). Paul writes of being crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:19). Why would our ministries not be included in that crucifixion? The Christian theology of baptism reminds us that as we have died with Christ, so also we will be raised with Christ (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). The sum of all Christian living is given for us by Paul at Colossians 3:3—we have died, and our life is hidden with Christ in God. No less so should we expect that our ministries too should need to die, even to be killed, that they may be raised with Christ.

The notion of the crucifixion of ministry opens up the deep theological root of what ails us. One time, when

speaking about this at a conference, a minister approached me afterwards with the observation, “You just nailed me!” (An evocative allusion, I think.) I find, however, that seminarians rarely internalize and appropriate the lesson of the crucifixion of ministry and the theology behind it. Perhaps we have to be bashed about a bit in ministry before we are able to learn the lesson that the crucifixion of ministry is God’s gift. Also, I think that while the theology of the vicarious humanity and ministry of Christ is not so difficult to grasp at a cognitive level, it is difficult to internalize in such a way that one’s ministry is deeply and redemptively formed by it. For this to happen, the truth of Christ in our stead must convert us in heart and mind, as in pastoral practice. We have to move from thinking about our ministries—and all the attendant concerns for strategies, programs, and processes that make ministry ostensibly more effective—and think rather of Christ’s ministry in our place, and what it means that we are connected to him and what it is that he is up to. The form and content of ministry then takes an explicitly Christological content and shape. And all this is hard for us because it means that ministry is no longer about us and our skills. It is now about the *real presence* of Jesus Christ, whenever and wherever in his gracious freedom and love he is Emmanuel, God *with* us. It is the actuality of his ministry that makes our ministry possible.

A story to make the point might be helpful here. My wife is minister of a small, urban Presbyterian congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was sitting with my adult children during a moderately dull Christmas Eve service. The attendance was very poor for some reason; the choir seemed a bit off and unenergetic; a couple of under-fives got free from their parents right at the beginning of the sermon, and were noisily roaming the pews—charming certainly, but it was hard to concentrate on what my wife was saying.

As we reviewed the service later I confessed to her that tonight I really struggled with my annoyance at small congregations. I recall thinking, “I bet my friend Craig Barnes at Shadyside is putting on a great show tonight.” (Shadyside Presbyterian Church is a fairly large and prosperous congregation in town. Dr. Craig Barnes is the senior minister and a colleague on the faculty of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.) And then a truth dawned on me! I had spent part of the day writing this, and, now, in the evening I had already forgotten what I had written. I wanted excellence in musical and homiletical performance. My attitude had been after the fashion: what will they do to give me a Christmas Eve spiritual high? With a prideful sense of entitlement I was focused on the ministry of the musicians and the preacher. With sadness, I realized later that I had not been attending to what it was they were pointing to, namely, the ministry of God with and for us, Emmanuel, whose birth we were there to celebrate, and

who, in the Spirit, was present there with us. The service was not about the choir's performance, the quality of the sermon (which actually was very good), or the meditative calm of the sanctuary. It was about what God was up to then...and here, now...and I had missed it. I had, so to speak, been looking at the finger rather than at what the finger was pointing to.

Experientially, what is happening to us, we who are the ministers of Jesus Christ in the mainline Protestant churches? Many of us are professionally, spiritually, and financially depressed. The figures produced by the studies only serve to quantify what we may have bitterly experienced for ourselves. Something is very wrong, and the costs—personal, spiritual, familial, and financial, as well as congregational—are terrifying. For example, one respected study concluded that around forty percent of Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod clergy suffer from mild to severe burnout. There is no reason to doubt that these figures render the experience across the denominational spectrum. Our stress levels are at a medically significant level, as various studies have recorded for a number of decades. In fact, denominational health insurance agencies report that the medical costs for clergy are higher than for any other professional group! Another report, a summary of which was written by Michael Jinkins of Austen Theological Seminary, and published by the respected Alban Institute in 2002, is poignantly entitled "Great Expectations: Sobering Realities." Excessive demands on time, conflicts within congregations and between ministers and members, loss of one's personal spiritual life (the study discovered that of the sample group, 62% of ministers have little spiritual life!), and loneliness, account for a deep malaise within our professional and personal lives. Experience in ministry for many of us is more or less contained in a category labeled "hell," at least for much of the time.

Ministry has always been hard. Weariness is par for the course. Spiritual embattlement is to be expected. We are not in it for the money, and the social status of ministers now-a-days is mostly low and likely to remain so. I am told that we rank somewhere just below a factory foreman on some sociologist's ranking, which may not be so bad! But once-held professional status on a par with the classical professions of law and medicine is mostly long gone. We are tired, often over-worked, usually over-stressed and under-paid, theologically confused and, dare I say, somewhat ill-educated for the tasks before us, often bored, and probably guilty for feeling this way. So: ministry has always been hard, but now for many of us it feels just a lot harder. Whatever the reasons, in some denominations, around one third of ordinands leave the ministry after five years, never to return. It's that bad! Still, many of us nevertheless continue to drag ourselves out of bed in the morning and labor on.

While I recognize the danger of sweeping generalizations, it would appear that something has gone very wrong with regard to the education, nurture, and employment expectations of ministers. And heaven knows, those of us in theological education go round and round on what to do. We hear the pain stories term in and term out from our Doctor of Ministry students. Candor insists that we have been and are part of the problem, just as we must be part of the solution. It will be no surprise to those who know of me and my writing that I believe that a broadly liberal theology, and especially a dilution of classical Christology and the attenuation of interest in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, have produced a couple of generations of ministers with a theology that seems to have failed at the congregational level. The theologians in mainline seminaries have too often bitten the bait of accommodation to what Enlightenment philosophies have said we could or could not believe. As the Enlightenment project is now in serious, hopefully terminal, decline, the theological generations who hitched their wagons to its engine are now in disarray. Reductionism in theology, we are discovering—reducing God to fit modern, predetermined human categories of experience—does not grow congregations or lead to fulfillment in ministry.

And that's where I come in to tell you what you already most likely know and prayerfully hope to be true: "Jesus is the answer." The bumper sticker had it right. I believe that the answer to our malaise and disappointments in ministry is theological. It has to do with God, and how we connect to whatever it is that God is up to. But it is theological in a particular way. My concern is not with complex concepts and arguments, but with the practice of God and our sharing in it.

In summary fashion this is the argument. 1. The ministry of Jesus is the ministry of God. That, at the end of the day, is what most of our credal and confessional language concerning Jesus Christ is about. 2. Jesus' ministry is at once historical, present, and future. It is not just a past influence reaching into the present. 3. By sharing in the life of Jesus (the doctrine of our union with Christ, which is the principal work of the Holy Spirit), we thereby share in his, that is, God's, continuing ministry. In other words, it is he, not we, who primarily "do" ministry; and by the gift of the Spirit we are joined to him to share thereby in his life, and thus, in his ministry in some regard. Wherever Christ is, there is the church and ministry.

