

# Theology Matters

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The following is an excerpt from the **Minority Report of the Special Committee on Civil Unions and Christian Marriage** by Rev. Tracie Mayes-Stewart, Rev. Bill Teng, and Elder Lisa Van Riper. This report along with the **Committee Report** will go to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in July for action by the GA commissioners. This is reprinted with permission of the authors and the Office of General Assembly.

## What is the Place of Covenanted Same-Gender Partnerships in the Christian Community?

### *Our Starting Place*

Included in the mandate of this special committee was a directive that the PC(USA) constitutional definition of Christian marriage *not* be changed. In our confessions, marriage is consistently defined as a lifelong covenant between God, a man and a woman, and the community of faith.

The PC(USA) *Book of Order* states:

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith. (W-4.9001)

### II. What Is the Place of Covenanted Same-Gender Partnerships in the Christian Community?

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of*

*the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph.2:19–22)*

*When Christ calls a man [sic], he bids him come and die. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*)*

#### A. *Our Current Disconnect*

The Presbytery of Denver's overture to the 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is part of the larger struggle that our denomination has had over homosexual practice for the past three decades.

The 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. issued a report on homosexual practice that found the following:

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(1) “homosexuality is a contradiction of God’s wise and beautiful pattern for human sexual relationships revealed in Scripture ...”; (2) “unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination”; (3) “Persons who manifest homosexual behavior must be treated with the profound respect and pastoral tenderness due all people of God” as they “strive toward God’s revealed will in this area of their lives and make use of all the resources of grace”; (4) “There is no legal, social, or moral justification for denying homosexual persons access to the basic requirements of human existence” (*Minutes*, UPCUSA, 1978, Part I, pp. 261–66). The authoritative interpretation on ordination (point 2 above) was set aside by the 218th General Assembly (2008) (*Minutes*, 2008, Part I, p. 373).

This same 1978 report asserted that

the church’s grappling with the issue of homosexuality has already energized its membership in a remarkable reawakening of prayer and theological study. Our study should continue with the aim of reaching harmony in our diverging positions on homosexuality and other critical issues. Our prayer should now be concentrated upon this process of internal reconciliation.... (*Minutes*, UPCUSA, 1978, Part I, pp. 261–66)

History’s trajectory, looking at the thirty years that separate us from those hopes and prayers, has not been a gradual harmony, but an increasingly strident and rigid disharmony that threatens to once more tear the PC(USA) asunder.

Two reasons for this continued discord are: (1) disconnect between the theological/pastoral and advocacy strands of the 1978 report on homosexuality and (2) divergent readings of Scripture. Because these are foundational principles, the special committee could not reach consensus.

Over the past three decades, General Assemblies have agreed to pursue advocacy for the homosexual person. During the same time, in presbytery votes, the theological standards have been upheld, particularly in regard to the sexual behavior of those seeking ordination. Recent General Assemblies have begun to advocate for rights for same-gendered couples instead of the individual person.

Most recently, the 218th General Assembly (2008) acted to “renew and strengthen the long-standing Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) commitment to equal protection under the law for lesbian and gay persons and the 216th General Assembly (2004)’s affirmation of the right of same-gender persons to civil union and, thereby, to all the benefits, privileges, and

responsibilities of civil union” (*Minutes*, 2008, Part I, p. 259). This action did not define what the “benefits, privileges, and responsibilities of civil union” should be or how they might relate to the privileges and responsibilities of civil marriage or Christian marriage.

The difficulty is this: Whereas one could advocate for civil rights of the person while continuing to uphold the theological standard cited above and providing pastoral care that worked toward conformity with this theological position, when the General Assembly began to move toward advocacy for the couple, the strands became disconnected for many members in the PC(USA). It seemed contradictory to encourage public favor and subsidy for a behavior that the church had found to be outside of God’s design. Or, from the other perspective, it seemed contradictory to demand equality in society that was denied within the church.

### B. *Variant Interpretations*

Second, there truly exist variant interpretations of Scripture that in turn dictate different pastoral models and advocacy models. The variant interpretations of Scripture are the foundational reason that the 1978 theological/pastoral/advocacy strands have unraveled. The ongoing controversy around this issue and others will not be resolved until consensus is reached on the interpretation of Scripture. Unity cannot be reached through polity inventions. Unity will only be reached through common affirmation of truth.

There are at least two larger approaches to biblical interpretation at play in these debates. One tends to call itself “liberal” or “progressive.” The other is variously labeled as “evangelical,” “conservative,” “orthodox,” or “traditional.” Admitting that the terms and descriptions are oversimplified and miss many nuances, it is still useful to compare the two perspectives.

Both approaches appeal to Scripture, although they read it differently. Both refer to history and biological and social sciences. Both see their approach as compassionate toward lesbians and gays, although they understand the requirements of compassion quite differently.

Traditionalists tend to focus on specific biblical commandments that appear to prohibit same-sex relations categorically. Progressives tend to focus on broader principles of love and justice that they regard as more important than the specific commandments.

Traditionalists tend to emphasize a core meaning of marriage established by God in creation. They see the near universality of marriage in almost all known cultures as confirmation of God’s design in creation.

They think it unwise for either church or society to alter the core meaning of marriage. Progressives tend to emphasize the variability of marriage across human history and around the world. They are reluctant to fix a core meaning. They view further evolution of the institution as natural and necessary.

Traditionalists tend to see the biblical writers, and the church through its history, as elaborating a fairly consistent strand of teaching on marriage, under divine inspiration. They believe that the church can apply that teaching directly today, despite the differences and even injustices of the societies in which it was formed. Progressives tend to stress contradictions between various biblical passages and church attitudes toward marriage over the years. They view the biblical authors as captives of limited cultural perspectives prevalent in societies deformed by patriarchy and other injustices. They are reluctant to apply sexuality standards originating in the ancient Near East to a modern society that has more scientific knowledge about sexuality.

Traditionalists tend to view the two sexes, male and female, as an important part of God's providence in creation. They therefore regard marriage, the institution joining the two sexes, as of unique social importance. Although they recognize how sin has distorted relationships between the sexes, and how the grace of Jesus Christ may open new possibilities for just relationships between men and women, they do not believe that God's grace in Christ nullifies God's earlier grace in making two complementary sexes to be joined together. Progressives tend to be wary of any purported distinctions between the sexes, in which they suspect the taint of past patriarchal attitudes. They take Paul's declaration that in Christ "there is no longer male and female" (Gal. 3:28) as a mandate for reconfiguring institutions, such as traditional marriage, that take account of sex differences. For them the biological or social gender identity of a spouse should be an irrelevant factor.

Traditionalists tend to see God's commands as offering clear choices between limited options. For them, marriage is the single norm for human sexual expression. The ways to God's blessing are two: either fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. Progressives tend to be open to other kinds of covenanted sexual relationships.

