

Theology Matters

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“Let Us Rise Up and Build!” A Plan for Reformation in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

*... Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,
in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.
In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.
Ephesians 2:20-22 (ESV)*

*Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.
Psalm 127:1 (NIV)*

The Plan in Summary

The overarching goal of this plan for the reformation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is the same as it has always been in the history of the Church, that we as a body will exercise what John Calvin said is the Christian's first and lifelong calling: repentance. We pray that our repentance will produce fruit that will be the reformation of the Church, Christ's visible body, and that we together will become more faithful, certainly not perfect, disciples of the Church's Savior, fulfilling the "Great Ends of the Church" and displaying its marks.

The need for reformation is deep, widespread, and urgent. Thus, we long for a pervasive reformation

that affects every level and every aspect of the church. We recognize how central and essential our congregational life is to the worship of God and to carrying out his gospel mission in the whole world. And we recognize that congregational life is supported by the relationships we have as a body that necessarily extend to farther-reaching covenant communities, which in our polity are presbyteries and General Assembly.

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We emphasize our own need for reform and our own identity with the deep distress of our whole denomination. We seek to rebuild our own part of the ruined walls of this church. Our goals reflect our commitment to speak first to ourselves and then to the larger church, so that what is rebuilt is of one piece and we are part of it.

The working goals of this plan recognize the serious spiritual, theological and moral decline that constitutes the ruin of our body. They are offered as means to strengthen the church's covenant life and mission by:

1. Returning to the Scripture. Rediscover a right understanding of God's Word under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
2. Developing elders competent to provide spiritual leadership and pastoral care for the congregation.
3. Preparing elders to lead our congregations and the larger church into the fullness of life that God intends, manifested in direct mission and evangelism efforts and in participation in the governance of the church at every level.
4. Examining ministers of Word and Sacrament and those in the preparation process according to the constitution.
5. Strengthening the church's covenant life by building up one another. Form covenant communities for mutual accountability and support among presbyters.
6. Building up our pastors' preparation for and practice of the ministry of Jesus Christ.
7. Streamlining synods by reducing their functions to only administrative and judicial commissions. Move other responsibilities into presbyteries, providing for missional relationships among and between presbyteries.
8. Establishing a closer relationship between presbyteries and the General Assembly in regard to responsibility and authority for policy-making.
9. Electing—to any office at the General Assembly level—those who conform in faith and manner of life with the theology and polity requirements of the constitution, as promised in their vows.
10. Identifying and supporting a candidate for Stated Clerk at the 2008 General Assembly.
11. Preserving a polity that is faithful in belief and practice to Scripture and the confessions of the church, and best represents reformed life in community.
12. Undertaking a study of the doctrine of the Church (ecclesiology) from a particularly reformed perspective.

O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your dispersed be under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there. They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant...' (Nehemiah 1: 5-11).

Introduction

I. Reclaiming a Biblical Vision for the Church

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand" (Neh. 1:10).

"The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. God has called the Church into being in order to carry out God's mission in the world. We believe that the Presbyterian Church (USA) must respond to that commission by reaffirming its Christ-centeredness, reclaiming its biblical faith, and remobilizing its missionary service."

With these affirmations began "Union in Christ," a theological declaration published by the Presbyterian Coalition in 1998. Nine years later, we claim again that same biblical vision for the Church. We confess our union in Christ, and to one another, to be a work of God's grace requiring our response. "In the proclamation of the Word, the Spirit calls us to repentance, strengthens our faith, empowers our service, gladdens our hearts, and transforms our lives more fully into the image of Christ." Our union in Christ involves our participation in his righteousness, his holiness, and his obedience. The Church and its members find their mission in the One who "is the gracious mission of God to the world and for the

world,” whose “incarnation discloses the only path to God.”

It is only in union with Christ that we can know or seek the “Great Ends of the Church” (G-1.0200): “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” These missionary tasks are the measure of our life in the Church.

The Church is also defined by its “marks” or “notes”: “first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promises of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly administered, as God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished” (Scots Confession, 3.18). These, too, can be known and sought only in union with Christ.

We in the Presbyterian Church (USA) have received and accepted a call to live out our union in Christ within a particular covenant community. We have been bound together by vows of baptism and membership. We have all promised to:

- profess [our] faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- renounce evil and affirm [our] reliance on God’s grace;
- declare [our] intention to participate actively and responsibly in the worship and mission of the church (W-4.2003).

And, reciprocally, our congregations have promised to “take responsibility for the nurture of those baptized” (W-3.3603).

Many of us also have been ordained as deacons, elders, or ministers of Word and Sacrament. We are bound even more tightly by vows such as:

- that we will “fulfill [our] office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions”;
- that we will “be governed by our church’s polity” and “abide by its discipline”;
- that we will “be a friend among [our] colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit”;
- that we will “further the peace, unity, and purity of the church” (G-14.0207/W-4.4003g).

And, reciprocally, our congregations have promised to “encourage [us], to respect [our] decisions, and to follow as [we] guide [them], serving Jesus Christ, who

alone is Head of the Church” (G-14.0208/W-4.4006b[2]).

These vows of baptism, membership, and ordination hold us together in a solemn covenant. Even in the case of officers who conclude a term of service, the *Book of Order* reminds us: “The office of elder or deacon is perpetual and no one can lay it aside at pleasure or be divested of it except as provided in this Form of Government or the Rules of Discipline” (G-14.0210/G-14.0203).

May the Lord grant us so to be engaged in the heavenly mysteries of his wisdom that we progress in true godliness, to his glory and our own edification.—John Calvin’s prayer starting each of his lectures on *Daniel*.

II. The Need for Reformation

“You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins, with its gates burned...” (Neh. 2:17).

It is with good reason that Presbyterians call ourselves “a church reformed, always being reformed, according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit” (G-2.0200). We know that the church always stands in need of reformation.¹

But the need for reformation is particularly acute in the PC(USA) today. Easiest to recognize are the outward symptoms. Over the last 40 years membership in the denomination (or its predecessors) has dropped by almost half, from 4.3 million to less than 2.3 million. This decline occurred during a period when the U.S. population went from 194 million to 300 million. Thus, the proportion of the population belonging to the PC(USA) has plummeted from 2.2 percent to 0.8 percent.

Between 1995 and 2005, the number of PC(USA) congregations fell from 11,361 to 10,950. In no year during that period did our denomination establish more than 30 new churches, or initiate more than 40 new church developments—across the whole country. These gains are far outweighed by the 70 to 100 churches that we close every year. Among the 10,950 churches that remain, 2,050 are classified as “without [pastoral] leadership” of any sort. Another 2,650 are without an installed pastor (from the *Comparative Statistics* reports, Tables 1 and 15, online at www.pcusa.org/research.htm).

