

Theology Matters

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The 208th General Assembly last June sent to the presbyteries for their vote changes to the Book of Order that would clear the way for full participation by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in COCU. If the amendment passes, participation will be mandatory for sessions, presbyteries, synods and the GA. The articles in this issue of Theology Matters examine the serious theological and polity concerns raised by Presbyterian participation in COCU. Theology Matters has been sent to every PCUSA congregation as a resource in preparation for the vote by presbyteries.

The Church of Christ Uniting (COCU): An Analysis of the Polity Issues

by Daryl Fisher-Ogden *

In 1993, the 205th General Assembly voted to join the ecumenical group, The Church of Christ Uniting (COCU, also known as the Churches in Covenant Communion). However, full participation is not possible until changes are made to the Presbyterian Church (USA) Constitution; specifically the *Book of Order*. The 1996 General Assembly has proposed major changes to the *Book of Order* that would alter our polity and allow the Presbyterian Church (USA) to fully participate as a member denomination in COCU. These changes must now be approved or rejected by the 172 presbyteries.

If a simple majority of the presbyteries votes to approve the amendment, the Presbyterian Church (USA) will become a fully-participatory member of COCU. If, however, the amendment fails to receive affirmative votes by at least 87 presbyteries, the changes will not be made to our Constitution. This would make the Presbyterian Church (USA) a member of COCU, but unable to participate in it. Such a situation could be resolved by a subsequent General Assembly either voting to withdraw

from COCU or sending a new amendment to the presbyteries. A new amendment could address some of the serious concerns that currently remain unresolved.

The proposed COCU amendment to section G-15 of the *Book of Order* needs careful consideration before presbyteries vote to accept or reject its provisions. If the amendment is approved, it will take effect when a plenary meeting is held by all the denominations that have joined COCU. Even then, the changes would be optional until local, regional and national covenanting councils are formed. If approved this year, the changes would become optional in 1998 and mandatory when the councils are in place.

The defining documents for COCU are *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting*, 1985, 1991 and *Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting*, 1989. Both of these are available from the Consultation on Church Union, Research Park, 258 Wall Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540, (609) 921-7866.

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PCUSA Polity and COCU Councils

The COCU documents call for member denominations to “live as one in the most basic things--in faith, sacrament, ministry, and mission.”¹ This involves mutual recognition of members and churches, recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministry, and a common Eucharist. Recognition would be made certain by the implementation of a hierarchical bureaucracy consisting of local, regional and national covenanting councils made up of representatives of member denominations.

As provided in the COCU documents, the representatives to the covenanting councils are bishops. In an attempt to reconcile Presbyterian polity to the requirement of denominational representatives, the amendment sent to presbyteries stipulates that the PCUSA will be represented by commissions, not bishops.

COCU challenges the Presbyterian Church (USA) to expand its ecumenical horizons. COCU has existed in various forms for over thirty years. The COCU proposal is lengthy and nuanced. This year’s General Assembly Commissioners’ Committee spent many long hours reworking it and trying to eliminate some of the objectionable sections before it was sent to the entire General Assembly for a vote.

As a result of the effort to make COCU acceptable to the General Assembly, several problems were left unresolved. First, the term, scope and authority of “covenanting councils” remained undefined. COCU creates “covenanting councils” at all governing body levels. For example, a local covenanting council would be formed from the various participating congregations in a local area. Representatives from sessions would constitute a “commission” which would in turn participate in the local council. Similarly, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly would designate “commissions” to represent the PCUSA at the regional, and national levels.

The COCU proposal and amendment allow for a subtle shift of power to an unfettered governing body, the covenanting council

The “covenanting councils” are given the power to “make Christian unity more visible” [G-15.0401f]. However, there are no provisions in the COCU documents or the amendment sent to the presbyteries that specify or limit the powers of the councils. The Presbyterian tradition of checks and balances is missing: there are no provisions to review or check the decisions of the councils. The COCU proposal and amendment allow for a subtle shift of power to an unfettered governing body, i.e., the covenanting council. Further, there are no provisions defining the staffing, funding requirements, or financial responsibilities for the councils. Participation in all aspects of the work of all councils, including at the local level, would be mandatory

based upon the General Assembly’s commitment to participate in COCU.