Ministry kills us, not least with regard to our ego needs, desire for power and success, and an enduring wish to feel competent and in control. It does not take us long to discover that we cannot heal the sick, raise the dead, calm the demonized, guide the morally afflicted, sober up the alcoholic, make loving the wife beater, calm the

anxious, pacify the conflicted, control the intemperate, have answers to all the “Why?” questions, give the teenagers a moral compass, and so on, and all the while grow the congregation and keep the members happy. We preach and teach, do the round of pastoral visitations, and administer the congregation’s life, while the sore heads more often than not remain sore headed, the stubborn remain stubborn, the quarrelsome remain quarrelsome, and the stupid seem to get no wiser. Meanwhile people continue to die.

I suspect that there are two major crucifixions or seasons of dying in ministry. The first, as I noted briefly, happens early on, as the studies now show. After seven years in higher education, the great expectations of service in the Lord’s vineyard after a few years turn often to sad and angry disappointments. About one third of those in early ministry leave, never to return. This is a major death, full of deep disenchantment and at times embittered recriminations. It is a personal, fiscal, and ecclesiastical disaster.

The second crucifixion is more subtle, less dramatic, and it probably moves in on us more slowly than the rapid, stunning disillusionment that characterizes the first crucifixion. But it is more profound, and in its way more deadly. But once endured and understood for what it is that is happening to us, it may usher in a deep, that is, resurrected, theological conversion that really makes ministry possible for the first time. It is now the deep death, if I may speak that way, of our ministries. I suspect there are no surveys to consult here, and the time-frame is likely different in each case. I am doubtful that it is reducible to a paradigm of death and dying. There are no Kubler-Ross-like category equivalents. My impressions of the general characteristics, however, go something like this: the first crucifixion survived (that’s a curious notion!), our minister begins to realize that some serious skill learning beyond what the seminary offered first time around is now urgently required. It may take the form of a Doctor of Ministry degree: peer learning, theological retooling, and skill enhancing. Some of us travel for a while in the rich pastures of spiritual renewal. We become Merton groupies, walk the labyrinth for a season, and light candles in midweek Taize services—and all, let’s be clear, to our spiritual good. It is likely, too, that we may begin to make our way along the career track. Workshops, conferences, seminars are grist to the surviving minister’s professional mill.

Then somewhere along the way—ten, fifteen, twenty years out, who knows when, or what events precipitate the process—a terrible awareness may begin to dawn on us. Now the hurt is deeper than before, because it goes all the way down to the core of our being. It is a theological crisis—for that’s its real nature. I can’t do this. I can’t convert them. I can’t heal them. I can’t

give them hope, or make them happy, or pray like Peter, or preach like Paul. I can barely understand the theology books anymore, even when I carve out the time and energy to try to read them. My drawer full of pastoral, homiletical, and administrative skills is impressive; and the weight of experience is a great comfort to me, for I now know how to survive in a parish. But something inside tells me that the whole ministry enterprise is turning to sawdust. Inside I feel I can’t bury any more babies, listen to any more divorcing couples, conduct marriages for any more pregnant girls, listen to any more tales of cancer diagnoses, conduct funerals for any more friends, or preach the Beatitudes for the third time. And I have had too many arguments over the color of church carpets, the brand of cookie for VBS, and bulletin covers for Mother’s Day. The yoke is too heavy and the burden is too great to bear. Maybe, too, I discover that I am just plain bored.

Here’s the issue: Does God show up any more? Because if he doesn’t, I can’t carry the load, make the faith exciting, or meet the siren calls for my attention any longer. My knees are buckling under the weight of my obligations. My compassion recoils; it is killing me. And if God does show up, do I have the theological and spiritual apparatus to understand what is happening? If God does show up, what does that mean for what I am supposed to do and say?

I think it takes great courage for the seasoned minister to admit her second crucifixion. I suspect many of us don’t. It may get buried beneath ecclesiastical bonhomie. Outward good cheer masks the inner death of compassion. Keeping busy, running what Eugene Peterson once called “the shop,” may usefully occupy our days. A Doctor of Ministry class once insisted with me that more or less 90% of their time was taken up with administration of one kind or another. What ever happened to Word and sacraments, I wondered?

The darkness of Gethsemane is never welcomed. Its nights are too long and fretful, its prayers are too hard, its waiting is too lonely, and its tears are too stained with blood for a welcome. We stare into the spiritual void, into the theological abyss; we discover the terror of our personal *tohu wabohu*, and vaguely hope that the Spirit of God is hovering over us. Indeed, it takes great spiritual, theological, and professional courage to look this second crucifixion in the eye and name it for what it is: this is the death of *my* ministry.

Henceforth, faithful ministry—that is, God-glorifying, Spirit-empowered, world-transforming, and kingdom-announcing ministry—is now only possible on some other basis. And this, most likely, is a basis I dare to suspect that for many of us neither the seminary, nor the purveyors of ministry skills, nor the demanding judicatory leaders have ever told us they know anything

about. This other basis to be worked out now is a sharing in the continuing ministry of Jesus, for the church and her ministry can only be found where Jesus has already showed up. He has to show up, carry the load, and do the job of saving people, for I am no longer capable or available. I have discovered a terrible, limiting truth about myself: I am not the Messiah. I don't do salvation any more. As a minister, I am being crucified; I am gone, out of the picture. The ministry of Jesus the Lord is displacing me from the throne of my ministry, and in every meaningful sense it is a death. Success is not a predicate that meaningfully follows crucifixion. I am no longer Lord in my own house.

Now there is a point to make here that is very important and which deepens our understanding of what is really happening to us. The problem is precisely *our* ministries, as if we own them, as if they are all about us. Let us not delude ourselves. We deeply invest in our own success—certainly we might wrap it up in pious language to soften its pridefulness. We wish after professional fulfillment. We enjoy the applause lines and the warm affirmations when they come. We are human, after all. We are all, more or less, co-dependent.

Thus far I have placed the weight on the side of our experience of ministry, and looked at some of the consequences. Yet it is a mistake to leave the impression that our ministries are crucified only by the back-breaking burdens of responsibilities and obligations. Remember, the Word of God is combative: it is a sword; Yahweh Sabaoth is Lord of Hosts, commander of the heavenly army. God will not be timid about getting us out of the way. So there is more to say: I believe it is now theologically necessary to go beyond what I have already said, and to say now as clearly as I can that when necessary, *God* kills our ministries. The problem is that we have reversed the ancient axiom. In the practice of ministry it now becomes: wherever my ministry is, there is Christ and the church.

If we are in some measure not very successful in ministry (however that is measured), God doesn't have too hard a time getting us out of the way. In fact, it may be a great relief when God brings us to the ministerial Jordan: cross and let me do it, God in effect tells us; stay here on this side and it's an early and resentful retirement. It may be that the burdens of office are so heavy that we welcome with open arms being bumped aside by Jesus. I suspect many of us find ourselves here.

If we aspire to be ministerial royalty, however, the crucifixion by God may have to be much more brutal. (Amusing, I think, that we speak of "pulpit princes," "cardinal rectors," and the like.) Certainly some of us

are upwardly mobile, moving seamlessly from associateships in prosperous congregations, under the guiding mentorship of able pastors, to solo pastorates and then to larger congregation head of staff positions, where the cycle repeats itself. Those of us who are "successful" ministers should be especially aware that the mortification we should expect may be particularly cutting. We might be a long time dying. The embedded pride and the myth of competence may be very deep. Too easily we may have slipped into the business of purveying religious merchandise to choosy consumers, with measurable productivity and identifiable success. Our situation, in which case, is dire!