Traditionalists draw out biblical themes of purity, emphasizing the calling of Christians to keep their bodies as "the temple of the Holy Spirit." They speak against specific sexual acts—homosexual acts, or any sex outside of marriage—that they understand to violate that purity. Progressives tend to regard this emphasis on purity as outdated and unhelpful. They are more

concerned about the emotional content of a relationship—the love, trust, and commitment between individuals—than about the form of the relationship or the bodily acts by which it is expressed.

Traditionalists acknowledge that sexual desires may be deep-seated; however, they emphasize the choices that individuals have in how to act on their desires. They affirm that, by God's grace, the behaviors—and even sometimes the desires—can be transformed. Progressives tend to view sexual orientation as a fundamental, indelible part of an individual's personality. They stress the likelihood that persons will act on their desires and the unlikelihood that the desires can be redirected.

Traditionalists acknowledge that the church has changed its mind previously on issues such as slavery, divorce, and women's ordination. But they believe those revisions of doctrine came about because of fresh insight into the Scriptures—not merely out of a desire to conform to social trends. They do not see the issue of homosexuality as analogous, because the biblical texts on that topic are much less ambiguous. Progressives believe that sometimes God moves first in society to bring about greater justice and then pulls the church along behind. They believe that changes in teaching on slavery, divorce, and women's ordination do set a valid precedent for a possible change in teaching on sexuality.

The pastoral model for traditionalists is: Compassion toward practicing homosexual persons means calling them, with all heterosexuals who have departed from God's intentions, to repentance and restoration. The advocacy model is to call society away from its destructive "anarchy in sexual relationships" (*The Book of Confessions*, The Confession of 1967, 9.47). For progressives the pastoral model is: Compassion means affirmation of everyone's sexual orientation and encouragement to use it responsibly in covenanted relationships. The advocacy model is to seek the dissolution of distinctions between marriage and same-gender relationships.

### C. *A Question for the Church*

The 2008 overture that mandated the formation of this special committee recognized this disconnect. The overture recognized that there are same-gendered partners in the PC(USA). It asked the special committee to state the place of such partnered couples within the Christian community. The overture further asked the committee to explore marriage from a historical, sociological, and political (legal) perspective. The committee has attempted to do this exploration in an accurate, descriptive manner.

Discerning the place of same-gender partnerships in the Christian community, however, requires us to move beyond description and affirm an understanding of the nature of Christian community. First, the Christian community is found in the church. The church is for “the gathering and perfecting of the saints” (*The Book of Confessions*, The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.142). We are sealed by baptism into this community. But baptism signifies “forgiveness of sins” (*The Book of Confessions*, The Nicene Creed, 1.3), “walk[ing] in newness of life” (*The Book of Confessions*, The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.154), “an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord’s” (*The Book of Confessions*, The Larger Catechism, 7.275), “dying with Christ and a joyful rising with him to new life” (*The Book of Confessions*, The Confession of 1967, 9.51), “present[ing] [our] bodies to be living sacrifices to God” (*Book of Order*, W-1.3033).

Therefore the question must be addressed from the perspective of the church as a place to gather and perfect the saints. Ultimately, we find the answer in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as known in Scripture, affirmed in the confessions, and operationalized through the *Book of Order*. It is only by looking at this question as one of discipleship, of sanctification, that we can ensure that the PC(USA) bears the marks of a true church: “first, the true preaching of the Word of God...; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus...; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly administered, as God’s Word prescribes...” (*The Book of Confessions*, The Scots Confession, 3.18). It is only when we find our unity in the purity of the Word of God that we fulfill our connectional responsibilities to each other.

Based on the above-outlined diversity in views of Scripture and resulting pastoral and advocacy models, the special committee could not develop consensus on the question about same-gender partnerships. The special committee believes there is also significant disagreement among members and officers of the church regarding this question.

#### D. Historic Principles

In this situation of disagreement, we do well to return to the “Historic Principles of Church Order” expounded in Chapter I of the PC(USA) Form of Government: “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” it declares, “and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men [sic] which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship” (G-1.0301). So our consciences are not free in every respect, but rather we are called to bring them into captivity to God’s Word. It is only when confronted with demands that are

“contrary to his Word, or beside it,” that we may claim freedom of conscience.

Regarding such scripturally undetermined matters, the historic principles state that “there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ.” They advise that “in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (*Book of Order*, G-1.0305). On the other hand, where Scripture does determine a question, “it is incumbent upon these officers, and upon the whole Church, in whose name they act, to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous, observing, in all cases, the rules contained in the Word of God” (*Book of Order*, G-1.0303).

The issue before us is whether this question of covenanted same-gender partnerships is determined by the Word of God or not. The fact that equal sisters and brothers in Christ have differing convictions does not imply that all those convictions have equal standing in the church. The historic principles maintain that “no opinion can be ... more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man’s opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty” (*Book of Order*, G-1.0304).

#### E. The Constitution Holds

As we work through our disagreements, we recognize that church teaching and church policy are still set by the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Members of the special committee may not agree on civil unions and Christian marriage; however, the Constitution has authoritative provisions that bear on these questions. Until such time as the church’s understanding of marriage is changed in *The Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*, those provisions remain in force. The burden of proof rests on those who would change the teaching.

Since decisions relating to marriage are made by ministers and sessions, it is well to review the obligations of those officers. All church officers vow to “be instructed and led by those confessions as [they] lead the people of God.” They also pledge to “be governed by our church’s polity” and “abide by its discipline” (*Book of Order*, W-4.4003c, e).

“So far as may be possible without serious departure from these standards [of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government], without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the

constitutional governance of the church,” officers have “freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture.” But “in becoming a candidate or officer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) one chooses to exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds. His or her conscience is captive to the Word of God as interpreted in the standards of the church so long as he or she continues to seek or hold office in that body” (*Book of Order*, G-6.0108a–b).

Regarding marriage, the Constitution consistently declares that:

- Marriage “was instituted by the Lord God himself” (*The Book of Confessions*, 5.246; also 6.131, 6.133, 7.130, 9.47, and *Book of Order*, W-4.9001);

- Marriage is a “spiritual and physical union [of] one man and one woman” (*The Book of Confessions*, 6.131; also 5.246, 6.133);

- Marriage is “designed of God to last as long as they both [husband and wife] shall live” (*The Book of Confessions*, 6.133; also 6.131, 6.137, 9.47 and *Book of Order*, W-4.9001);

- “Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family” (*Book of Order*, W-4.9001; also *The Book of Confessions*, 6.131);

- Marriage serves purposes including “the mutual help of husband and wife;...the safeguarding, undergirding, and development of their moral and spiritual character;...the propagation of children and the rearing of them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (*The Book of Confessions*, 6.134; also 6.131);

- “Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man” (*Book of Order*, W-4.9001);

- “For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship” (*Book of Order*, W-4.9001);

- Christian marriages are to be “publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith” (*Book of Order*, W-4.9001);

- Christians are called to continence in single life or “complete love and concord” in marriage (*The Book of Confessions*, 5.245–.246; also 4.108, 7.248–.249).