Another unanswered question involves the make-up of the membership of commissions to the council. When regional councils overlap presbyteries, it is undetermined which presbytery will send a commission. Further, it is uncertain to which presbytery such a commission would report or which presbytery would determine the scope and extent of the powers of the commission. Further still, there are unanswered questions about the financial support that will be mandated, the authority of the decisions of the covenanting councils, and how the balance of various members of the participating denominations will be effected. For example, when a council will be comprised of bishops, who have oversight of congregations and pastors, *and* commissions of elders and clergy who have no oversight authority, how will the various member denominations be balanced? Presbyterians would have greater numbers on councils but would have no oversight authority. In some sense, they would be observers rather than full participants, because they would have minimal and very specific delegated authority.

Ordinarily, when presbyteries establish a commission it is for a limited specific purpose. Is it practical to suggest a Presbyterian commission with limited, specific powers can function as part of an ongoing covenanting council with an unlimited mandate and unlimited powers?

As an example, the COCU document says,

“A covenant communion of churches is, by definition, committed to become truly inclusive. Each partner is enriched by sharing in the gifts that God has given to the other. Each partner works to take down walls of alienation that exist between the churches, and to overcome attitudes which tend to marginalize persons in regard to race, class, age, gender, disabilities, marital status, sexual orientation, and positions of power and powerlessness, and to live toward a church in which all participate in the wholeness of Christ.” (*Churches in Covenant Communion*, p.10)

If the “Fidelity and Chastity” Amendment, which is currently before the Presbyterian Church (USA), is approved, ordination will be denied to anyone who is not faithful in marriage and chaste outside of marriage. How can a commission representing the Presbyterian Church (USA) participate in a covenanting council whose charge is to “overcome attitudes which tend to marginalize persons [because of] sexual orientation?” What powers would the councils have, up through their national level, to seek compliance?

Will the COCU proposal be on the same level as the PCUSA Constitution?

PCUSA Constitution and COCU Documents

The second basic question left unanswered is closely related to the issues already raised. The COCU proposal is based upon two documents, *The COCU Consensus* and *Churches in Covenant Communion*. These were approved in principle by the 1993 General Assembly, but have never been sent to the presbyteries for approval. The two documents set out the specifics of what the new church will be. There are four functions that will be shared by all parts of the new church: (1) faith, (2) sacraments, (3) ministry, and (4) mission. The primary question is the status of these documents if the COCU amendment passes. Will they be on the same level as the Presbyterian Constitution-- the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*? Is the theology of the COCU documents, which equates Scripture with tradition, now to govern the PCUSA? What happens to the standards of the PCUSA's Constitution regarding membership given the different standard in the documents? Are we prepared to do mission work in accordance with *The COCU Consensus*? Do we even understand these documents?

PCUSA Clergy Requirements and COCU Intentions

A third area of concern left unanswered by the current amendment is the status of clergy. Questions involving transfer of Ministers of Word and Sacrament between member denominations of COCU remain unanswered. What are the procedures for transferring clergy from a COCU denomination? Will clergy persons be treated like clergy from other denominations and have to take the Presbyterian standard ordinations exams as they do today? Or will they be treated as if transferring from a sister presbytery? What level of theological examination will be permitted by presbyteries when a COCU clergy person seeks membership in a presbytery? Will such examination be limited to agreement with the COCU documents or can it include the Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*? After the 1994 Assembly, which declared "Reformed Theology Matters," do the presbyteries want to move to a broad diversity of theological views in our clergy? Is the PCUSA prepared to accept ministers from other COCU denominations without regard to how much they hold to our polity? Do the congregations of the PCUSA want pastors who do not recognize the historical Confessions of the PCUSA as having weight?