The PC(USA) has shown little success in evangelizing the unchurched. We average fewer than one adult baptism per congregation per year. We add only some 90,000 members annually through profession of faith. Again, these gains are far outweighed by the outflow of members leaving our churches.

The median age of PC(USA) members, according to Presbyterian Panel research, is 58. Our denomination is 92 percent European-American, in a society that is moving toward a non-European majority. The PC(USA) is also unbalanced between the sexes, with only 38 percent of its members being male.

More qualitative measurements tell a similar disturbing story. Only 16 percent of members in the Presbyterian Panel reported that they read the Bible daily; another 16 percent read it several times weekly. Even among pastors, only 54 percent reported a practice of daily Bible reading. Unfamiliarity with the Scriptures correlates with doctrinal weakness. Only 69 percent of PC(USA) members, according to the Presbyterian Panel, agree that “Jesus will return to earth one day.” On the other hand, 32 percent agree that “all different religions are equally true.”

According to denominational statistical reports, the average PC(USA) member gave \$984.41 to the church in 2005. With a median PC(USA) income in the \$60,000-\$90,000 range per household (2.4 persons on average), Presbyterians give much less than five percent of their income to the church. Furthermore, there has been a decline in the proportion of contributions going to mission beyond the local church. Distrust of national denominational agencies has cut severely into the General Assembly mission budget, reducing it from \$144 million in 2001 to around \$90 million today. The long-term compensated international missionary force has shrunk from 2,063 in 1959 to 235 today.

We are the highest income per household Christian fellowship in the wealthiest nation in history. Yet our record for attracting minorities and the poor is dismal; we retreat from global mission commitments and from caring for the poor nearby. All of these trends are exhibited across the entire denomination. It is not just “progressives” that experience declining, aging, monocultural membership, biblical illiteracy, doctrinal confusion, and a retreat from mission. These same symptoms, to a greater or lesser degree, are present in many evangelical congregations.

A Fraying of the Covenant

The problems in the PC(USA) are not merely outward. They go all the way to the covenants—the vows of baptism, membership, and ordination—that hold us together in Christ. For many years, these covenants have been strained or broken, or they have not operated effectively. Basic concepts, such as what it means to “renounce evil” or “profess faith in Jesus Christ,” have no agreed-upon meaning. Covenants presume and rely on common understanding of the words used in the covenants.

This crisis is especially pronounced among our church officers, who are supposed to look to the two parts of the PC(USA) Constitution for “guidance” and “discipline.” Yet the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* are rarely used in that way in our denomination.

A particular difficulty arises in laying hold of the “essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church,” which ordinands are to “receive and adopt...as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do” (G-14.0207b/W-4.4003c). Those who have not read the confessions find it a hopeless task. And they are discouraged from even attempting it by the voices in the denomination insisting on the danger or the impossibility of identifying or agreeing upon any essential tenets. Thus our officers are left to take an ordination vow that is ambiguous—a subtly but deeply demoralizing experience.

The *Book of Order* has become a battlefield, but most elders, and even pastors, have limited knowledge of it. In the end, only a few polity wonks have mastered it. And some of those are now using that mastery to justify evading its requirements—G-6.0106b in particular. A new authoritative interpretation adopted by the General Assembly in 2006 may suggest that sessions and presbyteries have the authority to determine that this particular *Book of Order* mandate—and many others, potentially—is not among “the essentials of Reformed faith and polity” and, therefore, need not be applied in each case.

Meanwhile, the practices that might have ensured some accountability to our covenant vows have atrophied. Session and presbytery examinations of candidates for office often “lack rigor,” as the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church acknowledged. We have little way of knowing that our elders and ministers of Word and Sacrament do, in fact, hold to a Reformed faith—or even an orthodox Christian faith. Once a person is ordained, moreover, we make little attempt to check whether he or she is persevering in the faith.

Sessions and presbyteries almost never practice ordinary discipline—the process of encouraging one another to do better in the everyday struggles of the Christian life. Consequently, they struggle to confront the rarer cases of scandalous abuses that call for extraordinary discipline. Between cases that are swept under the rug, cases that fail for technical reasons, and cases that result in a renunciation of jurisdiction, far too few situations have the desired outcome of repentance, reconciliation, and restoration to spiritual health.

It is worth emphasizing that these problems, like the statistical trends above, are exhibited across the entire

church. Evangelicals, too, contribute to and suffer from the fraying of the covenants. This part of the church also has its own besetting sins for which it bears particular responsibility.

Those called evangelicals have too often neglected repentance. Rather than grieving the sin of the Church, we have often preferred to hear more “positive” messages that we find affirming. Rather than engaging the hard work of hearing and applying the Scriptures together with the whole Church, we have often preferred to remain comfortable in our own private and partisan interpretations. Rather than bringing the saving Word to a world in need of the Savior, we have often preferred conformity to the world’s expectations and definitions of the usefulness of the Church. Rather than humbly bringing our individual consciences into subjection to the will of Christ as set forth in Scripture, and boldly asking the same of our sisters and brothers, we have often preferred to indulge the sin of pride in our own consciences and the sin of cowardice regarding the conscience of the Church. Rather than loving our more progressive colleagues wholeheartedly, we have often preferred either a loveless antagonism that masquerades as zeal or a loveless apathy that masquerades as tolerance.

While evangelicals have frequently been marginalized by others in the denomination, we have marginalized ourselves with equal frequency. We have too often become functionally congregational, withholding ourselves from the life and work of the higher governing bodies. We have short-sightedly failed to join hands with the racial ethnic congregations and leaders who hold so much promise for the future of the church in this country. The world’s poor and the least are neglected because of our internal preoccupations. Those outside the church tend to see more of our conflict than hear our proclamation of the Gospel.

Signs of Hope

Almost a decade ago (1998), the Presbyterian Coalition offered “A Strategy for the Transformation of the PC(USA)” to encourage and guide efforts toward reform and renewal within the denomination. It outlined various steps that could be taken toward the renewal of mission, worship, polity, theological education, educational ministries, and church discipline. These agenda items remain valid and important. There has been some progress in a few areas over the past decade. For example:

- There seems to be a rising “missional understanding of the church that encompasses both evangelistic outreach and the transformation of society and culture to the glory of God.”

- More sessions are making it a practice to “designate mission giving to acceptable projects within the denomination.”
- Denominational mission agencies are less top-down in style and more attuned to “encouragement of local church leadership in mission projects.”
- The General Assembly Council and many presbyteries have undergone a “comprehensive evaluation,” with significant “reduction of what is unwieldy” and some curtailment of “what is biblically unfaithful.”
- There has been some development of “innovative models of theological education,” as well as production of some “faithful, engaging, and effective biblical curricula” for Christian education.
- We have seen the emergence of “ministries of compassion and restoration for persons whose behavior has estranged them from biblical standards for the holy life.”
- Renewal organizations have made significant contributions to both reform and renewal efforts.