Authoritative interpretations of the Constitution have established that:

- “Officers of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who are authorized to perform marriages shall not state,

imply, or represent that a same-sex ceremony is a marriage because under W-4.9001 a same-sex ceremony is not and cannot be a marriage” (*Spahr case, Minutes*, 2008, Part I, p. 331, 333).

- Sessions “should not allow the use of the church facilities for a same sex union ceremony that the session determines to be the same as a marriage ceremony” (*Minutes*, 1991, Part I, p. 395).

- Ministers and churches may celebrate a “loving, caring, and committed relationship” between persons of the same sex. But such a ceremony should not “appropriate specific liturgical forms from services of Christian marriage,” nor should it “confer a new status” upon the persons being blessed. It should not be “construed as an endorsement of homosexual conjugal practice.” Same-sex couples should be instructed “that the service to be conducted does not constitute a marriage ceremony” (*Benton case, Minutes*, 2000, Part I, p. 588).

#### F. A Faithful Answer

God calls us into relationship with God and then with others. In fact, the call to love one’s neighbor is a command. In fulfilling this command for relationship with others, we must act in conformity with the first relationship to God that we have through Jesus Christ. Then in this life of discipleship to Christ, we are called to become his bond servant: body, soul, and mind. Our bodies are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. We must use our bodies within God’s design. Because God’s design is rooted in creation, this design is not just for the believer but for humanity. Therefore, friendships, whether of same or opposite gender, which do not violate God’s boundaries of sexual expression as defined in Scripture, the confessions, and the *Book of Order* can be honored and encouraged. However, those relationships, whether same or opposite gendered, that although committed and caring, which are outside of God’s design of sexual expression, cannot be encouraged or blessed. Pastoral care must be extended to all people within the body of Christ. Such care should always conform to the standards of the confessions as the church works to “gather and perfect” the saints.

For over three decades, the PC(USA) has wrestled with questions of human sexuality. When presbyteries have been asked to depart from the historic teaching of the church, they have declined. The *Book of Order* has been amended to make clear that chastity outside of marriage and monogamy within marriage, with marriage being defined as one man, one woman is a requirement for ordination. If this standard is considered serious enough to bar ordination, then the church in good conscience cannot encourage behavior or relationships that violate this standard. The *Benton* and subsequent decisions

make it clear that in blessing same-sex couples, such blessings cannot be seen as marriage and cannot be construed as blessing sexual activity within these relationships.

This answer to the question about the place of covenanted same-gender partnerships may not be the answer that the Presbytery of Denver expected or

desired. Others, too, may be disappointed. But this is the most faithful answer that we can give, within the faith that we have received and to which we have pledged ourselves.

*The full Minority Report and Committee Report are available on [www.pc-biz.org](http://www.pc-biz.org), Committee 12.*

## A Walk Through the Woods

by Mary Holder Naegeli

There are deep theological flaws in some seemingly acceptable assertions being made in current debates about homosexuality and marriage. In order to sort these out, please join me on a walk through the forest of the PCUSA. Imagine yourself surrounded by the great redwood trees of California and be aware of its tightly intertwined root system. Though shallow by most standards, redwood roots extend laterally for great distances and weave themselves amongst the roots of nearby trees. They are not “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). As we walk among these ancient spires, we are going to examine some very closely. I hope by the end of our tour you have gained an appreciation of the whole forest and can discern which are the diseased limbs causing infection within it. Mindful that this forest may seem at some points to be more like a maze, I offer the following nature trail guide to identify points of interest along the way. [diagram on [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com)]

### Trail Marker No. 1: The God-as-Trinity Tree

We start at the very center of the Presbyterian forest, the point around which all Presbyterian life revolves. It is a huge tree with many facets. We know God to be One-in-Three since the church coined the term “Trinity” to describe the great mystery of one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a lively, relational fellowship of three distinct persons existing as one essence:<sup>1</sup> God the Father, creator and sustainer of all that is and the initiator of relationship with that creation; Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate among us to inaugurate the Kingdom and to reconcile sinners to God; and the Holy Spirit indwelling believers to convict of sin, regenerate to new life, empower and

equip for ministry. While describing their distinctions as we experience them, we also affirm that they are of one substance. So when we perceive the work of the Holy Spirit, we know that God is acting; when we believe in the saving work of Jesus Christ, we know that God was acting; and when the Father embraces us in covenant love, we know that God is acting. They cannot be separated from each other; one is not willing or capable—by God’s very nature— of “going rogue” to say or do something the other two would not. In support of this assertion, we recognize moments in the biblical narrative in which the Trinity is present: Creation (Gen. 1 with Col. 1:15-17), the Annunciation (Luke 1:35), at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:16f and par.), and at Stephen’s stoning (Acts 7:55). The Trinitarian formula for baptism was evident in the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, who commanded us to “baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19f). These three are and act together.

So the Trinity represents one God, the God of the universe, the God above all gods, the God who existed in loving relationship even before human beings were created. While Jesus was teaching in the early first century, he referred to the mutuality of the Trinity of which he was one person: “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30); “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf” (John 15:26). The Apostle Paul was well aware of this divine one-in-three, when he observed, “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal. 4:6).

We need this God-as-Trinity Tree firmly planted in our Presbyterian forest, because some in our midst want to separate Jesus from the Trinity as though only Jesus is to be obeyed, or attribute to the Holy Spirit ideas that are out of synchronization with the Trinity, as though the Spirit can add new and contradictory “revelations” to God’s Word.

## **Trail Marker No. 2:**

### **The Path around the God-as-Trinity Tree**

It is one of the mysteries of our faith that this God-as-Trinity Tree, under certain light conditions, can be seen or experienced as one of three trees of its substance. As we walk around its circumference, we detect that there are specific aspects of this intertwined three-in-one tree worth examining. For now, note that they are all grounded together as one tree (do not ever forget this!) and cannot be separated to plant as individual trees in isolated parts of the forest. Nevertheless, we can make some observations at points marked on the trail.

## **Trail Marker No 3: The God as Jesus Christ Tree**

*Jesus as Lord of All.* The first sermons by post-Pentecost disciples proclaimed, “Jesus Christ is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36 [Peter], and 17:24 [Paul]), identifying for us the central affirmation of the Christian Church for all ages. In ringing tones throughout the New Testament, Jesus Christ is exalted and praised. He is unsurpassed in power, rule, and authority. There is no one higher than this One who relinquished the prerogatives of heaven, took upon himself full humanity while retaining his deity, was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, healed many, declared and demonstrated the Kingdom of God, died on the cross, rose again on the third day, and ascended into heaven (Phil. 2:5-11).