In either circumstance, whether we are successful or not, or just somewhere in the middle, we get in the way. Whether we minister with just some competence, or with a truck-load of competence, with small success or with much public acclamation (and the salary to go with it), we are brought by God to the point where our reliance on what we think we can do is killed *by God*.

The second crucifixion means that we have a chance of seeing, maybe for the first time, the glorious freedom of ministry in terms of Galatians 2:20: *I, yet not I, but Christ. Everything* is summed up here. *Everything* is now to be rebuilt on this foundation. This is the hermeneutic of the gospel in every regard. Jesus Christ stands in for us; as in faith, and worship, so now also in ministry, he does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We are bumped aside by God—with whatever forcefulness is required—so that Jesus stands in our place, offering the worship, discipleship, faith, and ministry that we thought we could offer, but in truth, can't. As I said at the beginning, this displacement, this crucifixion of ministry, is staggering good news. For ministry is now possible for us, probably for the first time, as gospel.

The crucifixion of ministry is good news!
1. Conceiving ministry as *our* ministry is the root problem of what ails us in ministry today. 2. Ministry, rather, is to be understood as a sharing in the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ, for wherever Christ is, there is the church and her ministry. The effect is that our ministries are displaced by Christ's ministry—thus the notion of the crucifixion of ministry. In more formal terms, we need to recover the paramount significance of two weighty but quite neglected doctrines: the vicarious humanity and ministry of Christ, and our union with Christ. The Christian identity and the faithful practice of ministry are not possible on any other terms.

Note: This is a slightly amended form of "Introduction" to a book under contract with IVP, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, scheduled for publication late Summer 2007.

Suffering, Courage and Theological Conflict: Learning from the Cappadocians

by Gerald McDermott

Every major denomination today is beset with conflict over the meaning of sexuality. Most of us have learned that the debate is finally not about sex but the identity of God, the nature of salvation, and the question of how we know God. Those of us who have entered the battle are weary of fighting. Some of us have suffered for the positions we have taken. We are loathe to continue fighting, but we also know that the battle is far from over.

It is a source of no little comfort to know that this is not the first time that the church has been rent by theological controversy. One of the first such times was the fourth century during the Trinitarian debates, when the identity of God was disputed in more fundamental fashion than today. We know that the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil's longtime friend and disciple Gregory of Nazianzus) were critical to the victory of orthodoxy. But we may not know the reluctance they felt and the suffering they endured in order to secure final victory.

There was fierce opposition to Nicene orthodoxy for more than a half-century after the great Council of 325. In 370 the Emperor Valens, an Arian, threatened Basil with plunder, exile, torture and death unless he changed his stance. Basil's reply was, "None of these things hurts me. I have no property, the whole world is my home, my body is already dead in Christ, and death would be a great blessing" (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:901). Things were so bad in Constantinople in 379 that mobs attacked Gregory of Nazianzus in the streets for his orthodoxy, and Arian monks broke into Gregory's chapel and profaned the altar.

Churches were corrupted by heresy and cultural compromise. Basil complained that ministers no longer dared preach what the laity had grown unaccustomed to hearing. The churches, he lamented, had cast aside the teachings of the Fathers and the apostolic traditions. Their leaders, he said, were more skilled in rhetoric than theology; they taught the wisdom of this world but not the glory of the cross. The result was disastrous for the laity: "The ears of the more simple-minded...have become accustomed to the heretical impiety. The nurslings of the Church are being brought up in the doctrines of ungodliness.... Consequently after a little

time has passed, not even if all fear should be removed, would there then be hope of recalling those held by a long-standing deception back to the recognition of the truth" (Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 311-12).

Because of the triumphs of heresy and its advocates' ruthless methods, the orthodox were reluctant to join the battle. Gregory of Nazianzus hated conflict and was indecisive. Gregory of Nyssa was temperamentally timid, "born for study and speculation" (Schaff, 3:904). All three of the Cappadocians started their adult lives as monks who delighted in the isolation of the mystical life, removed physically and psychologically from the dangerous and depressing conflicts of the Church. As Basil put it, "[My inner] longing urges me to flight, to solitude in the mountains, to quietude of soul and body.... But the other, the Spirit, would lead me into the midst of life, to serve the common weal, and by furthering others to further myself, to spread light, and to present to God a people for His possession.... So Christ did, who, though He might have remained in His own dignity and divine glory, not only humbled Himself to the form of a servant, but also, despising the shame, endured the death of the cross, that by His suffering He might blot out sin, and by His death destroy death" (Schaff, 916).

For the most part, the Cappadocians had to be cajoled into service. Every one of them was ordained against his will (in the days when the overwhelming acclamation of the laity was considered the voice of God; the same thing happened to Augustine as a presbyter, and to Ambrose and Athanasius as bishops). After his forced ordination, Basil fled to the monastic community to avoid trouble with a bishop, but then returned when persuaded by another bishop that he needed to fight Arianism. Basil then forced his brother Gregory to become bishop of the village of Nyssa because he needed his help; Gregory of Nazianzus was coerced into the presbyterate by his aged father, who was himself a presbyter and needed pastoral help. Later this same Gregory was compelled by Basil to become bishop of an obscure market town that was nevertheless important in the ecclesiastical fight against Arianism.

It was only by the Cappadocians' willingness to suffer that orthodoxy prevailed. Basil braved threats on his

life. Because of Gregory of Nyssa's orthodoxy, he was deposed and driven into exile. Gregory of Nazianzus stood firm as Patriarch of the orthodox church in Constantinople in the midst of mockery and persecution. Despite his hatred of travel, he accepted Theodosius' later appointment as theological advisor that took him to Arabia and Mesopotamia. The result of their courage and eloquence was the final victory of Trinitarianism in 381 at the Council of Constantinople, when Nicaea was reaffirmed and the Holy Spirit was declared to be fully divine.

There are several lessons we can learn from these brave theologians. First, we must not shy from controversy. As Martin Luther once said, "If we are not fighting at that point on the line of battle where the enemy has concentrated his forces, we are not real soldiers in the army of Christ." And as Stephen Crane wrote in the *Red Badge of Courage*, it is not those who are unafraid who are brave, but those who are afraid but do the right thing anyway. Second, we must not assume someone else will fight for us. God may have called us "for such a time as this." If we don't proclaim the faith once

delivered to the saints, who will? Third, we must not decline because we assume we are not made for conflict. Neither were the two Gregorys (Basil was more contentious by nature). Few of us enjoy conflict, but God calls all of us to leadership in the truth. Fourth, we must not permit personal conflicts within orthodox ranks to keep us from joining the contest. Gregory of Nazianzus bitterly resented Basil's making him bishop without his consent. But he swallowed his hurt and spoke publicly for truth regardless. Fifth, we must embrace the cross. As Paul wrote, "Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable...endure suffering" (2 Tim. 4:2, 5). Finally, we must find joy in Jesus' promise that He is building His church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt 16:8).