Progress Too Slow

Nevertheless, we recognize that large areas of this reform agenda have seen little progress over the past decade. The “obstacles” discerned in the 1998 document remain apparently unmoved. Again, these problems affect the entire church. For example,

- “An incipient universalism that diminishes the urgency of the gospel message.”
- “A witness that echoes cultural ideology rather than biblical fidelity.”
- “Nonbiblical and unconvincing preaching.”
- “Worship services that are manipulated by political and ideological agendas.”
- “An estrangement between the denominational leadership and the church it is called to serve.”
- “Our failure to be knowledgeable, faithful, and responsible presbyters.”
- “Theological education that is captive to ideological currents alien to the faith of the church.”
- “Graduates from our theological institutions who are ill-equipped for pastoral ministry.”
- “The great exodus of college age students from the life of the church.”
- “Diminishing biblical knowledge and theological understanding within our congregations.”
- “The neglect of devotional practices and piety which are faithful to the Reformed tradition.”
- “A refusal to live under the authority of the biblical and constitutional standards of the church.”
- “A distorted understanding of grace which confuses moral permissiveness with biblical compassion.”

Reform As the Work of All

“The work is great and widely spread...” (Neh. 4:19).

Reform has always been the task of the entire church. In our time and our denomination, local congregations, presbyteries, national agencies, and various renewal groups have their part to play with their respective gifts and areas of service. In particular, those who see the need for biblical reformation most clearly bear most responsibility for taking action.

Some have exercised their gifts well in reform efforts. Some have resisted efforts at reform, and some have neglected the work, expecting someone else to do it. Further, lack of coordination and lack of unity on hoped-for outcomes among those of like mind has hampered the good work attempted.

Responses to this disappointment have been mixed. Some individuals and congregations have decided to leave the PC(USA) and affiliate with another reformed body. But many others will conclude that they still can and should live out their baptismal, membership, and ordination vows within the PC(USA). Whichever call is discerned, all these individuals and congregations will have the obligation to seek the reformation of the church, according to the opportunities and abilities given to each.

Even individuals and congregations that move to another reformed body will soon discover that that body, too, stands in need of biblical reformation. The negative trends affecting the PC(USA) are not unique to this denomination. Problems like biblical and confessional illiteracy, incipient universalism, lack of ecclesiastical discipline, and a distorted understanding of grace are characteristic of American society, and they touch all segments of the U.S. Christian community to one degree or another. Other denominations simply face a different mix of concerns.

Those of us in the PC(USA) do not have the option of “defecting in place” and distancing ourselves from Christ’s wounded church (even if the wounds are sometimes self-inflicted). “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor. 12:21). On the contrary, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26), and all members of Christ’s body are to “have the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:25).

Those of us who promised, at our ordinations, to “share in government and discipline” and “be a friend among your colleagues in ministry” (G-14.0207e/W-4.4003e) bear even more specific obligations to the health of the denomination. We must, by God’s grace, open ourselves and our church bodies to God’s work of renewal and reformation. Baptismal, membership, and ordination vows call us to serve and bear witness where

God has placed us. Others in the PC(USA) need that faithful witness whether they recognize it or not, whether they receive it with gratitude or not.

We are Presbyterians at a time when our communion shares in a much greater spiritual, theological, moral and missional crisis than our own. It is critical that we attend to these matters with a sense of immediacy and unity on how to proceed. Many more of us must take up the weapons and the tools required to reform our current condition into that which brings glory to God.

Endnote

1. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book IV, Chapter 1), recites the long history of doctrinal and moral corruption in Israel and the Church. He refers to the church in Corinth, where “it was not a few that erred, but almost the whole body had become tainted; there was not one species of sin but a multitude; and these not trivial errors, but some of them execrable crimes” (section 14). Calvin notes that “Paul, instead of giving them [the Corinthian Christians] over to destruction, mercifully extricated them” (section 27). The reformer concludes, “Such, then, is the holiness of the Church: it makes daily progress, but is not yet perfect; it daily advances, but as yet has not reached the goal” (section 17). Our hope is that “the Lord is daily smoothing its [the Church’s] wrinkles, and wiping away its spots” (section 2).

III. Premises for Faithful Witness in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,

and you did not forsake them.... You gave your good spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst
(Neh. 9:17b, 20).

The final section will put forward a number of specific steps toward reformation in the PC(USA). First, though, it seems helpful to elucidate the premises that underlie our recommendations.

1. The purpose of all of these plans and proposals is to assist Presbyterians in pursuing more effectively the “Great Ends of the Church” (G-1.0200). Our calling is not to peace, unity, and purity for its own sake but for the sake of the world, “so that the world may believe that you [the Father] have sent me [the Son]” (John 17:21). Only the Church has the Gospel by which we and our neighbors may be delivered from slavery to sin and death. Only the Church knows the law and the grace of God that is the key to social righteousness. It is the Church, above all, that is equipped to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

2. Both renewal and reform are required. We know that no plan can succeed without the renewal of hearts that is the work of the Holy Spirit. We know that any effort

undertaken on our own is bound to fail; only by seeking the will of God and acting through the leading and power of the Spirit will this work bring glory to God. At the same time, the church and its members need structures and habits that open them to that transforming work of the Spirit. To be renewed, we must rediscover our union in Christ through prayer. We must turn to the means of God's grace: the study and preaching of the Word, the sacraments, and the exercise of mutual discipline in holiness. It is noteworthy that these means of grace are also among the distinctive "marks of the Church."

3. Following a principle expressed in the August 2006 Presbyterian Coalition document entitled "Discovering a Way Forward," our plan must allow those pursuing renewal and reform to differentiate themselves, so as to limit the infection of corruption and enable like-minded folk to join together to build new models of church life. Equally, we need permeability so that our witness can have an impact on many colleagues who are confused and searching for direction in the church.

4. Our plan seeks to allow protection for faithful believers under pressure in the denomination: relief of conscience, support to persevere in hostile environments, fairness and charity toward those called away to other reformed bodies.

5. A central feature of our plan is covenant fellowships for mutual encouragement and accountability. We are convinced that biblical renewal and reform operates in an organic way, as believers "holding fast to the head [Christ], from whom the whole body [the Church], nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews [the bonds of Christian fellowship], grows with a growth that is from God" (Col. 2:19). The vows of baptism, membership, and ordination that we take presuppose structures of covenant fellowship through which the vows can be exercised and safeguarded. Our governing bodies were designed, in the PC(USA) Constitution, to be such fellowships, though some now fail in that role.

6. We aim to offer steps that can be taken at every level of the church. There is work to do for all Presbyterians, not just General Assembly leaders, not just ministers of Word and Sacrament and elders, not just renewal groups. The Coalition offers its own hand to foster these reform efforts, but it is relying upon many others working at all levels of the church.