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is a partner denomination in the COCU dialogue. Each partner is expected to approve the proposal (the two documents) and make adjustments to its own polity for COCU to move forward. Many of the partners have already approved COCU. The Episcopalians continue to debate the merits. Their discussion emphasizes some of the same concerns many Presbyterians have voiced.

Episcopal General Convention Response

The Episcopal Church is one of the nine denominations that is a part of COCU discussions. The Episcopal Church meets once every three years at the national level in its

"General Convention." In 1988 the Convention found that the COCU Consensus was "not yet a sufficient theology" for entering a formal covenant. This stance was reaffirmed at the 1991 Convention. In 1994 a report was issued to the House of Bishops giving a detailed analysis of *The COCU Consensus* and *Churches in Covenant Communion* from an Episcopalian viewpoint. The following is a condensed version of that report, which has close application for the Presbyterian Church (USA).

There are eight elements identified in *The COCU Consensus* and *Churches in Covenant Communion* that establish the basis for the new covenant Church. Each element is important to the total picture.

Element 1: Unity in faith

The first step toward covenant unity is to recognize theological agreement among the denominations. The Episcopalians have not found the COCU documents sufficient. The presbyteries need to decide if the documents are acceptable as theological statements. According to the *Book of Order* section G-15.0302, the COCU documents should have been sent to the presbyteries for their vote. Since this was not done, the only mechanism available for debate on their content is the present amendment which makes the necessary polity changes to implement COCU.

Element 2: Unity with Wholeness

While human wholeness is endorsed by all Presbyterians, there are different ideas of how wholeness is achieved. The COCU documents identify sin as almost entirely social injustice and disunity. The Episcopalians voice the concern that "A deeper view of sin touching on our revolt from God's holiness, is missing." Further, the spiritual role of the Church, proclaiming the Gospel and calling for holy living, is under-emphasized in favor of the Church's 'this-worldly' social justice role.

Element 3: Mutual Recognition of Members in One Baptism

Considering other people who have been baptized in the name of the Trinity as members of the Body of Christ is the easy part. Yet, the United Church of Christ, a member of COCU, will not agree to baptize exclusively in "the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The UCC response to COCU states, "...the United Church of Christ will continue to honor the traditional biblical expression of the Trinity in baptism while being open to further theological exploration by the leading of the Spirit."

There are concerns about what happens at the level of membership when these documents are implemented. Will PCUSA congregations still be able to examine people for membership? Will there be any requirement that potential members accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior?

Element 4: Mutual Recognition of Each Other as Churches

Mutual recognition flows from mutual understanding. The COCU process, the Episcopalians observe, provides for "getting to know" each other after union rather than before. The presbyteries need to weigh whether or not the PCUSA

is willing to enter this type of “arranged marriage” that COCU has brokered.

Element 5: Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation of Ordained Ministry

This element is essential to the recognition of the covenant union. The documents try to rule out any hint of “re-ordination” by COCU councils. Yet, they still use the traditional symbol of ordination, the laying on of hands, in the reconciliation services. Reformed theology and historic Church practice view the laying on of hands as an act representing the setting apart for a specific purpose that is not to be repeated because the Holy Spirit seals that act. The presbyteries need to evaluate if the ancient symbol of ordination is being used to re-ordain PCUSA officers or if it is being used only as a quasi-sacramental sign of non-ordination. If it is used only as a sign, then is this appropriate?

Element 6: Celebrating the Eucharist Together

The documents recognize that the Eucharist is a powerful centering reality for the Church’s mission. The ecumenical documents (“Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry”[BEM]), which are widely used by World Council of Churches’ members, include many aspects of celebrating the Eucharist such as proclamation of the Word, the presence of Christ, and the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The Episcopalians observe, “All these elements of the Christian tradition have been superficially treated or passed over entirely in the COCU documents.”