Rev. Gerald McDermott, Ph.D. is professor of religion at Roanoke College, Roanoke, VA and teaching pastor at St. John Lutheran Church, VA.

Heresy, History and Hope

by Eric Laverentz

Students of the conflict in the PC(USA) know two things. First, they know that the conflict regarding ordination is symptomatic of differing perspectives on the authority of Scripture. The other issues which plague the denomination: abortion, the exclusivity of Jesus Christ, Trinitarian language and the mandate to evangelize are symptoms born of differing understandings of the authority of Scripture. Secondly, they know that Presbyterians are not alone in this struggle, that it crosses denominational lines, particularly in the mainline Church.

Few people would argue that the conflict is simply a matter of differing, but equally valid theological persuasions, or redesigning denominational structures. The struggle, rather, is with what might charitably be called a departure from orthodoxy or perhaps more pointedly, a heresy.

What then is this departure? I have labeled it *hyper-humanism*. Humanism helped give rise to vast strands of the Reformation and, in particular, the Reformed witness. Humanism, in general, helped train the

Church's eye upon the dignity and worth of each human being and the power of rational thought and reasoned investigation. Most of the Reformers, including John Calvin, Zwingli, and Melancthon were trained in humanist thought before beginning their theological education. The Christian humanist position is that human experience and tools are *informative* for understanding God. The hyper-humanist position is that human experience and tools are *determinative* for understanding God. Like most departures from orthodox belief, this is not so much a matter of being entirely in the wrong, as it is a matter of emphasis. Hyper-humanism over-emphasizes human ability and potentiality, as it de-emphasizes our sinful nature. Perhaps due to this over-emphasis, hyper-humanism also de-emphasizes the holiness and otherness of God, especially His potential for wrath and the consequent need for atonement. John Calvin, in his 1538 Catechism, correctly identified these two trends of thought when he claimed that "the carefree disregard of God's (his) vengeance and false confidence in our own capacity," are the "two most harmful plagues of all."¹

The upshot of hyper-humanism is that as the human capacity is exaggerated and the holiness and otherness of God is mitigated, the distance between humanity and God is lessened. The fruit of this perspective runs throughout American Protestantism but perhaps most tellingly in our slackening view of Scriptural authority. The latter is an issue about which there is a steady evangelical cry and wail. It has been often asserted that a low view of Scripture is at the root of our denominational struggles, but I think if we pull back the curtain in this regard, we will see a hyper-humanist perspective standing behind it.

The Church is in the midst of a battle against heresy, in the same way that She battled Arianism, Pelagianism, Donatism. Therefore, we ought to examine how these struggles may inform the current one. Some people may shrink from applying the term “heresy” to the current struggle; however, even our unwillingness to employ the term is grounded in hyper-humanism. Human beings are fallible not only in practice but in belief. Scripture teaches this as does experience. We are all subject to heresy, even the ultra-orthodox, as I will soon argue. Theological battles, even among God’s children, can quickly grow ugly and divisive. It is unclear if even Peter and Paul were able to heal the rift between them which opened at Antioch. Perhaps what we need as a Church is to once again develop a taste for theological red meat as we become reawakened to the inherent danger in falsehoods which are close to the truth, whose error is by degrees. Emil Brunner argued this point as he defended Karl Barth against charges of “heresy-hunting.”

I have made the point that most theology is made necessary by heretics using the terms of the true faith, while meaning something other than the plain words can signify. Not open heresy but hidden heresy is the real danger in the Church; it is the internal enemy, even more dangerous than the external.²

Assuming that we are now joined in a battle against an enemy whose presence in our theology constitutes a danger to the Church, what can be learned from Scripture as well as previous struggles which might now guide us?

First, a theological struggle of this scope and magnitude may last hundreds of years. A common refrain among evangelicals engaged in the struggle is “I am tired. I have been fighting this battle for my entire life in the Church.” Being 35 years old, I am relatively new to the struggle. I want to be careful to honor those who have labored long and endured much. However, the struggle against hyper-humanism has been going on since the Garden of Eden when Eve elevated her own experience over God’s Word. Marcion was a 2nd century example of one who elevated experience over the Word. He rejected the OT and much of the NT to craft a God

“who had nothing to do with law, wrath, or judgment, but was instead only a god of grace, love and acceptance.”³ One might also argue that the struggle over the authority of Scripture grounded in hyper-humanism has some roots in Schleiermacher’s apologetic approach to Christian theology. One can certainly see some evidence of the hyper-humanist perspective in the modernist-fundamentalist controversy which rent asunder the Presbyterian Church. The struggle was certainly in the mind of B. B. Warfield when he defended Scriptural authority, writing:

The issue raised is whether we are to look upon the Bible as containing a divinely guaranteed and wholly trustworthy account of God’s redemptive revelation, and the course of his gracious dealings with his people; or as merely a mass of more or less trustworthy materials out of which we are to sift the facts in order to put together a trustworthy account of God’s redemptive revelation and the course of his dealings with his people.⁴

It is important that in our struggle for truth that we do not “grow weary of doing good, for in due season, we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:8).

Arianism limped on for close to 150 years. When discussing that 4th century heresy, it is often mentioned that the Unitarian Paul of Samasota was deposed as bishop of Antioch in 269 AD for asserting that Jesus Christ was born as man alone. Arius’ view that Christ was the first-born of creation began to stir approximately 50 years later. He was condemned by the Council of Nicea in 325, however, that did not eliminate his doctrine’s appeal. Arianism grew in prominence and the Nicean condemnation was affirmed at Constantinople in 381. Arianism continued on, however, among groups such as the Goths, the Vandals, and the Burgundians well after Constantinople.

Pelagius’ denial of original sin and belief that human beings possess the free will to choose good over evil and effect their own salvation began to gain a wide audience as early as 390 AD. Pelagius’ views were condemned by a council at Carthage in 418 and then again, without discussion, at the third ecumenical council at Ephesus. Semi-pelagianism, however, rose up to take its predecessor’s place until it was finally condemned by the Synod of Orange in 529.

Donatism, the view that the efficacy of the sacraments is dependent upon the character of the minister, arose in 312 AD with the conversion of Constantine. The sect was condemned finally by the Emperor Honorius in 412. Their civil rights were removed in 414 and they were persecuted unmercifully by the Romans for decades afterward. However, it was not until the Muslim conquest in the seventh century that the Donatist sect finally disappeared.

Even after the formal movements of Arianism, Donatism, and Pelagianism were denounced by the Church, their teachings continued to be promoted by some individuals and congregations. Even today, some people accept their teachings. Given the long time frame with which the Church has wrestled with movements such as these, we can anticipate a similarly lengthy effort against hyper-humanism. We must prepare ourselves as well as the future generations of Christians for a prolonged struggle and not lose hope when a particular clash does not affirm orthodoxy.