7. Our focus is first on the congregational level, where most of the mission work of the church is carried out. Secondly, we look to the presbytery level, where ministers of Word and Sacrament and elders in the same communities can most readily find mutual support. The synod receives light treatment here. The General Assembly goals are more specific, and probably the

most urgent. We think it most likely that the more significant, long-lasting reforms would take root first in congregations, and only subsequently begin to transform the higher governing bodies.

8. Reform-minded persons should take the initiative and go forward wherever they have the ability to do so, in local congregations and presbyteries. We must strive to make these into the Christ-centered, inter-connected bodies that God intends. It is a mistake to wait for others to act first.

9. Where the way to reform is blocked within a governing body, alternative structures may need to be created. If a session or presbytery cannot or will not undertake the spiritual disciplines, mutual accountability, and missional enterprise that befit it, then other fellowships will have to fill the void. Already, such fellowships exist in some presbyteries. At the national level, renewal groups function in somewhat this manner, bringing Presbyterians together for mission in areas where the General Assembly entities have fallen short. These informal fellowships obviously lack the powers of governing bodies; however, the voluntary commitment of the participants can set a powerful example for the whole church.

10. We seek to impact church officers first. We believe that if deacons, elders, and ministers of Word and Sacrament are turned back toward the means of God's grace, a ripple of blessings will flow to all the church. Raising the expectations for church officers will have the effect of challenging all members to more faithful, missional discipleship.

11. Financial stewardship is a component of any faithful Christian witness. Sessions and presbyteries that are committed to the "Great Ends of the Church" will ensure that their benevolences are used to advance those ends.

12. We aim for unity among those who seek biblical reformation in the PC(USA). Our hope is that these steps will be such that those with diverse experiences, gifts, and perspectives can join together in common purpose. Large congregations and small congregations, churches in hostile presbyteries and friendly presbyteries, churches with different cultural styles—all can pursue the same basic goals. Achieving these goals, however, will not be quick or easy work; indeed, we continue in what Eugene Peterson aptly calls a "long obedience in the same direction" and pray that God will grant us the patience to endure and persevere.

The Plan

Recommendations for Reformation and Renewal At Every Level of the Church

The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build... (Neh. 2:20).

We turn at this point to look at some initial steps and actions that pastors, sessions, congregations, and members can take to move the church from its current state to a brighter more hopeful future. It is our intention, through the whole of this document, to create a starting point for action rather than a comprehensive plan. We offer this with the conviction that godly men and women in leadership across the church have been called to rise up and build in this time in our church, and we present this set of goals in hope of joining together to renew and reform the church and bring glory to God.

The “how” suggestions are just that, suggestions. We hope the readers of this plan will take their own congregations’ gifts and resources into account, finding creative ways to implement the goals. And we hope the continued sharing of ideas and resources through the Coalition’s website will offer fresh impetus for all of us as we work and pray for the reform of the church. Some current resources and examples for implementing the goals will be found in the various appendices on the Coalition’s website (www.presbycoalition.org).

The working goals of this plan recognize the serious spiritual, theological and moral decline that constitutes the ruin of our body. They are offered as means to strengthen the church’s covenant life and mission.

Reform and Renewal of Our Congregations

They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading (Neh. 8:8).

A thread through the Bible is the rediscovery of Scripture and an associated reform and renewal of the church. The account of King Josiah is an example. So also is the account from our theme book, Nehemiah. Hebrews is one of the many examples from the New Testament. History is filled with cases where the people of God find a new passion for the Gospel, love for God, and change of life through a return to Scripture, such as Luther and Calvin in the Reformation period. Where the Scriptures are ignored, diminished, or misused, the church suffers loss of power, loss of true purpose, and loss of witness and mission. Above every other goal, we should work for a rediscovery of a right understanding of God’s Word, a right use of the Scriptures in our churches and lives, and a fresh life of joy and purpose

that comes from growing intimacy with the Triune God of the Bible.

The spiritual health and maturity of a congregation cannot be stronger than its leadership. Elders should become exemplars of the biblical description: spiritual mentors and models of mature faith, able to lead, teach, evangelize and strengthen the congregation’s participation in mission at home and around the world. Elders move those under their care and responsibility toward a better, godlier, future. They give vision, guidance, example, and correction so that those whom God has placed under their care might grow in the knowledge and service of God.

Following Scripture, our Presbyterian covenant community places high value on elders’ understanding of the standards of faith and practice. We expect them to demonstrate these as virtues in their own lives and lead the congregation under their care into the fullness and purity of life that God intends.

The life and health of the church is determined by the character, example, and leadership of those called to lead, including ministers of Word and Sacrament, whose preparation for these responsibilities is critical.

Goal #1. Return to the Scripture. Rediscover a Right Understanding of God’s Word Under the Guidance of the Holy Spirit.

How:

- Encourage daily Bible reading. Offer help with reading plans, incentives, opportunities for discussion and study, and guidance with application.
- Institute and promote Bible study that engages elders and members of all ages in systematic study of the Scriptures.
 - Use a catechism and the confessions to assist in learning the essentials of Christian faith.
 - Get the whole message. Focus sermons and Bible study on working through whole books of the Old and New Testaments.
 - Reach out. Offer and promote regular and planned Bible studies that bring members and officers together from a number of churches in your presbytery or region.
- Encourage the spread of the Bible’s message. Show elders and members how to use the Scripture to shape a statement of faith and a witness to the Gospel that can be communicated to others. Consider neighborhood Bible studies to be opportunities for evangelism and outreach.

Goal #2. Develop Elders Competent to Provide Spiritual Leadership and Pastoral Care for the Congregation.

How:

- Attend to the nominating process. Sessions should decide and communicate to nominating committees that the high standards for elders set forth in Scripture and the Constitution be the norm for the church. Nominees should be fully informed of the expectations of office prior to seeking their consent to serve.
- Develop elder piety and leadership competence. Create study and accountability opportunities for elders to prepare them for office, using G-14.0205/G-14.0240 as a guide. Examine elders with the purpose intended by the Constitution: that those affirmed have the spiritual qualities, statements of faith, knowledge of our polity, and behavior which clearly qualify them for office. Ensure that examination of elders confirms leaders' commitment to living lives of holiness and commitment to fidelity in the marriage of a man and a woman and chastity in singleness, and of their willingness to uphold and teach a biblical view of sexuality. Develop session as a covenant community united around the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the preservation of the truth.
 - Provide ongoing leadership development opportunities in the spiritual disciplines, making use of confessions and catechism to engage elders in the Christian faith, with the expectation that they will lead members of the congregation into spiritual development and godly practices.
 - Provide ongoing leadership development in polity competence.
 - Build a "college of elders" or other group organized to promote, engage and capitalize on the gifts of elders who are not currently on session.
 - Develop active practices of ordinary discipline and accountability. Teach the biblical and confessional meaning and purposes of discipline. Work toward agreements among leaders that they will submit to mutual accountability, encouraging maturity in holiness, service, and leadership. Members of session should hold each other accountable to the standards of Scripture in every area of life, including worship, sexuality, marriage, and stewardship.
 - Build the church's mission on biblical ground. Expect all church committees, task force groups, commissioners, and staff members to shape their work and ministry from the standards of the Scriptures and Constitution. Evaluate decisions based on these standards, so that work and ministry is faithful to the will of God and effective in expanding his kingdom.
- Create joint efforts regionally. Reach out to other churches to develop and provide a range of elder preparation opportunities in Bible study, theology, the spiritual disciplines, mission, and polity.
- Pray together and for one another. Seek the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

Goal #3. Prepare Elders to Lead Our Congregations and the Larger Church into the Fullness of Life That God Intends, Manifested in Direct Mission and Evangelism Efforts and in Participation in the Governance of the Church at Every Level.