All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named ...<sup>2</sup>

The apostle Paul proclaimed this “one Lord” (1 Cor. 8:6, Eph. 4:5) who is now “seated at [God’s] right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named...” (Eph. 1:20f).

As we ponder this Jesus, we become aware that different people may be picturing a different Jesus, depending on their theological presuppositions. A recent issue of *Christianity Today* offered a helpful cover story by professor Scot McKnight<sup>3</sup> that reflected on efforts to discover the “real” Jesus. He challenges us to consider what we mean when we say “the Real

Jesus”: is it the Jewish Jesus, seen as the son of Jewish parents, student of Jewish rabbis, victim of Jewish political clashes? Is Jesus the Canonical Jesus, the one interpreted by the four gospel writers as Messiah, Son of God, and the agent of God’s redemption? Is Jesus the Orthodox Jesus, reflecting the amplified understanding of Jesus developed by the theologians of the early church? Does one mean the Historical Jesus, the person behind all the testimonies about him, reconstructed by scholars on the basis of modern historical methods? Or perhaps, one is referring—honestly now—to the Personal Jesus, the personality you and I have each projected onto Jesus Christ and likely cast in our own image?

When challengers of basic Presbyterian faith and polity insist that we are to obey Jesus Christ (in contrast to obeying Scripture), which Jesus are they talking about? What other Jesus do we have than the one who is revealed to us in the Scriptures (the Canonical Jesus) and proclaimed as Lord, Savior, Teacher, Son of God, and Messiah (the Orthodox Jesus)? The assertions of these challengers must be examined for the possibility that their Jesus can be separated from Scripture and the witness of the Church. But more on that later, when we get to the Scripture Tree.

*Jesus as Head of the Church.* The authority of Jesus as Lord extends into the life of the Church, over which Christ is “head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18). God has “put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body” (Eph. 1:22). Presbyterians put it this way: “The Church, as Christ’s body, is bound to his authority,”<sup>4</sup> which means that any authority the church might perceive itself to have is derived from the authority of Jesus, the basis for our mission. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19f) makes this clear: [Jesus speaking,] “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Jesus as Lord of all and head of the church expects that his people will do as he says. But mystified, Jesus once asked, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46).

If we are sincere in calling Jesus Christ the Lord of all and the head of the church, we must also be sincere and guileless in our willingness to follow where he leads and do what he says. This is the essence of “obedience to Christ.”

#### **Trail Marker No. 4: The Path between the God-As-Jesus Tree and the Church Tree**

As we continue around the periphery of the God-as-Trinity Tree, we notice there are a few pathways leading out from the center. We will first take the path that links the God-As-Jesus Tree to the Church Tree. Later we will come back to this same spot, and take the path from the God-As-Holy-Spirit Tree to the Scripture Tree. As we circle the Church Tree, we will discover that a trail links it also to the Scripture Tree by a two-way path, so follow this guide to keep you from getting lost.

The church's origins rest with God, whose covenant with Israel extended to include those who would follow Jesus, the Messiah (Eph. 2:11-21). Jesus brought the church into being, not as an ecclesiastical structure but as a community of faith gathered around knowing him. His intention was that his disciples, after his departure, would carry on the work of proclaiming and demonstrating the Kingdom of God to the world. He imparted authority to the church to do this, after Peter's profession of faith: "...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:16-19).

Pentecost, commonly identified as the birthday of the church, more accurately was the day that the already existing community of faith was empowered to proclaim the gospel. Previously, Jesus had given it the authority to do so. This link will become important as we explore more fully the call of the church, but along this pathway we are reminded that any strength, authority, or power the church might possess has been imparted by Jesus Christ and is derivative of his own authority. The church is not to act on its own or do what is right in its own eyes, but to come back to its roots in obedience to Jesus Christ. This is the essence of the classic affirmation, "The church reformed, always to be reformed, according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit."<sup>5</sup> The church reforms by returning (repenting) to its biblical roots after wandering down bunny trails of false belief or scandalous practice.

#### **Trail Marker No. 5: The Church Tree**

The roots of this God-planted Church Tree run deeply through the history of Israel, when God's intention to establish a covenant relationship with faithful people (starting with Abraham) was revealed. The seed of righteousness based on faith was planted in Abraham's heart (Rom. 4:16), and those who followed in his footsteps were declared part of God's set-apart people. So when Jesus invited his (Jewish) disciples to believe in him and thereby know the Father (John 14:7), and

when Peter introduced Gentiles to the Savior (starting in Acts 10:9-44), both were demonstrating God's intention that all who believed in Jesus Christ would be counted among God's people made righteous in him. To this day, a declared faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is all that is required for membership in a Presbyterian church.<sup>6</sup>

*The Church empowered by the Holy Spirit.* "Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, for its service to God."<sup>7</sup> Its mission to the world is to make disciples, to introduce them to the worship and service of God, to teach them everything Jesus had commanded, and to demonstrate Kingdom living in the world.<sup>8</sup> We are not left to figure this out entirely on our own, nor are we expected to draw upon mere human strength. Jesus had said, just before he left, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The first sign of the Spirit's outpouring was the miraculous proclamation of the gospel among Jerusalem pilgrims in their own languages. That same Spirit, which we will examine when we get back to the God-As-Spirit Tree, brought to life the movement that gathered and deployed those who would "turn the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

*The Church instructed by the Word of God.*<sup>9</sup> God gave a second equipping gift to the church. Even before the New Testament books were gathered into a "canon,"<sup>10</sup> the people of God were in possession of the Old Testament. The books of Moses (the Pentateuch, or first five books of the Bible), the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, collected the written testimonies to God's redeeming work in the world. The reality that YHWH God wanted to be known by name (Ex. 3:13), have an ongoing relationship with Abraham and his progeny (Gen. 12:1-3), and define the terms of covenant in life-giving ways (Ex. 20) is staggering evidence of God's great love and care. God is not coy, arbitrary, or playing hard-to-get; from the very beginning God has wanted to be in open and unhindered relationship with human beings. In the course of this great story of God and his creation, God gave commandments that, when observed, would keep us in fellowship with God's purposes. To stray from these meant unchaperoned forays into the dangerous territory of "life on one's own."<sup>11</sup> So the Old Testament—"Scripture" to first century followers of Jesus—described a way of life and wooed God's people into saving relationship with their creator and sustainer. Jesus quoted from the Old Testament regularly; the Scriptures guarded his heart when tempted (Luke 4:1-12); his vocabulary for communicating his own calling was found in Isaiah (Luke 4:18); and the foundation for the redemptive

purposes of God through Jesus Christ was articulated in the overarching story of God's covenant people Israel. Jesus himself taught from the Law and demonstrated not only the letter of the Law but also its spirit (Matt. 5-7), helping his followers to discover faith as a way of life rather than a set of meaningless, rote rules to follow.