Second, our task is not to preserve the Presbyterian Church (USA) or any particular denomination, but to witness for truth. Sitting around a table with several ministers closer to retirement than I, we discussed the future of the PC (USA) with great anxiety. As several alternative plans for reform were being dissected and dismissed, one of the men who had served the Church faithfully for many years looked me in the eye and said, “You young guys with all the ideas just make sure you protect our pensions.” It is difficult to reconcile this kind of perspective with that of Martin Luther who when asked to renounce the clear witness of Scripture said, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” The Church, as an institution, derives its authority from Jesus Christ, its ministry from the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst, and its teaching from Scripture. Everything else, it would seem, is penultimate. This includes Presbytery meetings, General Assemblies, and the Board of Pensions. One thinks of the somewhat rough, but effective techniques of the Reformers in various towns across Europe, who whitewashed their Roman Catholic sanctuaries, broke out all the stained glass, and threw the idols out into the street. They were not concerned with preserving their heritage or a structure, but with promoting and preserving right religious practice. We would do well to avoid their obvious extremes, but perhaps we could use a little of their passion.

Calvin’s methodology for the reformation of the church may be instructive for us here. His deep appreciation for the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ and realism about human potential, led him to believe that the task of the Church was not to make absolutely perfect the body of Christ, let alone the world. This, of course, does not mean that he descended into the quietism of inaction. Instead, however, he maintained that the task of the Church was to meet the enemy sin wherever it is found and labor against it, for the glory of God. This is not to say that Calvin was unconcerned with the results of these efforts. He was certainly a strategist, but he did not allow himself to believe that his strategies would carry the day or usher in the Parousia. Barth summarized Calvin’s approach to reform saying, “For Calvin activism meant moderate action after due consideration. He had come to terms with the fact that the world resists the gospel. He did not dream of any dramatic breakthrough or victory for

his cause. His concern was to establish the most favorable possible conditions for the conflict.”⁵ Our question should be similar, “How do we establish the most favorable possible conditions for the conflict with hyper-humanism?” Quiet acquiescence, hopeless acceptance, or disgusted disengagement do not seem to be as faithful an option as persistent, grace-filled, strategically planned and executed witness.

Third, we should realize that heresy often serves to reform the Church by forcing it to clarify its theology and ethics. The great danger in a call to the Church to root out heresy is that it may be taken as license to act out against our brothers and sisters in Christ who we believe have lapsed into error. The word “heresy” itself raises the specter of fencing the communion table, heads and hands locked in wooden stocks, and burning at the stake. However, in God’s economy of redemption, even heresy is not without virtue as it forces the Church to clarify its beliefs and reform from within. Karl Barth, who in no way can be considered a milquetoast in staring down heresy, made the point of the need for heretical voices in moving the theological task ahead:

All heretics are relatively heretical, so even those who have been branded heretics at one time or another and condemned for their avowed folly and wickedness must be allowed to have their say in theology.... God is the Lord of the Church. He is also the Lord of theology. We cannot anticipate which of our fellow-workers from the past are welcome in our own work and which are not. It may always be that we have especial need of quite unsuspected (and among these, of quite unwelcome⁶) voices in one sense or another. So history, the history of the Church, of doctrine and of theology, enters the theological workshop and becomes a theological task.⁷

History seems to bear out Barth’s thesis for the place of heretical voices in the “theological workshop.” The clearest statements of Athanasian Christology, which have formed the basis of the Church’s Trinitarian understanding for nearly 1600 years, are found in Athanasius’ four *Discourses Against the Arians*. Both Donatism and Pelagianism forced Augustine to consider more deeply the doctrines of salvation by grace alone, the sufficiency of Christ, as well as the nature of the Church. B.B. Warfield claimed that Augustine “was not only ready for, but was looking for the coming controversy” with Pelagius.⁸ Warfield also pointed out that as Augustine’s prayer amongst the Pelagian controversy was not so much for victory over his nemesis, who he even hoped might be reclaimed, but for purity:

Pray, therefore, for us that we might be righteous, -- an attainment wholly beyond a man’s reach, unless he know righteousness, and be willing to practise (sic) it, but one which is immediately realized when

he is perfectly willing; but this cannot be in him unless he is healed by the grace of the Spirit, and aided to be able.⁹

There may be few better examples of this phenomenon of heresy sharpening and clarifying orthodoxy than the circumstances which gave rise to Calvin's first edition of the *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Although the circumstances are somewhat reversed here, since it was the 'Lutheranism' which Calvin was promoting that was considered heretical by the governing powers. Nevertheless, Calvin was careful to point out that it is not his religion which was "new."¹⁰ It was instead, Calvin argued, the religion of those "wicked persons" whose persecution of his comrades "by prison, exile, proscription, and fire" which was the departure from God's truth.¹¹ Calvin pointed out these persecutions in his "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France," claiming his desire to see such persecutions end as well as "to vindicate from undeserved insult my brethren whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord..."¹² as the rationale for the construction of his great theological work.

In addition, any good five point Calvinist can also point out their theology arose in direct response to the five points of Arminianism.

Given this historical record, perhaps those of us who wrap ourselves in the mantle of orthodoxy should consider what elements of our theology may be infected with the hyper-humanist perspective. We should not presume to remove the speck from our brother's eye without removing the log from our own (Matt. 7:5, Lk. 6:42). What golden calf have we allowed into our midst, indeed, perhaps even worshipped that has caused God to "send this plague upon his people" (Ex. 32:35).

It is possible that hyper-humanism is quite simply one natural endgame of Christian humanism. Perhaps it is only natural to expect that any emphasis on the dignity and worth of the human being in our theology, even as rightly inspired as the *imago Dei*, would eventually result in an attempt to seize the fruit off the tree in the center of the garden so that we might "be like God." Could it be naïve to assume that an emphasis on the use of the original languages and historical context as keys to understanding Scripture, as well as the "inalienable right of private judgment" would not eventually result in a lower view of Scriptural authority? This does not mean that we throw out the Christian humanist baby with the bath water, but it does mean that we might open up a little the spigot of Scriptural truth and Holy Spirit-led inspiration, allowing some fresh water to pour into the tub.

Fourth, we must trust that in Jesus Christ the victory has already been won and that God will preserve His Church against every foe and even misguided friend.

God is the Lord of the Church and He will preserve it. Christ's words assure the Church of ultimate victory, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). John 15 is also instructive here:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (v. 4-6)

The word heresy comes from the Greek word *hairesis*, which literally means "choice." Heresy is a willful choice for something other than Christian truth. In making such a choice, those who indulge themselves in the heresy are fostering a cleavage between themselves and God. While God is gracious and makes great allowance for repentance, there are consequences to persistent, willful choices which run counter to God's revelation. Among these consequences is the withering of ministry and witness. Indeed, the effectiveness of our ministry and our ability to bear authentic fruit comes only via our union with Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This passage, however, is not simply a Divine warning against the perils of life outside the vine of Christ. It is also a promise to those endeavoring to be continually grafted into the Vine, that they need not agonize over the apparent triumph of those not similarly grafted. For those who endeavor to live and minister outside the Vine, the prospects appear rather grim. They will have no victory. Those grafted into the Vine ought to pray earnestly, not in self-righteous piety, but in sincere pleading for God's mercy first for self and then for others.