How:

- Expect elders to be teachers and mentors, reflecting the biblical expectations of the office. Teach the congregation the importance of Christian morality, especially in the area of sexuality. Lead church members into holiness of life.
- Create discipleship development opportunities for elders that include discernment and preparation for the church's priorities in mission outreach, drawing the congregation actively into mission. Make specific mission partnerships visible in the congregation and develop ways to be identified as a body committed to mission. Set a budget goal of increasing giving to mission priorities. Partner with racial/ethnic congregations, and be deliberate in drawing people of all races and ethnicity into your fellowship.
- Exercise good and conscientious stewardship by ensuring that the faithful contributions from the church body are used in ways consistent with the Gospel and the priorities set by session. Sessions determine the use and designation of funds for which it has oversight, according to the priorities of Scripture, the "Great Ends of the Church," and the values of the Gospel.
- Set as a priority the reform and renewal of the whole body. Pastors and elders commit themselves to active support of and participation in denominational reform and renewal efforts, and participation in presbytery, synod, and General Assembly. Attend meetings and lead the whole church at every governing level into increasing faithfulness, spiritual maturity, and effectiveness. Active participation includes informed voting, speaking to the issues, initiating and promoting overtures, taking stands, and supporting brothers and sisters encountering hostility.

Endnote

1. While our emphasis is upon the office of elder, much of what we say is equally fitting for all officers of the church, particularly the value of the work and the leadership provided by deacons. In addition, we recognize, with a deep level of respect, the calling of the Teaching Elder and the significant responsibilities of the pastors of our churches. We encourage attention to building them up, freeing them up to fulfill their callings, supporting them and developing ways for them to be mutually accountable.

Reform and Renewal of Our Presbyteries

Our presbyteries are the locus of our common life as a reformed community. They provide a place where our congregations ought to find a unity in connections with each other and in sharing together in leadership,

worship, mission, fellowship, and mutual accountability. Our presbyteries are bound by a common commitment to theological, moral, and polity standards adopted by the whole church and expressed in our Constitution, both as creed and polity.

The basic theological rift among us produces conflict within and among many of our presbyteries. Failure to uphold constitutional standards or to exercise discipline when standards are breeched is a serious problem.

Presbytery leadership often holds sufficient power to reward and punish churches by arbitrary means that lack any effective due process. Some presbyteries offer a healthy common life. Some do not. Some presbyteries have taken hostile actions against member pastors and churches that speak and act in support of the Constitution or take action that is within the bounds of the Constitution. It is increasingly essential that we form covenant communities in and between presbyteries to accomplish the work of reform and renewal and to offer support and protection to each other.

We see the priority needs in this area to be these: common agreement to uphold and obey the Constitution in both its parts; careful and proper examination of candidates; and development of a healthy and faithful common life of participation, encouragement, support, and accountability.

Goal #4. Examine Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Those in the Preparation Process According to the Constitution.

One of the effects of the authoritative interpretation adopted by the 2006 General Assembly has been a renewed interest and vigor in examinations. The stakes in these examinations have always been high, but most of us have put little thought or effort into them. Sitting in the pews at a presbytery meeting, we have become increasingly passive. Yet, every time we cast a vote, we are making decisions about the pastoral leadership of the whole church. Orthodoxy in belief and practice in the leadership of our denomination begins with the examination process.

How:

- Preferably with your presbytery's agreement, but even without it, create a team to develop an examination process that meets *Book of Order* standards and is designed to satisfy the body that each candidate is prepared to serve as Christ's ambassador and shepherd of his flock. Theological competence and correctness is essential to faithfully fulfilling the role of teaching elder. Include explicit examination on the requirement of G-6.0106b regarding fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.

- Attend to follow-through with candidates, particularly those whose answers do not conform to the Constitution.
- Provide practical preparation sessions to help presbyters understand issues and procedures, including how to use the floor process.

Goal #5. Strengthen the Church's Covenant Life by Building Up One Another. Form Covenant Communities for Mutual Accountability and Support Among Presbyters.

Presbyteries are, by definition, covenant communities. But that does not mean every presbytery fulfills this goal well. For each is a mixture of health and illness, faithfulness and faithlessness. Some, of course, lean more to one side, exhibiting more health than illness while others show the opposite. In healthier presbyteries it is not difficult to form covenant communities—believers united to achieve common goals, provide mutual encouragement, guidance, and accountability—and to live our faith in the communion of other believers. Sadly, in some presbyteries animosity and distrust are so profound that these aspects of presbyteries are known and experienced only on a formal level at best. Presbyteries in these circumstances become merely places of business, losing the spiritual qualities they were created to further.

Reform of our presbyteries requires us to behave like the Body of Christ, building up one another, forgiving one another, confessing our sins to one another, recognizing our differing gifts, standing by and protecting one another, acknowledging our reliance on the grace of God. As this Body of Christ, we also act together as defenders of the faith once received, holding one another and our presbyteries to high standards of faith and practice in accordance with Scripture and the Constitution.

Whether in a healthy or not-so-healthy presbytery, covenant communities offer a much-needed venue for learning to act like the Body of Christ. Those pastors, elders, and churches in presbyteries which are hostile to their evangelical witness need covenant communities more than anyone. We need to develop intra-presbytery relationships in order to bear one another's burdens.

How:

- Send a full complement of presbyters to presbytery meetings, with significant representation of session. Provide for reports of presbytery and action items related to presbytery at session meetings.
- Set an expectation that elders, especially those not serving on session, serve on presbytery committees.
- Develop pastoral relationships among churches in the presbytery that encourage mutual accountability, support, and growth in depth of piety and preaching.