Element 7: Engaging Together in Christ’s Mission

COCU is strong in this area, reminding us that mission is essential to the life of the whole Church. The COCU documents state that “uniformity in structure is not essential to covenant communion.” Left unsaid, however, is what parts are essential, how such factors are to be identified, and what mechanism will be put in place to monitor compliance? The realities of social categorizations, congregational histories, and cultural expectations are not taken into account in these documents.

Element 8: Formation of Covenanting Councils

The primary purpose of these councils is to enable sharing of communion between the member denominations. The Episcopal Bishops see these councils as weak and tending too much to a congregational form of governance. As formulated, the councils are actually stronger than the average Session. In the amendment before the PCUSA presbyteries, these councils, in addition to taking formal votes on issues, have powers that are undefined. With unlimited powers, it would be wise to require councils to meet together for common reflection and dialogue. We in the PCUSA have strong theological reasons for requiring our governing bodies to meet in order to render a decision. The COCU amendment gives too much power to the councils without the theological or polity constraints we in the Reformed faith value.

Conclusion

Presbyterians should ask whether it is wise or even feasible to establish an entirely new hierarchy of local, regional and

national bodies at a time when ecumenical bodies, like the National Council of Churches and World Council of Churches, as well as most mainline denominations, are struggling with declining revenues.

Presbyterians should also ask what COCU will establish for the Presbyterian Church (USA) that is not already in place. For example, most local ministerial associations are already engaged in vital and effective ministries in their areas. What will COCU provide that is not currently being provided for by these kinds of informal liaisons. Missions beyond the local level are provided by national and international ecumenical bodies like the National Council and World Council of Churches that coordinate between member denominations.

Presbyterians already have an open communion table where all those who are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are welcomed as one family at one table.

Presbyterians already recognize other ordained ministers. They are welcomed in Presbyterian pulpits with the approval of the session. They are welcomed into presbyteries after evidencing their knowledge and acceptance of Reformed faith.

The amendment before our presbyteries proposes changes that will be far-ranging for the Presbyterian Church (USA). COCU may take the Presbyterian Church (USA) closer to ecumenical involvement with some denominations. It may facilitate sharing communion and much more with the partner denominations. Yet, the possible polity shifts of membership, clergy, and theology would be departures from historic Reformed polity. The over-riding question remains: is this where God is leading us? The answer will be found by each presbytery as the amendment is discussed and voted upon. It is hoped that these will take place in an atmosphere bathed in prayer and founded on Scripture.

¹ *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting*, 1985, p. 9.

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The Church of Christ Uniting (COCU): An Analysis of the Theological Issues

by Paul Leggett *

While last summer's General Assembly adopted changes in the proposed structure of ministry outlined in *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting* regarding the role of bishops on covenanting councils, no alterations were made in the theological definitions which underscore the whole understanding of faith and worship in COCU. This is especially notable in light of the published study on the COCU documents done by Dr. Joseph D. Small, the Coordinator for Theology and Worship in the Presbyterian Church (USA). In his little booklet entitled *Essential Things: A Study of The COCU Consensus and Churches in Covenant Communion*. Dr. Small raises a number of important questions regarding the treatment of theology and doctrine in COCU. Specifically, he states,

The COCU asserts that "it is now evident that an essential core of theological agreement exists and continues to grow . . . in matters of faith, worship, sacrament, membership, ministry and mission." This claim may be greater than the documents themselves demonstrate, however. Detailed discussions of sacraments and, especially, ministry are not matched by *explications of theological convictions regarding central elements of Christian faith*. The COCU discussion of "The Faith" identifies the 'sources' of faith - Scripture, Tradition, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, worship, mission and inclusiveness - but not the 'substance' of faith. (italics mine, p. 17)

Dr. Small has rightly noted that there is not a clear statement of "theological convictions regarding central elements of Christian faith" in COCU. This alone should be troubling in a document recommending any kind of proposal for church union. There is, however, I believe an implicit theological agenda in the COCU proposals which is even more disturbing. This can best be seen by noting three basic themes which run throughout the theological statements of *The COCU Consensus*: the authority of Scripture is limited to that of a primary source document, subjective personal experience is elevated to authoritative standard, and an ideological agenda is made a foundational element of union.