It was the responsibility of the church to receive this Word, to put it into action, and to transmit it (Luke. 5:8-15). On the corporate level, the Church was God's agent for collating, affirming, and distributing the Word of God written. On the personal level, the apostle Paul was acutely aware that he had received a precious gift of God's self-revelation in the Scriptures, and considered it a sacred trust to pass on to others. "For I *handed on to you* as of first importance *what I in turn had received*: that Christ died for our sins and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures ..." (1 Cor. 15:3-8).

### **Trail Marker No. 6: The Path from The Church Tree to the Scripture Tree**

This trail goes in both directions between the Church Tree and the Scripture Tree. We have described how, through the witness and work of the Church (inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit), we came to possess the Scriptures and share God's Word with the *world*. In this limited sense, the Scriptures are mediated to the world by the Church. However, the Scripture as God's Word written imparts God's will upon the *Church* through instruction, information, and correction, and thereby holds the Church and its members accountable to the will of God (2 Tim. 3:16).

### **Trail Marker No. 7: The Scripture Tree (just a quick look)**

As we approach this redwood of the faith, a walk around its periphery reveals a connecting path that heads straight back to the God-As-Spirit Tree embedded as One of Three in the Trinity Tree, where we started. In order for us to appreciate fully all the aspects of the Scripture Tree, we must trace its roots from the Trinity Tree, since one of Scripture's hallmarks is that the Word written gives an authentic and sufficient witness to the saving Lordship of Jesus Christ. "The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written."<sup>12</sup>

So our discussion pathway leads us back to God, Three in One—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the God who wants to be known.

### **Trail Marker No. 8: The God-As-Spirit Tree**

The Holy Spirit is God eternally present with us (John 14:16), dwelling in our hearts by faith (Rom. 5:5). The Spirit was sent by God as Advocate (the word is *paracletos*, paraclete, the one who comes alongside), a witness on Jesus' behalf (John 15:26), our intercessor (Rom. 8:27), to convict us of sin (John 16:8), to bring us to life in Christ (Rom. 8:9-11), and to endow us with spiritual gifts for the work of ministry (1 Cor. 12:4-11). All the Holy Spirit does is intended to bring people to an authentic, vital, and pure relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Nicene Creed affirms that the Holy Spirit is One with the Father and the Son.<sup>13</sup> The Spirit, while making Christ known to individual believers and the church, does not fabricate anything that is contradictory to the self-disclosure of God in the Scriptures.<sup>14</sup> The Spirit speaks what the Spirit hears from God-As-Trinity, just as Jesus did only what he saw his Father doing (John 5:19). "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:13). This unity of the Trinity is what makes *our* union with *Christ* possible: the Spirit of God acts upon and within us to invite us into a right relationship with Father, provided by the atoning work of the Son. The Spirit has no plans whatsoever to take us by any other path than "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 4:6) to the heart of our loving Father.<sup>15</sup>

The Holy Spirit is given to those who believe in Christ. Peter made the connection clear in his first sermon after Pentecost: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). While the Holy Spirit is at work *on* all people, the indwelling Spirit's work *within* is limited to Christian believers, because the Spirit cannot be separated from Jesus Christ, who waits to be invited into one's heart.

The Holy Spirit as One of Three participated in the writing of Scripture. When Paul reminded Timothy that "all Scripture is inspired by God," he used the word literally translated "God-breathed." *Theo* is "God" and *pneustos* is "breathed" from the same word for "spirit," *pneuma*. The Spirit is at work in and through Scripture, having been present and active when it was written and present now as it is read and preached. The Spirit has a vested interest in God's people getting the Word right, because the Scripture is the Spirit's word to the church. The Word of God is known to Paul as "the sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17). One can test any assertion attributed to the Spirit by evaluating its consistency with the Word of God written. The authority of the Bible in

the life of the church is based squarely on the work of the Trinity, working in concert to make known God's will and way to those God calls his own.

With the origins of Scripture recognized as coming from God, we can now return to the Scripture Tree for a closer look.

### **Back to Trail Marker No. 7: The Scripture Tree**

*God's Word.* While saying that the Scripture is "God-breathed" or "inspired," it is not sufficient to say that the Bible contains inspired passages or is simply inspiration to us. It would also be inaccurate to say that parts of the Scripture can exist alone as Scripture, because it takes all of Scripture to accomplish—infally and authoritatively (Isaiah 55:6-11)—what God wills. We know what God intends this self-revelation to achieve because of the claims it makes (cf. 2 Tim 3:16f); the Holy Spirit, at work in the written word and dwelling in our hearts, confirms that this is indeed God speaking as *living* word. The Scripture is God's ongoing word to humanity.

*In human words.* We also affirm that the Bible is God's Word expressed in human words. God chose to make this self-revelation in ordinary human language, so we could hear it. The Scripture itself is not God,<sup>16</sup> but it infally points to God as one who wants to be in covenant with us through Jesus Christ. God's Word in human words demonstrates that God desires full participation with humanity; and Jesus entered our world in time and space, language and locale, in order to make reconciliation with God possible.

*Bearing a living witness to Jesus Christ.* "The church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit."<sup>17</sup> We have two biblical examples of the Scriptures pointing to Jesus Christ. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus talked to two confused disciples who were trying to sort out the events of Easter day. "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Philip, a gifted evangelist, shares Christ with an Ethiopian pilgrim returning from Jerusalem: "Philip ran up to [the chariot] and heard [the Ethiopian] reading the prophet [Isaiah].... Then Philip, starting with this Scripture, proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:29-35).

*Authoritative in the life of the church and the believer.* By virtue of its divine origin, the Word of God carries the authority of its author. "The one sufficient

revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written."<sup>18</sup> This "receiving and obeying" brings us back to the path between the Scripture Tree and the Church Tree, in that the Word of God is given to the church as the sufficient statement of God's heart, mind and expectation for the people of God. The Bible is our rule for "faith and manners."<sup>19</sup> The authority of Scripture lies in its ability "to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

*Properly understood.* The task becomes "rightly explaining the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:20f). We understand that the Word both in its parts and in its entirety requires interpretation, which, we believe, must be guided first by the Holy Spirit through Scripture itself, and then by the confessional statements of the church. Scripture is the lens through which we see God's will clearly. Human beings are not the lens, and our own eyes are clouded by spiritual cataracts. We need the Scripture to bring God's will into focus.<sup>20</sup> Paul's exhortation to Timothy was to remain faithful to the Word of God, to read it, study it, teach it, and not be persuaded to change the message when orthodoxy became unfashionable or dangerous (2 Tim. 3:10-7).