Where, then, does this leave us? By seeing the current struggle in the Church with perhaps a longer historical view, we can discern a truer picture about our current condition. This should fill us with the hope of the inevitable victory. Indeed, we already have "the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57). We should also possess the spiritual confidence to search our own hearts as we boldly witness to the truth of Jesus Christ. Gustaf Aulen closed his historical study of the atonement, *Christus Victor*, with what might best be labeled a benediction. Let it serve that same purpose here:

For my own part, I am persuaded that no form of Christian teaching has any future before it except such as can keep steadily in view the reality of the evil in the world, and go to meet that evil with a battle-song of triumph.¹³

Lord, may it be so.

- ¹ John Calvin, "1538 Catechism" tr. Ford Lewis Battles, found in Calvin's First Commentary, ed. I John Hesselink (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) p.10.
- ² Emil Brunner "Nature and Grace," found in *Natural Theology*, tr. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1946) p.19.
- ³ Randall E. Otto, "The Problem With Marcion: A Second-Century Heresy Continues to Infect the Church," *Theology Matters*, Vol 4, No. 5, Sep/Oct 1998, p. 1.
- ⁴ B.B. Warfield, "The Inerrancy of the Original Autographs" found in *The Princeton Theology*, ed. Mark Noll (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001) p. 270.
- ⁵ Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1995) p.111.
- ⁶ The "voices" to which Barth is specifically referring are the voices of the 19th century, with many of which he had strong disagreements.

- ⁷ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, tr. John Bowden and Brian Cozens (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001) p. 3.
- ⁸ B.B. Warfield, "Introductory Essay on Augustine and the Pelagian Controversy," found in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers Vol.5*, ed. Phillip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999) p.xxii.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p.xxviii.
- ¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960) p. 14-15.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, p.9.
- ¹² *Ibid*, p. xxxii
- ¹³ Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, tr. A.G. Herbert, *Christus Victor*(New York, NY: Collier Books, 1969) p. 159.

Rev. Eric Laverentz is Senior Pastor at the Presbyterian Church of Stanley, Overland Park, KS.

The Renewal That Is Changing the PCUSA: Part II

Presbytery of Philadelphia by Rev. John Berstecher

In 2001, the Presbyterian Coalition issued a call for evangelicals to network with like-minded Presbyterians through regional gatherings patterned after the national event. A few pastors who attended the Coalition Gathering, took the call seriously and began to work together. The following spring, Bethany-Collegiate Church in Havertown, PA, outside Philadelphia, hosted the first "Regional Gathering of Evangelical Presbyterians" (RGEP). It featured Dr. Rob Gagnon, Associate Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, as its first plenary speaker. The event also included 4-5 practical seminars to strengthen and equip the ministry of local churches.

The RGEP currently holds two events a year, one in the spring and the other in the fall, always at the Church on the Mall, Plymouth Meeting, PA. It attracts between 150-200 pastors, staff, lay leaders, and church members from eastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey and Delaware. In our brochure, we describe the event as "a time for worship, celebration, instruction, fellowship and encouragement." The events begin in mid-afternoon for learning, followed by fellowshiping and networking over the dinner hour, concluding with Christ exalting worship in the evening featuring a combined choir and a message delivered by a significant voice for evangelical Christianity.

On November 14, 2006, at our fall gathering, Michael Carey, Pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church, in

Satellite Beach, FL, led the afternoon workshop on the Purpose Driven model for ministry. Michael's congregation hosts the annual Purpose-Driven Church Conference. Our evening speaker was the Rev. John Guest, rector of Christ Church at Grove Farm near Pittsburgh. John has led evangelistic crusades around the world and was instrumental in the founding of Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry.

Other speakers at previous RGEP events include: Craig Barnes, Head of Staff at Shadyside Presbyterian Church and Meneilly Professor of Leadership and Ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; Darrell Guder, Dean of Academic Affairs and the Henry Winters Luce Professor of Missional and Ecumenical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary; Arnold Lovell, Senior Pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Knoxville; Dean Weaver, Senior pastor of Memorial Park Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA and co-moderator of the New Wineskins Initiative; Jim Berkley, Director of Presbyterian Action; Andrew Purves, the Hugh Thomson Kerr Professor of Pastoral Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; Wallace Charles Smith, President of Palmer Theological Seminary (formerly Eastern Baptist) and Jim Logan, Pastor of Bread of Life Church in Charlotte, N.C.

Those who would like to receive information about our regional events can contact me at presbypal@hotmail.com.

Presbytery of Cincinnati by Elder Sharlyn “Sam” Stare

“**Get Changed...Get Together...and Get Going**” is a phrase that has informed and formed much of my Christian ministry. It serves as an unseen heartbeat of a group in the Presbytery of Cincinnati where I and other evangelicals find refreshment and renewal.

Rev. Sam Shoemaker, founder of *Faith At Work*, coined the phrase before I was born. My spiritual father, Dr Jerry Ross Kirk, preaches and lives Shoemaker’s words. The phrase made sense to me as a new believer. Now it’s part of my Christian DNA.

I’ve served beyond my local Presbyterian congregation since the early 1980’s. Faith at *this work* is challenging—sometimes like a foreign mission *work*. By the mid-90’s, frustrated with the overture wars, crumbling theology and general denominational malaise, I was tempted to withdraw to the safe haven of my local congregation. The Gatherings of Presbyterians in Dallas/Orlando provided encouragement and vision for me and other believers within the Cincinnati Presbytery.... “**We Got Changed.**”

“**We Got Together.**”

Our small group coalesced around two key documents:
<http://www.presbycoalition.org/>

- “Union in Christ: A Declaration for the Church”
- “Turning Toward the Mission of God: A Strategy for the Transformation of the PC(USA)” which focused on 6 key areas: mission, polity, discipline, theological education, worship and educational ministries

The documents declared “that this work of renewal will be carried on in and through the existing structures of the PC(USA) whenever possible.” While critical of the PC(USA), the Strategy noted “that all too often we[evangelicals] have been part of the problem.” The Strategy listed “frequently encountered obstacles” and “strategic goals.”

“**And We Got Going....**”

- We invited Rev. Andrew Purves, from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary to Cincinnati to help us understand what we saw as “key formation documents” from the Dallas Gathering.
- John Detterick, the Executive Director of the General Assembly Council, was known to affirm the documents. A dozen of us drove to Louisville to build a relationship with him. We shared dreams, concerns and prayer. We asked, “How can we help you to succeed?” (a good question to ask denominational leaders at any level).
- We called ourselves the ‘PSST’ (Presbytery Strategic Support Team). Our mission was to be supportive of

one another as we respond to Christ’s upward call on our lives, and to be strategically supportive of our presbytery consistent with the 1998 Dallas Declaration and Strategy. We chose not to be an “issues-oriented” group, but to be informed so that we could respond to issues, as led, individually or congregationally.

Red and White Blood Cell Work

Rev. Dr. Harry Hassall also met with us. Former Highland Park PC Executive Pastor, visionary behind Presbyterians for Renewal’s Wee Kirk Conferences and a brilliant strategist, Harry brought more clarity on “Get Going.” He spoke of the *Body* of Christ’s “red blood cell” and “white blood cell” functions.