The Authority of Scripture

As members of the Reformed theological tradition we Presbyterians place a great weight appropriately on the authority of the Bible. In our *Book of Confessions* the Scriptures are repeatedly referred to as the Word of God in written form (*Book of Confessions* 5.001 5.002, 6.002, 8.04, 9.27). The Reformed conviction is that the word of Scripture through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is the living voice of Christ in the church (*Book of Confessions* 10.4). The Scriptures are the Word of God (*Book of Confessions* 5.003, 6.004, 7.113, 8.04, 9.30).¹ It is highly significant that *The COCU Consensus* refers to the authority of Scripture several times (pp. 18, 29, 31) and also to the Word of God (pp. 19, 20, 36) but *never equates the two*. In a clear departure from all the documents in the *Book of Confessions*, the authority of Scripture in *The COCU Consensus* is significantly limited. While the Scriptures are referred to as authoritative, it must be asked, what is the nature of their authority? The Scriptures are described as having authority (p. 18). They are "the normative authority for *knowledge of Jesus Christ*" (p. 18, italics mine). They are the "source" of faith (p. 29) and "new life and light" (p. 30). They are the record of the revelation of God (p. 30). We are told that "Christ is the Word to whom the Scriptures and the Spirit testify" (p. 30).

According to COCU the Scriptures have only a relative authority

What is striking here is that the authority which the Scriptures have in *The COCU Consensus* is a very indirect one. In reality, according to COCU, the Scriptures have only a relative authority. Theirs is the authority of a primary source document. They are presented here as a conduit or a means to encounter Christ who is the Word of God (p. 30). The Scriptures are not to be *obeyed* as the Confessions state (*Book of Confessions* 6.004, 7.113, 8.04). COCU's view of Scripture is consistent with the idea that the Scriptures' authority essentially lies in their giving us knowledge or information about Jesus Christ. They comprise an authoritative source without being a content which we are

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to believe and obey. What COCU has done is effectively to drive a wedge between the written Scriptures and the Word of God.

Several implications emerge here which have been on the rise in certain circles of academic theology for some time. In a recent book, David Tracy, Professor of Christian Theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School, expresses a view different from the Confessions when he states, "It is the revelatory event and not the witnessing texts which must play the central role in Christian self-understanding."² He goes on to say,

The complexities intrinsic to any Christian theological interpretation of the scriptures becomes clear. For Christianity is not, strictly speaking, a religion of the book like Islam. And yet "the book" does play a central role for Christian self-understanding. Christianity, in more explicitly hermeneutical terms, is a religion of a revelatory event to which certain texts bear an authoritative witness.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this distinction between event and text for Christian theological self-understanding. To fail to grasp the distinction is to lead into two opposite difficulties. To make the text into the revelation is to turn Christianity into a strict religion of the book on the model of the place of the Qur'an in Islam. Then the route to Christian fundamentalist readings of the scripture under the banner cries of 'inerrancy' soon takes over.³

It is a view like Tracy's which appears to be operative in *The COCU Consensus*. The essence of this view lies in drawing a distinction between "revelatory event" and "non-revelatory Scripture." This, however, is no small distinction. How is the "event" authoritative or "central to our Christian self-understanding" without a written text or narrative which gives it shape and definition? The Reformed tradition is *not* "fundamentalist," as Tracy suggests, when it insists that the written text, the biblical story of redemption, is itself a form of revelation revealed to us in the witness of the Holy Spirit (*Book of Confessions* 6.005). This is the heart of the issue. Is the Bible itself the Word of God in written form and therefore revelation, or is it only a source or witness to certain "revelatory events" which lie outside it?⁴ Can Jesus Christ as the Word of God be made distinct from the written Word of God? *The COCU Consensus* seems to agree with Tracy that the two must be separated. Yet, if this is the case, it changes the whole nature of biblical authority as Reformed Christianity has understood it.