The New Testament writers understood the church's authority to rest solely upon its faithfulness to the Word of God. Foundational principles of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) acknowledge this important link (emphasis added): "All Church power is only ministerial and declarative; that is, *the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners*;...all the decisions of a church governing body should be founded upon the *revealed will of God*"<sup>21</sup> (G-1.0307).

Out of the church's understanding of Scripture come standards, which bind church officers to a pattern of behavior that relies on the grace of God, repents of sin, and exhibits the fruit of the Spirit. "Among these standards is the requirement" that church officers "live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness."<sup>22</sup> This is a biblical standard, fully supported not only by Scripture but also by the church's teaching in our confessions.

But it is precisely here, at the point on the trail where the Word of God must be interpreted, that we find

challengers to Presbyterian faith and polity obscuring the path.

### **Bunny Trail No. 1:**

“We can accept the authority of the Scripture, but reject the church’s interpretation of the Scripture related to homosexuality or same-sex marriage.”

The controversies in the PC(USA) revolve around “rightly explaining the word of truth.” It would be a brazen denial to say that the Bible has no authority in matters related to homosexuality, and few would make such a denial. Rather, challengers of Presbyterian faith and polity seek to *interpret* the authoritative Word of God in a way that allows for the very behavior Scripture unequivocally condemns.<sup>23</sup> We can only appeal to the plain meaning of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments, the complete lack of any modulation or softening of that meaning as the Scripture unfolds (between Lev. 18:22 and 1 Cor. 6:9), and a strong Genesis-based understanding of marriage complementarity (Gen. 1:27f, 2:18-25) to make this case. Furthermore, the witness of the church—through its confessional interpretations of the Scripture through the centuries—rejects the notion that homosexual behavior is acceptable.<sup>24</sup>

### **Bunny Trail No. 2:**

“The Holy Spirit is re-interpreting the Word of God, and we must be open to the new thing God is doing.”

Believing that “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8) and that the Triune God is unified in purpose, message, and ministry, we reject any “new thing” contrary to God’s Word that might be attributed to the Holy Spirit. Rather, we see this as blasphemy: attributing something to the Spirit that is undue, untrue, or defaming. “Reformed and always being reformed, according to the Word of God” does not entitle us to invent something totally new or unheard of or contradictory to the church’s teaching. What *is* new, and accomplished by the Holy Spirit, is a regenerated responsiveness to Jesus Christ, Lord of All, and repentance made possible by the kindness of God (Rom. 2:4).

**Bunny Trail No. 3:** “It is wrong to say that we are to obey Scripture (as in G-6.0106b). Rather, we are called to obey Jesus Christ to which Scripture gives witness.”

Implicit in this assertion is that, somehow, Jesus is detached from the Word of God. You can see how this would be possible if one rejected a Canonical or Orthodox Jesus in favor of a Personal Jesus. However,

the link between the Word Become Flesh and the Word Written forged by the interlocking roots between the God-as-Trinity Tree and the Scripture Tree has been demonstrated above. It is something relatively new to claim that the Word of God does not require our obedience; but in the era of historical-critical inquiry of the Scriptures, the humanness of the Bible has wrongly diminished the church’s confidence in the affirmations of biblical infallibility and authority.

On the particular topic of homosexuality, it is claimed that because Jesus is silent on the issue, we are free to take that silence as approval of some sort of sexual arrangement *we* deem appropriate or acceptable. But Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 as the defining word on marriage, obligating us to measure all other sexual relationships against that standard.

We must be very careful, lest we fall into Eve’s sin. Eve could be said to have followed her conscience, by regarding the forbidden fruit and coming to the very-well-meaning conclusion that it was “good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6). But her decision failed the most basic test of the well-shaped conscience, obedience to God’s Word.

### **Conclusion**

Just as a redwood forest is tied together by the interlocking roots of its trees, the Presbyterian Forest is grounded in the Trinity, to which the Church and the Scriptures are linked. When we understand that God does not act or speak at cross-purposes with himself, our doctrines of divine revelation, knowledge, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Church all fall into place. The debates before us are not “only about sex,” but about the very biblical and theological roots of our faith! So “keep your head in all situations” (2 Tim. 4:5 NIV) and take fellow Presbyterians for a walk through the Presbyterian forest.

**Footnotes and an explanatory diagram are on our website at [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com)**

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# The Belhar Confession: A Failure to Confess Jesus Christ

By Viola Larson

The Belhar Confession, birthed out of the ugly years of apartheid in South Africa, has been recommended for inclusion in *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The original request to include the Belhar was sent to the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2008) by the 12-person, Advocacy Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns. That GA set up a special committee to consider the request and report to this July's 219<sup>th</sup> GA. That special committee considers the effort to include Belhar among the Church's confessions timely. General Assembly commissioners will vote on the recommendation. If the recommendation is approved, the presbyteries will then vote on whether to include the Belhar in the *Book of Confessions*. At least two-thirds of the denomination's 173 presbyteries must vote yes in order for it to be adopted.

In this paper I will explain why the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) should not adopt the Belhar Confession. The main reason for not including Belhar in the denomination's book of confessions is a concern that it does not properly confess Jesus Christ. But there are several other problems in the document which are connected to faulty statements within the text and their impending misuse.

The *Belhar Confession Study Guide* produced by the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and written by Eunice T. McGarrahah gives a short history of the Belhar Confession, which was adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1986. McGarrahah writes:

The Belhar Confession emerged out of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. In the nineteenth-century the Dutch Reformed Church decided to separate all non-white members into the Dutch Reformed Mission Church....The Belhar Confession was originally a product of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church as it protested the sin of apartheid. Just a few years later it became the confession of the Uniting Reformed Church, the reunion of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa.

McGarrahah continues noting that the Belhar Confession is a non-white, non-North American confession produced by a conversation between the Theological Declaration of Barmen of the Confessing Church of Nazi Germany and Apartheid in South Africa. However, as I will show, the relationship between Barmen and Belhar is mainly due to structural considerations since Belhar, unlike the Barmen Declaration, lacks an important Christological emphasis.

McGarrahah quotes one of the authors of Belhar as he addresses his thoughts on Karl Barth's view of a confession. Dirk Smit wrote "It [a Confession] always arises in a definite antithesis and conflict. It says a definite Yes only because a definite No is implied, otherwise it is no confession."<sup>1</sup> But is this a complete view of Karl Barth's view of a confession? Does it fit with the complete understanding of a confession as understood by the original signers of the Theological Declaration of Barmen? The issue is clarified by understanding that the definite *yes* in Barmen was a yes to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And the *no* was about adding anything else that would deny his Lordship.