- Support, defend, and care for churches in trouble, and those without pastoral leadership.
- Partner in mission and mutual support with racial/ethnic brothers and sisters.
- Seek out joint ministry opportunities and use them to increase mission and evangelism efforts. Include ministries that address sexual sin and other human needs in the community.
- Explore joint Bible study, Christian faith instruction, and elder preparation and instruction.
- In less healthy and more troubled presbyteries, form identifiable communities, and encourage regular participation by like-minded congregations. Develop relationships of mutual accountability and exercise loving and restorative discipline where it is needed.
- Work together to advance reforms in the presbytery and at General Assembly, including making good stewardship decisions, decisions about property, and overtures to General Assembly.
- Pray together and for one another. Seek the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

Goal #6. Build Up Our Pastors' Preparation for and Practice of the Ministry of Jesus Christ.

How:

- Develop strategies for the reform of seminaries.
- Set expectations that pastors will submit to mutual accountability in covenant relationship with other pastors that includes attention to matters of their moral and ethical behavior, and the development of their preaching and pastoral ministry.

Reform at the Synod Level of the PCUSA

Except for their judicial functions, synods no longer make a significant contribution to the mission effort of the church that would not be done more efficiently and effectively by congregations and presbyteries. The priority here is to streamline synod functions to eliminate all but the administrative commission and court provisions.

Goal #7. Streamline Synods by Reducing Their Functions to Administrative and Judicial Commissions. Move Other Responsibilities into Presbyteries, Providing for Missional Relationships Among and Between Presbyteries.

How: Overture the General Assembly to begin a process that effects this change in the function of synods.

Reform at the General Assembly Level of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes (Neh. 4:14b).

We recognize that decline in every area of our life presents us with need for immediate changes. Nevertheless, there are particularly urgent needs at the GA level of the denomination that affect our life at every other level. The integrity of our Constitution is the central concern in this area. That need is reflected in each of the following goals.

The ways in which the concerns of our congregations are represented and decided by the GA is a growing problem. This plan addresses it by two means: First, with an initiative to avoid hasty adoption of harmful actions by GAs and secondly, with an initiative calling for full and proper disclosure of information pertinent to the faith and convictions of candidates for commissioner and for those serving on every other GA committee or elected office.

The role of the Stated Clerk is essential to maintaining the peace, unity, and purity of the body. In fulfilling the stipulated duties of this office, the Clerk is responsible for upholding the principles and the requirements of the Constitution and for providing and ensuring an open and fair process. It is important to pursue the best possible candidate for this position for the 2008 election.

There is turmoil over the adoption of the Peace, Purity & Unity Report. We need to take action to reverse the confusion and distrust caused by the General Assembly's adoption of the report's authoritative interpretation, and we need to ensure that amendments to the Constitution enrich, edify and preserve the relationships of our community.

Finally, we recommend a serious study of reformed ecclesiology for the benefit of the whole body.

Goal #8. Establish a Closer Relationship Between Presbyteries and the General Assembly in Regard to Responsibility and Authority for Policy-making.

How: Send overtures to GA that empower presbyteries with a greater decision making power in matters that affect the whole body. Examples are:

- Narrowly decided votes by GAs may be reviewed and vetoed by a majority of presbyteries.
- Avoid adopting or continuing policies neither sought nor wanted by a majority of Presbyterians. All policy proposals affecting the social witness or mission

of the church shall be initiated by presbyteries only; no standing committee of GA shall bring policy business directly to the GA.

- Any social witness policy more than ten years old be reviewed by presbyteries and continued only if a presbytery sends an overture to GA requesting that it continue as policy and the GA approves its continuation.
- Social witness policies require a two-thirds approval by the GA.

Goal #9. Elect—to Any Office at the General Assembly Level—Those Who Conform in Faith and Manner of Life with the Theology and Polity Requirements of the Constitution, As Promised in Their Vows.

How:

- Define minimum essentials of theology and polity using the Nicene Creed, the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*.
- Provide the essentials in writing to nominees and request from each of them a statement of faith and response to at least the minimum essentials. Ask for direct statements from them of any provision of the Constitution with which they disagree and why.
- Provide the responses of the nominees to all voting members of the governing body and allow for floor examination of the nominees prior to a vote for election to office.
- Employ this means of full disclosure—in addition to any other information required by any governing body above the session—for election to GA positions, including commissioners.

Goal #10. Identify and Support a Candidate for Stated Clerk at the 2008 General Assembly.

How: Assemble a broadly representative committee whose members have a commitment to a plain-face reading of the Constitution. The committee will:

- Identify and prepare a candidate to run for this office in 2008.
- Assist in developing a platform on which this person will run.
- Create means for the candidates to be accountable for their records.
- Advocate and work for an open process for nomination and election of the Stated Clerk.

Goal #11. Preserve a Polity That Is Faithful in Belief and Practice to Scripture and the Confessions of the Church, and That Best Represents Reformed Life in Community.

How: Use the overture process to

- Nullify the General Assembly’s 2006 authoritative interpretation on G-6.0108.
- Study and respond to the work of the Form of Government Task Force.

Goal #12. Study the Doctrine of the Church (Ecclesiology) From a Particularly Reformed Perspective.

How: Form a working group that includes our best pastor theologians to bring a study document to a Gathering no later than two years from this Gathering (summer, 2009), and sooner if possible. Ask this working group to

- Explore the Scripture on this subject.
- Look at the writings of church fathers and at more recent writing on the subject of ecclesiology, giving particular attention to a reformed perspective and the arguments both for reform and for declaring a church to be no longer a true church.
- Consider the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, and in the church’s reform.
- Provide guidance for the application of a reformed ecclesiology to our current situation.
- Prepare us for a discussion of a faithful way forward.

Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly....Because of all this we make a firm covenant(Neh. 9:32-33, 38).

Recovering Our Knowledge Of Scripture

By Mary Holder Naegeli

This is an abridged version of a presentation at the Coalition Gathering in Houston, August, 2007. Printed with permission.

It is a special privilege to speak with you this morning, because our topic represents the reason why I am in ministry. Recovering our knowledge of Scripture, bringing the Word to life, is at the very center of my personal sense of call. For over thirty years now—yeah, I know I'm not old enough—Christian formation and discipleship has been my overarching concern and interest. How many of you have ever prayed the prayer that recurs in my dreams and wrestling matches with God: “Lord, please let me teach people who really want to learn!” It is my passion to reclaim with people a mastery of the Scriptures in order to remember what God has done and to see what God is doing that is completely consistent with divine history and the very nature of the One who created us. It is too easy to forget the basis upon which our faith is built, and how grateful I am for the trouble God has exerted to make sure we know what he is thinking.

By way of illustration, I have one serious regret in my life that illustrates the importance of the written word.