The Authority of Personal Experience

We can never deny the importance of personal experience in the reality of Christian faith. The question at issue, however, is, "In what sense is personal experience an authority for Christian understanding?" The defining reality of modern Protestant theology, along with modern European thought in general, has been the sovereignty of the individual. At the risk of oversimplification one could

say that the sixteenth century Reformation introduced the freedom of the individual where the eighteenth century Enlightenment presented the autonomy of the individual.

The key figure in the dawn of modern, as opposed to Reformation or Evangelical, Protestantism is Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78). Simply put, Rousseau replaced the idea of revelation with the worship of nature. He extolled the idea of an autonomous individual in touch with nature, unfettered by civilization or standard codes of morality. He celebrated reason, not in an abstract logical sense, but rather, as the true expression of nature. For Rousseau, experience was the sole guide to truth. He denied the reality of original sin and praised the feelings as the source of true knowledge of the divine. This feeling for nature was for him the only certain guide in religion. He rejected any objective revelation, especially, that which could be written in book form.⁵

It is difficult to overestimate Rousseau's influence. Philosophically, he points toward the view that an objective knowledge of the world is impossible. For all his emphasis on nature, his conviction that only the heart (or experience) can know what is true led to the idea that philosophy can only analyze the *act of knowing*, not the *object of knowledge*. We can only know our sense experiences but these may have little or no connection with external reality. With this view we could never know an objective revelation from God since we are only in touch with our subjective consciousness.

Rousseau believed that only a religion based on the experience of the heart in conformity with nature was genuine. Nature, for Rousseau, is not an object of the senses but rather of the feelings of the heart. Nature alone is the basis of justice and freedom. It is also the sole basis for religion. Rousseau rejected any concept of doctrine in his understanding of religion or any claim that any particular religion was superior to any other. He extols the fact that the ancient City States of Greece each had their own god with no god having any claim of superiority over any other. In fact, for Rousseau, particular "gods" are only imaginary beings. Religion is a matter of the individual heart. It is not based on some obscure divine revelation.⁶

Rousseau's views culminate in his political theory. Since all are free and autonomous, how is any kind of society possible? Rousseau responds with his concept of the "social contract." Individuals must surrender their individual freedom for the cause of social unity and cohesion. In this sense Rousseau's view of "freedom" or "democracy" is severely limited. Ultimately, Rousseau chooses equality over freedom or liberty. Under the social contract, people can exist as equals but they may not enjoy any real sense of liberty. In this regard, Bertrand Russell sees Rousseau as a forerunner of both the French Revolution and Nazism.⁷ Mary Shelley may have had Rousseau in mind when she created the character of Dr. Frankenstein, who is in her words, the "modern Prometheus."

I have included this discussion of Rousseau because of his enormous influence on Protestantism since the eighteenth century. According to Karl Barth, Rousseau is the real

father of Liberal Theology as it has developed since the nineteenth century.⁸ At present, Rousseau's influence, far from diminishing, seems to have reached full fruition especially in mainstream American Protestantism. This is borne out by *The COCU Consensus* where the content of Christian faith becomes a vague notion of "spirituality." This harks back to Joseph Small's observation that the COCU documents lack any concrete substance of faith. Consistent with Rousseau's point that one cannot equate God's revelation with a written source like the Bible, it follows that there is no concrete standard for one's faith. Faith essentially becomes a matter of personal experience. Going beyond the simple point of respecting another's point of view, whether Christian or non-Christian, COCU maintains that denominational insistence on any specific doctrinal position is simply wrong (how can one perspective or viewpoint ever be superior to another?). In fact, COCU warns against holding onto a Church's "attitudes and institutions, customs and practices." COCU concludes, "Everything treasured by the Church"(!) should be "constantly re-examined and reconstituted for the sake of greater faithfulness in thought, life and work" (p. 20). But what is the standard by which this "greater faithfulness" is judged? The Word of God? But what is that since clearly it is *not* the Scriptures.