So while it is true that a confession must have a negative aspect and that negative aspect, as Dr. Arthur Cochrane puts it, clarifies and defines the positive, yet it is still nothing unless its emphasis is to confess Christ. Cochrane explains this in the "The Nature of a Confession of Faith," in his book *The Church's Confession Under Hitler*. He writes:

A Confession is therefore not the publication of the opinions, convictions, ideals, and value judgments of men. It does not set forth a program or system of theology or ethics. It is not a set of principles or constitution for a fraternal order, social service club, or a religious society. It is not a political or ethical, social religious platform. It does not bear witness to certain truths in nature and history that may be championed by certain groups in society. It confesses Jesus Christ as the one Lord, the one justification and sanctification of men, the one revelation, and the one Word of God which we have to hear, trust, and obey in life and in death.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, Cochrane, who conferred with Barth as well as other members of the Confessing Church during the early years of their formation, insists that, “the primary condition of a Confession, the possibility of a Confession, is not that men decide to confess Christ for a variety of reasons—say, for the sake of a Church union—but that Christ for no reason at all, that is, in his sovereign freedom, has decided to confess himself to us.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, understanding this very basic foundation of a confession, I shall consider four particular reasons why the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) must not adopt Belhar. The first and most important, as I have noted above, has to do with confessing Christ. The other three problems may be assumed under the first one. That is, they occur because of failure to focus the Belhar Confession on the church’s confession of Christ. Listed below are the four reasons:

1. Failure to focus the confession on the Lordship of Christ;
2. The issue of homosexuality in the mainline churches;
3. The Israeli and Palestinian conflict;
4. The issue of pluralism.

### **The Lordship of Christ:**

Various theologians have insisted that Belhar looks to Karl Barth and the Declaration of Barmen as its model. But Belhar’s references to Christ are simply formal statements inserted into a text which mainly speaks to church unity.

The problem in both South Africa and Nazi Germany, within the church, was the doctrine of the “Orders of Creation.” That is, that in creating, God instituted certain institutions that could not be changed. In South Africa, the church, using this doctrine, set boundaries for various races allowing the church to conform to the laws of a racist state. However, without a focus on confessing Christ as he is known in Holy Scripture, the Belhar Confession overcame the problem of non-unity in the church by making church unity a law set above or beside Christ. But, instead of unity as law, unity grows from the grace found in Christ Jesus. It is Jesus’ Lordship that births, nurtures and places boundaries around unity. Unity belongs to that body of believers who come under the authority of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, in Nazi Germany, within the church, the rights of government were emphasized in an attempt to allow the church to conform to the laws of a totalitarian state. But Barth, with the Declaration of Barmen as well as other documents, insisted that placing anything beside Christ, as he is found in the Old

and New Testaments, was a compromising position for the Church. Here Barth is referring to “Creation and Redemption, Nature and Grace, Nationalism and Gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, a nation could be neither more important than nor *as* important as the gospel of Jesus Christ. What knowledge, gifts and cultural inheritance one might possess because of nature could not be equal to or set against the redemptive grace found in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Holy Scripture. The covenant of God’s redemptive act in Jesus Christ for the sake of all peoples sits high above any particular national claims based on creation. “For by him [Jesus] all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and *for* him” (Col.1:16).

Hans Asmussen, who gave the expository sermon on the Declaration of Barmen at its adopting synod, gives further understanding of the importance and priority of confessing Christ. Explaining what is now 8.15 in the PC (USA) *Book of Confessions*, Asmussen states:

...it is only a relative difference whether beside the Holy Scripture in the Church, historical events or reason, culture, aesthetic feelings, progress, or other powers and figures are said to be binding claims upon the Church. All these factors cannot limit the proclamation of Christ, nor can they take a place beside Christ as subjects of proclamation. In proclamation they can have no other place than that of various marks of the one, basically unchanged world, which can find redemption in Christ and only in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus Christ as God’s final revelation, found only in the written Word of God, answers all questions the Church must answer and sets all boundaries against an intrusive sinful world.

### **The Issue of Homosexuality:**

Because of Belhar’s emphasis on unity rather than the Lordship of Jesus Christ, others have insisted on using it for issues that are unbiblical. Indeed, the author of the study guide provided by the Office of Theology and Worship of the General Assembly Council of the PC (USA) writes:

While the impetus for studying the Belhar Confession in the PC (USA) is racism, Belhar’s strength is that it speaks to more than one form of injustice. By focusing on the unity of the Church, it gives us theological grounding for the ministry of reconciliation amidst all the sins and disputes that divide the Church.

Statements within the text of the Belhar Confession add to a possible dichotomy in which a Confession of the Church could be used to encourage the Church to accept sin as normative. One such statement is, “...we reject any doctrine which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation....”

The list of those seeking, through Belhar, the ordination of self-affirming homosexuals is growing. One contributor to Belhar, Allan Boesak, has sought to use it as a means to gain ordination for practicing homosexuals in the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa. In the PC (USA) the Witherspoon Society’s Eugene TeSelle writes, “While we’re talking about absolutizing natural diversity, we might refer the Belhar Confession to the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity as it considers the PC (USA)’s prohibition on gay/lesbian.”<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Holder Rich of the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns, which initially sent the Belhar to the GA, stated that “This document [Belhar] is about freedom. People of different sexual orientations are not free and so this document could be used to free people.”<sup>7</sup>

In the PC (USA) we also will undoubtedly see this confession used in a way that is detached from the Lordship of Christ “as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture.”

### **The Israeli and Palestinian Conflict:**

Speakers at the Reformed Church in America’s 2004 General Synod meeting used the Belhar Confession as a solution for what they perceive as Israel’s racism. The Rev. Christo Lombard from the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa, stated “If there is one situation in this world that contextually fits the anti-apartheid struggle and its dynamics, for which the Belhar Confession was written, it must be the Palestinian situation, currently.” Another speaker, Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, pastor of Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, also hoped that the confession might be used against the State of Israel. In the same way some in the PC (USA) who are advocating for this confession may attempt to use it as leverage against Israel.<sup>8</sup>

My first introduction to the Belhar Confession was through a faulty study paper on the Belhar Confession. The study paper made reference to the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance which met in Durban, South Africa from August 31 to September 8, 2001.