In 1971, early in my freshman year at Stanford, I met a very nice guy named Andy—he happened to be a fellow resident of my freshman dorm—who was asking some very interesting questions about my Christian faith. By spring quarter he, a lifelong but unregenerate Presbyterian, committed his life to Christ. By the end of the year, we were an item, only to part again for the summer: I flew home to the Seattle area, and he drove home to southern California. Defying any expectation I might have had for an engineering major, Andy began writing weekly letters to me which chronicled his new discoveries of God's faithfulness in his life, what he was learning in Scripture, and how this was affecting the way he viewed relationships and life-decisions. He also expressed wonderful friendship to me and made his presence known through this frequent correspondence. Our friendship blossomed into love, and two weeks after our graduation in 1975, Andy and I were married. During the first six months of our new life together, we moved four times until finally settling into our Bay Area duplex. During one of those moves, I was going through my stuff and came upon the box of letters Andy had sent to me the three summers we were apart. My dumb thinking went this way: “Well gee, I'm married to him now, and we can talk face-to-face anytime we want, so these letters have no value any longer

compared to having the living, breathing Andy right here with me.” So I threw the letters away.

Thirty-two years later, I would do just about anything to get those letters back. I hope they are in my inbox in heaven, because I would like to relive the joy of Andy's blossoming faith and note how he has lived faithfully within the promises expressed at that early stage of our relationship. But alas—I discarded what I thought was no longer needed.

I'm afraid many, many Presbyterians have done to God's Word what I did to Andy's letters. A false assumption has arisen, that the Bible is an old book, telling an old story that is irrelevant to the new realities in which we live. You and I know church folk who have dismissed the word of Promise, the message of the Prophets, and the gospel of Power. They have replaced the written, revealed Word of God with an amorphous collection of self-help, supposedly scientific, or quasi-spiritual beliefs based on what “works” or what feels right at the moment. In today's cultural climate our people are in danger of believing that they can get by with cheap imitations of God's Word. They do this by failing to read it on their own, letting others talk about what the Bible says without going to the Source to verify what is true. For reasons both complex and simple, our people are functional illiterates when it comes to the content and meaning of the Scriptures.

In the Spring 2007 edition—available online now—of Seattle Pacific University's magazine called *Response*, Jeffrey Overstreet regales us with examples of the cluelessness surrounding Bible content. I mean, “Noah's wife is Joan of Arc” and “Eve was created from an apple.” Or how many people believe the great *Sound of Music* line, “When God closes a door, he opens a window” is in the Bible? Wouldn't it be fun to insert those quotations into the Bible Content ordination exam, to see how many people take the bait? As it is, 25% of seminarians fail the Bible Content exam. Stephen Prothero in his new book *Religious Literacy* observes from a November 2002 poll that 75% of American adults believe the Bible says, “God helps those who help themselves.” As my husband would say, “That's a verse from the Book of Hezekiah.” Also found there are “All you need is love—justice-love,” and “Homosexuality is a beautiful gift from God.”

The fact that we have not been able to keep the story straight has led to confusion about the basic biblical revelation of God, God's nature, the human condition, the state of the world, and what constitutes faith. In one of the post 1996 G.A. meetings where the inclusion of the "fidelity and chastity" amendment in G-6.0106b was defended, I sat in on the committee meeting where an elder stood up and declared in, I assume, a wave of humility: "We cannot presume to know what God thinks. He is so big and inscrutable, and his thoughts are so far above our thoughts, that we cannot know what he thinks about homosexuality. We are arrogant if we try to come to any conclusions about this."

Meanwhile, we hear others say that the Holy Spirit is speaking a new word to the church, because "we now know . . ." such-n-such, which generally hangs on some tenuous thread of a recent scientific report or a personal experience. If what "we now know" directly contradicts the clear instruction of Scripture on a matter so consistently reinforced throughout, we have tossed out God's letters to his people in favor of a more recent revelation of the Holy Spirit. This is a false theology of the Spirit, who can no more be separated from the content and message of Scripture than we can be separated from our souls. John Calvin (I, ix, 1-3) said, "The Spirit, promised to us, has not the task of inventing new and unheard-of revelations, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the gospel." A true theology of the Holy Spirit wraps around this idea that the Spirit's task is to confirm in us, or "seal our minds" (in Calvin's words) the doctrine of the gospel. Jesus assured us of the Spirit's role when he said in John 16, "But when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears." The Spirit is permanently linked in Trinitarian mystery to the Father and Son and does not speak a new message outside the Word we have received. Again, Calvin: "The Holy Spirit so inheres—or permanently resides—in his truth, which he expresses in Scripture, that only when its proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth his power."

Calvin is saying that if we disrespect the Scriptures, if we do not honor and obey the Word of God, we cannot expect the Holy Spirit to be manifest in our midst. So when we hear the testimony of a gay or lesbian person at G.A. who says that during a period of discernment the Holy Spirit led that person to forsake marriage and enter the homosexual life, we must strongly counter that forsaking the clear admonition of Scripture shuts out the voice of the Spirit. Your years in youth ministry taught you that if a student came in to share that he was losing faith or maybe say, "God feels real far away right now," your early reaction is to assume that they had jumped off the wagon behaviorally in some way. I have no

doubts that the Spirit may test our faith at certain moments, but the means of doing so is not by leading us into sin.

So how can we help our fellow Presbyterians recognize the voice of Jesus, the prompting of the Holy Spirit in their lives? We do our best work when we teach them the Bible. George Gallup Jr. said, "Without biblical knowledge, those in the Judeo-Christian tradition are highly susceptible to a non-biblical, 'anything goes' worldview. The effects of such a worldview are apparent today in watered down ethics, sexual promiscuity, and feelings of hopelessness about the future of the nation and the world." We can certainly attest that this is true, because we have seen the evidence in our own denomination.

But look at what could happen if we led our people into the Bible, to read it, study it, keep it, apply it and obey it! Calvin's passion on this point led him to daily expository sermons in Geneva. He said, "We ought zealously to apply ourselves both to read and to hearken to Scripture if indeed we want to receive any gain and benefit from the Spirit of God." Which brings us to a passage from our theme book Nehemiah. [Read Neh. 8, NRSV].

Up to this point in the book of Nehemiah, we have the story of the exile survivors' return to Jerusalem, the heartbreaking discovery that Jerusalem lies in ruins, and the commitment to rebuild the walls and gates of the city. Through the 7 ½ week period of reconstruction, the Jews and Nehemiah are intimidated, threatened, attacked and otherwise distracted from the work. Political intrigue, back-biting and personal temptation were all employed to get Nehemiah and his crew off the job. But finally, in only 52 days, the gates were installed and the wall was completed with great fanfare and praise to God. We pick up the story in chapter 8, verse 1. [Read Neh. 8:1-13, 9:1-3, 38].