[In COCU] Christian faith becomes a vague notion of "spirituality"

The COCU Consensus is confusing on this score to lay persons and pastors alike. Much of the language is biblical or at least recognizably theological but it is divorced from any objective referent.⁹ It has an emotional appeal but its content is hard to define. On the one side, church members are told that it is "especially important" that they "learn how to develop and express their own contemporary interpretations of the Christian message and life"(p. 26). On the other, the point is made that no confessional statement of any member church will be permitted "to become a basis for divisions in the community"(p. 31). In effect, COCU is saying, *theology does not matter, unity does matter.*

In effect, COCU is saying, *theology does not matter, unity does matter*

COCU's refusal to allow theology to divide becomes clearer when the discussions regarding the two oldest and most universally accepted creeds in the Christian Church, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are examined. These are defined as "unique, ecumenical witnesses of Tradition to the revelation of God recorded in Scripture." Without getting into a lengthy discussion of "Tradition" as opposed to "traditions" (p. 30), it is striking that the elaboration on these Creeds speaks of them as "ancient"

and "widely accepted" (p. 30). They are praised for "their continuing power to set forth the reality and mystery of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ" (p. 31). The Church Uniting "will teach the faith of these creeds" (p. 31). This language is certainly not wrong. It is, however, remarkably vague. There is, for example, a notable difference between "the faith of these creeds" and the faith *expressed and defined* in these creeds. To see how vague the COCU proposal is at this point, one only has to consult our *Book of Order*, chapter II, which defines the confessions as guiding the church in its study and interpretation of Scripture, summarizing the essence of Christian tradition (small "t"), directing the church in maintaining sound doctrines and equipping the church for its work of proclamation (*Book of Order* G-2.0100).

The whole tenor of *The COCU Consensus* is away from any emphasis on defined belief or authoritative standards for belief. While Scripture, Tradition, and Creeds are invoked in various ways throughout the document, they emerge as little more than sources to be consulted. The emphasis seems to be on sharing "spirituality," "contemporary interpretations" and "earnest thought concerning God's will for the world and the Church" (p. 25), while at the same time warning against becoming "encrusted in traditionalism" or carrying "unnecessary ecclesiastical baggage" (p. 20). It is hard to disagree with these statements. The problem is that their meaning is by no means clear. Throughout COCU's discussion, the authority of personal experience, on the order of Rousseau, seems far more significant than any objective definition of Christian faith and life. The whole concept of obedience seems to be lost. This leads to a final point.

The Authority of Ideology

More than a proposal for denominational unity, *The COCU Consensus* seems clearly to advocate a particular ideological point of view. Ideology in the popular sense refers basically to a political or social agenda of some sort. It should also be remembered that as Karl Marx originally used the term it referred to an attempt to mask reality, to hide the true implications of a social phenomenon or process. One could argue that COCU uses ideology in both senses. The real issue here is not whether one agrees or disagrees with the ideological thrust of *The COCU Consensus* but rather, given the stated goals of COCU, should any ideological program be advanced as part of the consensus sought by COCU? The fact that such an agenda is not clearly noted in the document as an ideological emphasis suggests the original use of "ideology" as hiding or masking something.

The COCU Consensus is committed to the ideals of diversity and inclusiveness in theology and community which results in such a broad ideal of diversity and inclusiveness in theology and church life that the net result appears to be a relativistic idea of truth in general. The content of Christian faith in COCU is sufficiently vague to embrace all manner of personal spirituality. Stemming from a vague theology, the community is perceived to be

inclusive and diverse without a clear concern for a faith commitment.