In preparation for the 2008, 218th PC(USA) General Assembly, the Advocacy Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns offered the study paper entitled “Report of the Task Force to Study Reparations.” The authors of that paper castigated the United States for walking out of the Durban conference. What they failed to write was that Israel also walked out because it was an anti-Semitic conference. The then Secretary of State, General Colin Powell, after terminating the American presence at the conference wrote,

I know that you do not combat racism by conferences that produce declarations containing hateful language, some of which is a throwback to the days of “Zionism equals racism;” or supports the idea that we have made too much of the Holocaust; or suggests that apartheid exists in Israel; or that singles out only one country in the world—Israel—for censure and abuse.<sup>9</sup>

Members of the Advocacy Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns ignored the racism of this conference while recommending its paper and the Belhar. Rather than speaking against racism, some people may use the Belhar Confession in the same manner as Raheb and Lombard and those at the Durban conference to promote racism.

### **The Issue of Pluralism:**

Raheb formulates what I have listed as my final concern; that some in the PC (USA) may attempt to use this Confession as a platform to promote pluralism.

In a final and complete rejection of Barmen, Raheb divorces Jesus Christ from the Belhar Confession, writing:

On several places in the confession the word “church” is replaced by another category called “the People of God.” The Belhar Confession uses this term to describe the church. My question would be, is it possible to expand this “People of God” terminology to encompass the “peoples of God,” including in this Jews and Muslims? And by this to provide a monotheistic platform for unity?

This statement demonstrates how the promotion of “unity” in the Belhar can potentially replace, and therefore deny, the Church’s confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. Raheb’s formula empties and turns the confession into a hollow unfaithful paper with no confession of Christ at all.

### **Conclusion:**

A Confession of Faith for the church must have as its main focus the church’s confession of Christ. All other important concerns of the church, including her unity,

must be subsumed under the heading “Jesus Christ is Lord.” He is Lord over sin of any kind. Lord over adultery and homosexual practice. Lord over racism and anti-Semitism. Lord over all gods and powers. Jesus Christ is the Lord of his Church, within her, above her and leading her. That is the ultimate Confession for the Church of Jesus Christ.

**Footnotes can be found on our website [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com).**

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# How the New Form of Government Would Harm Congregations: A Summary

By Carol Shanholtzer

The proposed new Form of Government (nFOG) would significantly change congregational life by limiting the powers of the session. The nFOG would create a centralized, top-down governance, with the session at the bottom of the structure, following instructions from and sending required financial support to the higher governing bodies.

In some instances the nFOG would change our governance with the introduction of new language. Other changes are accomplished by retaining the current language, but redefining the meaning of words. A critical redefinition applies to the word “church.” The nFOG explicitly defines the lower-case word “church” always to mean “denomination” (footnote 1, first page of “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity”). Presbyterians should consider the implications of the altered meaning as it is applied to the mission of the congregation.

## Examples of changes the nFOG introduces which would harm congregations

- Sessions currently have the authority to support or not support the denomination’s per capita and mission budgets. Under the nFOG, sessions would be required to pay per capita assessments (nFOG G-3.0202f) and to support the denomination’s mission budget (nFOG G-3.0113).

- Currently the session is responsible for the “mission and government” (G-10.0102) of a congregation. The nFOG would remove the session’s responsibility for determining the congregation’s mission and instead would require the session to lead the congregation in participating in the mission of the denomination (nFOG G-3.0201c). The denomination’s mission uses strategy and priorities determined by the hierarchy of higher governing bodies, going from the General Assembly, to synod, to presbytery, to congregation, leaving the session out of the line of authority (nFOG G-3.0501a, G-3.0401a, G-3.0301c, G-3.0303).
- Members of a congregation now voluntarily put themselves under the leadership of their *congregation’s* officers, whom they elect (G-7.0103). In the nFOG church members would put themselves under the leadership “of the session and higher councils (presbytery, synod, and General Assembly)” (nFOG G-1.0103f).
- Instead of speaking of membership in a “particular church” (congregation), as our current Form of Government does (G-5.0302), the nFOG describes individuals as members of the denomination (nFOG G-1.0402).
- Currently the congregation is “understood as a local expression of the universal Church” (G-4.0102), but in the nFOG the congregation is “the basic form of” the denomination (nFOG G-1.0101).

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### Change Service Requested

- Currently a Pastor Nominating Committee must receive the presbytery Committee on Ministry's *advice* on the ministers being considered and presbytery approval is sought only after the congregation elects a pastor (G-11.0502d, G-14.0532). Under the nFOG, the congregation can only consider ministers the presbytery has *pre-approved* (nFOG G-2.0803).
- Currently there must always be a meeting of the congregation to vote on dissolution of a pastor's or associate pastor's relationship with a congregation (G-14.0610). The nFOG allows dissolution of an installed pastoral relationship without a congregational meeting if the presbytery finds that the denomination's mission under the Word "imperatively demands dissolution of the relationship without such a meeting" (nFOG G-2.0901).
- Currently the types of business allowed at a congregational meeting include "matters related to the permissive powers of a congregation" (G-7.0304a), but the nFOG does not give the congregation any "permissive powers" (nFOG G-1.0503).
- Currently, congregational representation in presbytery by elders takes into account the uneven distribution of members among the churches of the presbytery—some congregations being larger and some smaller. No church is left without elder representation and the Form of Government assigns elder representation based on the size of the congregation's membership (G-11.0101). Under the nFOG the guarantee that elder representation will be proportionate to the size of a congregation's membership is lost (nFOG G-3.0301).
- Currently, church financial records are open to inspection by authorized "church officers" (G-10.0401b), but the nFOG (through redefinition of words) requires that the records be open to inspection by moderators and stated clerks of denominational governing bodies (nFOG G-3.0205b).
- Provisions for review of session records in the nFOG (nFOG G-3.0108a) are similar to the current provisions (G-9.0407d). However, the advisory handbook (which the General Assembly will be asked to approve) includes a long list of questions for presbytery use in reviewing sessions such as, "Are any directives from the presbytery properly recorded?" (nFOG advisory handbook referring to nFOG G-3.0106, G-3.0202)
- Currently, governing bodies are described as being "separate and independent" (G-9.0103), but under the nFOG the governing bodies are described only as "distinct" (nFOG F-3.0203).
- The types of diversity required by our current Form of Government (G-4.0403) are not controversial and are consistent with current ordination standards, including G-6.0106b. The nFOG states, "The PC(USA) shall guarantee full participation and representation in...governance...to all persons or groups within its membership" (nFOG F-1.0403).

These points are a summary of a more complete analysis contained in "How the New Form of Government Would Harm Congregations" on the Presbyterian Coalition website [www.presbycoalition.org](http://www.presbycoalition.org). The more comprehensive paper quotes from the current Form of Government and the corresponding provisions from the proposed nFOG. That paper also offers a more detailed exploration of the nature and significance of the harmful changes the nFOG would introduce into congregational life.

*Carol Shanholtzer is a Presbyterian elder in Minneapolis, MN. This is reprinted with the permission of the Presbyterian Coalition. Additional articles critiquing the proposed new FOG can be found on their website.*