This vibrant account of the turnaround of a wayward people suggests to me some steps we can take as elders and pastors to bring the Word of life to our congregations. First of all, OPEN THE BOOK. Read it publicly, let it speak for itself. Make it accessible, make it heard, have pew Bibles and let people take them home if they don't have one. Get translations for those whose mother tongue is not English. Open the Book. Someone once challenged me with the thought, "For people who claim to have a high view of Scripture, we sure don't open it up and just read it very often." For this reason, I always read the Sunday's Scripture passage in its full context. On certain days of the year, the reading of the Scripture takes up most of the sermon time, just so we can be wrapped in the drama of the narrative and hear God speak in his own words. It was Martin Luther's particular mission to translate the Scriptures, both New and Old Testaments, into German

so his countrymen could read it for themselves. He was not the first to do so, but in light of his focus on *sola scriptura*, of course he would want the people to be able to have the experience he did, of hearing the Word of God in his native, heart language. May the Lord give us that same passion.

Secondly, from the Nehemiah account, the WORD READ IN THE WORSHIP CONTEXT is a critical element. The people bowed down and worshipped God as they heard the Word read. We are worshipping in that tradition if we make Scripture the centerpiece of our time together on Sunday morning, establishing the theme for songs and hymns, the drama, the children's message, the moment for mission, whatever elements you use—I mean, the offering and the benediction—everything revolves around the central message of that week's sermon. By doing so, we give the people a chance to digest the basic point of the passage and to remember it. This is why, in the Reformed service of worship, the sermon is not last but is followed by acts of response to the Word: these experiences of prayer and giving and commissioning and service all give you the opportunity to reinforce the Scriptural message of the morning. THE WORD IN WORSHIP will change your church forever. But it will also change your own spiritual life forever, if you move from reading the Scriptures for its information to “eating this book,” as Eugene Peterson would say: that is, reading the Scriptures transformationally. We have many spiritual helps for doing this, starting with the Ignatian exercises. Anything that helps you to slow down and digest what God is saying to you so that you are moved to further love and devotion, passion and commitment to Jesus Christ is a good thing!

Thirdly, EXPLAIN THE WORD to the people—TRANSLATE IT. As Jesus commissioned us in Matthew 28, “teach them to obey all that I have told you.” Don't be afraid that you'll lose your people, they want to know what the Word means. You can avoid technical jargon or fruitless forays into textual criticism and still get to the heart and soul of the message and help the people see that God is speaking to them in their situation this week. But they won't get it by osmosis; we have to teach them. We model a sound exegetical method, we demonstrate the Word's power, we exhibit our love for and submission to God's Manifesto of Grace when we do this. On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), Jesus, *in cognito* at the time, took the opportunity to clarify what had been happening in Jerusalem by “explaining to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” He opened their eyes to recognize him; he opened the Scriptures to them; and he opened their minds so that they could understand. Following in Christ's footsteps to make disciples, we can do no less.

Fourthly, FOSTER A JOYFUL ACCEPTANCE OF THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE. Continue to

reinforce the idea with your people that the Word of God is such a gift to us and it should be celebrated as it is heeded. The conditions described in 2 Timothy 3 are alive and well in the twenty-first century: “But in later days, people will be lovers of themselves, proud, not lovers of the good, having the form of godliness but denying its power, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.” Paul goes on in chapter 4, “But the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship[!]....”

Evangelicals are complicit in the disintegration of Bible knowledge, orthodox interpretation and faithful application—how? By winking and ignoring the blatant departures from biblical teaching we hear in COM and CPM examinations or in the arguments on issues during a presbytery meeting. The teaching office of the church must be restored to equip our people to discern truth from error and help restore the will of our presbyters to challenge shoddy and unbiblical theology as it comes before us. This is not only a matter of skill, but of will. We have whimped out in presbytery meetings by not challenging the interpretation of Scripture that denies the transforming power of Jesus Christ and his gospel—for starters. Presbyters should demand that their presbyteries publish statements of faith ahead of time for both candidates in final trials of ordination and minister transfers, so that presbyters can study those statements and examine candidates about deviations from creedal theology.

Let us not lose the good news that undergirds our faith: God has given us what we need to remain close to him. He has revealed himself to us; though he is certainly bigger than we are, God broke through the barrier of time and space to introduce himself from one generation to another, in terms we could understand. This is our God, who has not hidden a full disclosure of the divine purpose, but made known the mystery of redemption found in Jesus Christ. Hooray! We know how to relate to God: through the Son, our Lord and Savior!

Fifthly, following the outline of Nehemiah's account here, especially as pastors, we must TAKE SERIOUSLY THE CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE OUR PEOPLE EXPERIENCE in the face of the gospel. For some, “Go and sin no more” requires a radical redirection of their lives. We have the deep privilege of walking alongside and providing support for that kind of transformation. We must not scoff when people want to make changes in their lives as a result of hearing the Word. We must not cast doubt on their intentions or even their abilities, but point them

to Jesus, pray for their spiritual safety and the filling of the Holy Spirit, and come alongside them as a moral support through a time of change. We can't just talk about the Scriptures, we must live them. For, as Paul said in Romans 2, "It is not those who merely hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." We teach our people that we are serious when we say, "This isn't just a Sunday activity we're engaged in, but faith as a way of life." That's when we will see big changes in the tenor and vitality of the Presbyterian Church, when its members become contagious out of the joy of new life in Christ.

I believe that a spiritual revival is possible for us if we would get back to the Bible and reclaim our heritage without embarrassment or doubt. We have plenty of historical evidence that a reclaiming of the Scriptures leads to revival. The Protestant Reformation is itself our greatest illustration for this. The Great Awakening was sparked by Jonathan Edwards' commitment to expository preaching. Within eight months of taking over the pastorate of his deceased grandfather, there was an outbreak of revival. Spaener in the early 1600's wanted to get less formal, so he organized small group Bible studies, and the German pietism movement was born. Perhaps a more dramatic example can be found two centuries later: I think of what happened at "Stanford in the East"—oh, sorry, I meant Yale University—when it was still Yale College around the turn of the nineteenth century. Yale had really taken a beating as a result of the Revolutionary War. Morale was low, the campus was in disrepair—things were not going well. Jonathan Edwards' grandson Timothy Dwight was called as president of the college. He set out to rebuild the faculty, the student body and the buildings themselves. He was also very concerned about curriculum, and about the inroads of Deism and general Enlightenment secularism that had influenced the American population in the post-war decades. Sound familiar? Dwight came up with a plan to

stimulate interest in the Bible and biblical theology, by requiring that students attend a chapel service during the week and on Sunday. At these services, Dwight faithfully preached the Word. This program led to student prayer groups and dorm Bible studies, eventually involving a large number of students. At one point, around 1801, it was estimated that one third of the student body had committed their lives to Christ. A tutor, Benjamin Silliman, remarked in awe, "Yale College is a little temple of prayer."

The Presbyterian Church can become a renewed, invigorated and effective temple of prayer if we will reclaim this great love-letter of God, learn it, memorize it, take it to heart and live it out. By doing so, we will be carrying out the Plan for Reformation which unfolded in Nehemiah's time.

Make it so, O God, that we may know the mind of Christ! Amen.

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