“**Red Blood Cell**” functions are life-giving: Ephesians 4 actions that build up, strengthen, nurture, connect and support. The relational stuff brings PSST together for lunch each month and makes it a “safe place.” No one requires you to come, but you know that you’ll be missed if you’re absent. Red blood cell functions keep emails of encouragement coming. You pray for the family and congregational events of others and celebrate God’s answers to prayers. You have others *whom you trust... who are for you...who may not be connected with your congregation but care about the things you care about.*

Since its inception, PSST has been a partnership of clergy and laity, men and women. I convene the group and form the agenda each month. Unlike other denominational forums, PSST recognizes the value of having strong lay participation with clergy. A layman noted, “I think the laity bring *the seat in the pew view* that is very hard if not impossible for the clergy to get.” Another said, “I need to know that pastors (other than my own) care as deeply as I do about what’s happening in the church, and that they need me for prayer, support and action.”

PSST is there when the elders decide you need to leave.... your spouse dies.... you’re facing a huge deadline.... you’re between jobs.... you need an emergency pulpit supply.... or you’ve taken a faith-step that takes the pooled resources of several churches. PSST is there when laypersons put their faith to work and they want to share what happened. PSST knows when missionaries are in town who can share God-stories to help your church members grow as global Christians.

“**White Blood Cell**” functions defend the *Body* from threats from inside and outside. *Molding and mobilizing and mending* are all aspects of these functions.

Molding — I came to Christ with no history in the faith, reformed or otherwise. I struggled to understand the Presbyterian streams, systems and seismic dramas. Men

and women throughout the PCUSA who have mature relationships with Jesus Christ have mentored me. Locally, PSST provides a place to share such legacies and equip others. The group provides wise counsel and encouragement during the tough “white blood cell work.”

Sometimes simple information is needed. “Thank you. You’re a great ‘birddog!” “That link to the web article was perfect for my task force debate.” “The *Outlook* article really helped our church elders understand their options.” “Boy, that Amendment was confusing. You all sorted it out for me.”

More often though, “white blood cell work” leads the members of PSST to be *molded and mobilized* in spiritual warfare. Here’s a recent example: PSST took Cliff Kirkpatrick, the GA Stated Clerk seriously when he said: “...we have not altered the [ordination] fundamentals; we have the same standards as before. The [PUP] report encourages a more pastoral approach to ordination and encourages our governing bodies to do a thorough work of examining people for office.”

Three candidates for ministry were to be examined at the September Cincinnati Presbytery meeting. Usually we’d discuss who would line up to ask what questions. This time we said, “*If* someone asked questions about sexual practice, what presbytery leaders should be alerted out of respect?” We prayed and God did the rest. Three days before the Presbytery meeting, a member of PSST saw Erwin McManus’ “The Barbarian Way” video and was *mobilized* into action. The layperson shared the proposed questions with the Presbytery Moderator and Stated Clerk. The Moderator ultimately laid the groundwork for the commissioner to ask all 3 candidates the same questions:

1. about the Constitutionality of their own personal sexual practice, and
2. about whether they would support the Constitution as an ordained leader advising a Session or another ordaining body.

The lay person asking the questions did not stand alone and did not speak alone. She was undergirded with prayer and by the presence of PSST brothers and sisters in Christ.

Serious “white blood cell” work also requires *mending*— “binding up the brokenhearted” (Is. 61:1; Lk. 4:18) and healing by the Holy Spirit. The PSST group serves as a mobile field hospital and aid station when the inevitable wounds occur. God mends us — our attitudes, our beliefs and our actions. He also may change our circumstances through others, or mold others through our circumstances.

PSST members have said:

- “The fellowship has helped several of our elders and me to keep a balanced perspective on presbytery and

the larger church...[PSST] is realistic about the events and direction of our denomination, but also seeks to be edifying and positively engaged in work beyond the congregation.”

- “[As a leader in my church] I’m better informed and armed to respond to congregational questions about the actions of the Presbytery and the denomination.”
- “I had a plan, but felt defeated. The prayers of PSST sustained me through the long process.”
- “PSST provides hope in the midst of dark times. I don’t feel like the lone ranger any more.”
- “I was so encouraged when another PSSTer joined the Task Force.... Jesus did send folks out two by two!”
- “Blogging with a brother about the presbytery Transformation Process is great.”
- “The prayers and support of PSST have contributed quietly, but significantly, to the healthier function and spiritual well-being of the Presbytery of Cincinnati.”

“**Get Changed...Get Together...and Get Going**” is much more than a phrase to the Cincinnati Presbytery Strategic Support Team (PSST). Through “red and white blood cell” functions working together, God is mending, molding and mobilizing us as “contemporary apostles.” Ordained clergy and lay people are experiencing community where we help one another. We haven’t arrived, but (psst) we’re moving together in the right direction. Alleluia!

Presbytery of Carlisle by Rev. Denny Finnegan

According to the Presbytery of Carlisle web-site,

We are a Presbyterian faith community of nearly 17,000 members in 52 congregations....

We inhabit a region that includes a national civil war battlefield, a famous chocolate company, three turnpike tunnels, a state capital, and a variety of water sources including springs, trout streams and rivers. We have mountains, valleys and fertile farms. We reflect ethnic, theological and vocational diversity.... We have a history that precedes the Presbytery's founding in 1789. Our oldest congregation dates from 1724.

Even though that describes “what we look like,” that does not really tell, “who we are.” On the one hand, we have folks very supportive of the Covenant Network; on the other hand, there are folks very active in renewal groups like Presbyterians Pro-Life and Presbyterian Reformed Ministries International.

On the one hand, our Presbytery’s Mission statement is, “*The Presbytery of Carlisle exists to support our*

congregations for faithful service to God in the name of Jesus Christ"; on the other hand, when the Presbytery restructured a few years ago, they forgot to keep both stewardship and evangelism as two important "features" of the new structure "*for faithful service to God in the name of Jesus Christ*" this is not something that is just a problem of the theological "right, or left," but of many of our churches within our presbytery. And while we seem to treat each other very amiably at Presbytery meetings, the votes usually lean 45%—55%, theologically "right to left."

In response to the passage of the PUP report, those who want to see the ordination standards maintained are currently organizing themselves to accomplish three tasks:

- Take the responsibility to become better informed as to what our constitutional "essentials" are, so that we can help the presbytery and congregations hold to the "shall-s" of our polity (there are many resources available, including "questions to ask" that the Presbyterian Coalition has produced);
- Learn how to "speak the truth in love," so that we are neither a contentious nor divisive force within our presbytery; and,
- Discern how to support and encourage one another in the Lord to remain faithful to what we firmly know to be "essentials" of our faith and practice.

We are just beginning. But we hope to be an active voice in the presbytery, rather than a group of passively frustrated and angry conservatives.

One way my congregation has chosen to do this more recently was to host a meeting for elders within the presbytery to discuss the PUP report and "what it does say" versus "what it does not say," at least within our Presbytery. We had 41 pastors and elders (mostly elders) from the presbytery in attendance; our Presbytery Executive moderated the meeting. The majority of those present were "not happy" with the PUP report, nor the vote at GA.

The more we can do to "make available resources" and help facilitate "honest dialogue," the better equipped congregations will be to take a faithful stand.

Sheldon Jackson College by Rev. Dr. David Dobler

Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka has served Alaska Natives since 1878. That is old for any institution in Alaska, and we are the oldest continuously operating school in the state. Begun as a Presbyterian training school, the four-year College is named for our iconic missionary founder. Sheldon Jackson's traveling desk and binoculars, which sit today in my office, are

tangible reminders of the faith, vision, and tenacity from which the College grew.

"Alaska Education in a Christian Environment," the College's recently revised mission byline, emerged from a trustee-driven, campus-wide reflection on who we are called to be and how we speak of ourselves. The words did not come easily. The argument on "Alaska" or "Alaskan" I leave to students of Alaskana. It is enough to say that we know our place and our people. "Education" asserts that while we must be entrepreneurial and make money from our assets, our purpose is to serve and to teach.

With "Christian" began the real struggle. To serve Alaska Natives is to honor and embrace the range of Christian expression that characterized the frontier mission movement. One distinctive of Alaska is the visceral identification of particular regions, villages, and peoples with historic denominations. Sitka's earlier name, after all, was New Archangel, the capital of Russian America, and St. Michael's Orthodox Cathedral is the center of our town. Yet divisions between denominations that can be so corrosive in some locales, fade away in the Alaska Bush. If there is but one church in a village, that is where you worship and all are welcomed.

Among the many blessings I have received in my Alaska years are the sure knowledge of the unseen world, and the witness of a gentle and generous ecumenism. Presiding at the only Eucharist in an isolated Yupik village on World Communion Sunday changed forever my sense of the Real Presence of Christ.

"Christian," for the College, means non-sectarian and unashamedly Presbyterian—"Mere Christian," to borrow a phrase—or small 'o' orthodox. Sheldon Jackson College, which houses the Sitka Young Life office, requires religion courses, has a variety of Bible studies and chapel services, sends mission groups, and encourages students to attend a local congregation on Sundays. Our chaplain is staunchly Presbyterian and the chair of presbytery's Committee on Ministry. I'm pretty Presbyterian myself.

On my desk stands the icon of St. Trifon of Pechenga, a Russian layman of Medieval Novgorod. Trifon walked one thousand miles to answer God's call to evangelize the Saami people on the Arctic coast of the Kola Peninsula, near Murmansk. Established in 1573, three hundred years before Sheldon Jackson, the monastery Trifon founded lives today. Relations between the Orthodox and Presbyterians have not always been gracious, yet the ministries of St. Trifon and Sheldon Jackson, though half a world apart, exhibit the same zeal for Christ and love for the North and its people.

The “Environment” we would, like Christ, cherish and claim. One aim of Christian education is to cultivate our sense of wonder; “When I look at the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars that Thou hast established; what is man that Thou art mindful of him, the son of man that Thou dost care for him?” (Ps. 8:3-4). Faith need not fear inquiry, nor knowledge rob us of awe. To love the Lord with all our mind is, after all, a commandment.

The world that God so loved is our home and the arena of our Christian service. Sheldon Jackson College seeks to prepare students for the sake of that world, not to exploit but to serve. In earlier years the school’s motto was “Competent Christian Citizens.” While the modern ear might find that formula harsh, it does point to a classic Christian truth not lost upon traditional peoples—that humanity is expressed only through community. Our student body today is international, and the world both wider and smaller than ever, yet the proof of Christian education remains healthy communities.

Sheldon Jackson College continues as a work in progress. We continue to respond to changing needs and opportunities, have known our share of struggles and challenges, and witnessed generations of leaders, teachers, and pastors coming from our classes. Our campus by the sea is breathtaking, and our mission is clear: Alaska Education in a Christian Environment.

Presbytery of Los Ranchos by Elder Leslie Day-Ebert

Before I’d even returned home from serving as a commissioner to the 217th General Assembly, my church (Trinity United in Santa Ana, CA) had already appointed a G.A. Follow-Up Task Force. We met soon after G.A. was over and decided upon several actions in order to respond to the passage of Recommendation 5 of the PUP Report. The first was to send a letter from our Session to our Presbytery stating that we supported the ordination standards as they exist in the Book of Order and Book of Confessions. We also asked our Presbytery to affirm as essential all of the current standards and, in particular, G-6.0106b.

Our second action was a resolution to the Presbytery asking that they insert into the Manual of Operations of the Presbytery a similar affirmation. Several other churches submitted similar resolutions, as did a consortium of 10 pastors. The ten pastors worked with our Stated Clerk of Presbytery in editing and re-drafting a resolution which they felt most would accept. That resolution was approved by the presbytery at their November 16 meeting. Los Ranchos Presbytery now affirms that the *Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government in the *Book of Order* set forth the

Scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation.

In addition, our church has been in discussion with an attorney regarding church property issues and is planning a Spring presbytery-wide seminar for clergy and elders.

We have also been researching our church’s by-laws to see what might need to be changed in them in order to protect our property. We will be holding a congregational meeting in a Town Hall format to bring our congregation up-to-date when we’re a little further along as we have received several letters from members expressing their anger, frustration, etc. with the actions of the PC(USA) and our most recent General Assembly. I have spoken to a couple of our adult Sunday School classes giving an overview of the G.A. and pointing out some of the positive actions that occurred in Birmingham.

We believe that taking positive steps in response to Recommendation 5 is called for if we are to be faithful witnesses to our Reformed heritage and to our Lord. These actions need to be bathed in prayer so that they will be not only constructive but act as a balm to our souls. Our actions also assure our congregation that we are indeed being proactive and responding to their concerns and anger. We have found that some people are reluctant to participate in our capital campaign unless and until they feel we are doing everything in our power to protect our property and respond to what they feel is apostasy.

We have discussed the allocation of our offerings and find that almost all of it is designated. The percentage that is undesignated is 1.8%. The possible placing of per capita in an escrow account has not been discussed in any depth. We are in a unique situation because we have a new pastor who has just started and we feel he obviously needs to be involved in any far-reaching actions.

Another action our task force has discussed is sending some overtures to the next General Assembly. One possible overture would ask that the AI approved in 2006 be sent to the presbyteries for their vote so that the whole church can discern the will of God on this matter.

With the controversy over the passage of the PUP Report swirling about us, it’s important that we not let it “wag the dog.” We need to take to heart Paul’s words in II Timothy 4:2, “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.”

Above all, we seek to remain faithful to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to remember that it’s God’s church and He is still on the throne. Praise be to God!

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Important! Urgent! Please see the [analysis of Amendments 06-A, 06-B1—06-B3 to be voted on by the presbyteries at \[www.PresbyCoalition.org\]\(http://www.PresbyCoalition.org\)](#). This is a complete overhaul of Chapter 14 in the Book of Order that involves ordination standards and gives presbyteries vast powers. We recommend all of the proposed items of business related to amending Chapter 14 should be disapproved.

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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