Condemning Churches who would limit membership, in its opening chapter *The COCU Consensus* calls for “much more work” in defining “institutionalism and congregational exclusivism.” This introduction assures us that “the matters of racism, sexism, and prejudice against persons with disabilities are now addressed throughout this text” (p. 8). In the section on membership, the Church is rightly called to account for its past discriminatory policies. The conclusion is then made that “a vigorous struggle must be waged against all such abuses of human diversity” (p. 24). We are then told that

The full meaning of life together with Jesus Christ and with one another exceeds the *limited conceptions which the churches, in their divisions, have*. The Church Uniting will not grant exclusive validity, or impose on anyone an obligation, to any of those specific historical conceptions . . . The Church Uniting will dedicate itself to the removal of any and all impediments in its life which prevent it from receiving into full membership all members of the particular churches. (p. 24, italics mine)

While the emphasis on diversity here is clear enough, the ideological program being envisioned is less so. The nature of the “vigorous struggle” being called for is not defined. We certainly acknowledge that all particular churches have suffered from “limited conceptions” of the Christian faith but are we prepared to have those defined for us presumably at some later time in the course of the union imagined by *The COCU Consensus*? What also are the implications of the commitment to “the removal of any and all impediments” to full membership especially in the light of the implied rejection of the so-called “specific historical conceptions” of the member churches? Is this a reference to the issue of ordination of gay and lesbian persons? One might assume this is the case, since the companion document, *Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting*, states that,

A covenant communion of churches is, by definition, committed to become truly inclusive. Each partner is enriched by sharing in the gifts that God has given to the other. Each partner works to take down walls of alienation that exist between the churches, and to overcome attitudes which tend to marginalize persons in regard to race, class, disabilities, marital status, sexual orientation, and positions of power and powerlessness, and to live toward a church in which all participate in the wholeness Christ. (p.10)

Churches which resist this unity in community without common belief are declared to be sinful. The COCU document states, “In covenanting, the churches will make an act of common repentance for the sin of disunity among them, and for the sins which inhibit community within the human family” (p.10). Churches are told further, “To repent of sins that divide Christ’s body...being ready to change, especially in these idolatries which alienate and cause pain to sisters and brothers in Christ” (p. 11).

COCU seeks visible unity. . . without theological unity under Christ

COCU seeks visible unity of the community without theological unity under Christ. When unity is not a result of theology, but an end in itself, what other theological beliefs will have to be revised to facilitate unity? What about the use of female language for God? There are already those who claim that referring to God as “Father” is offensive and causes dehumanization of women and therefore disunity.

All of these emphases remain undefined in terms of their full meaning. It seems hardly helpful to be told repeatedly by advocates for COCU that none of this is really going to impact the particular standards of the individual participating churches. What then is the meaning of the call for “a vigorous struggle” or the concern about the churches’ “limited conceptions?” If these phrases do not imply some imagined action, why are they even in the document?

It is striking that in the section on “Confessing the Faith” that “Inclusiveness” is mentioned in the same list as Scripture, Tradition Creeds and Confessions, Worship and Mission. In this section the Church is called to take a strong stand against all forms of discrimination and to “affirm the diversity, equality and dignity of all persons” (p. 33). The point at issue is not the importance or validity of these stands but rather their centrality in “Confessing the Faith.”

a rather evident assumption of Universalism run[s] throughout the [COCU]document

This concern is heightened when one notes a rather evident assumption of Universalism running throughout the document. Under the term *inclusive* (italics original) we are told that “Jesus’ ministry embraced all” (p. 16). But is this really true? One can say Jesus called all “to repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15) but did his ministry embrace all? Did all respond? What about those who did not repent, the Rich Ruler and the religious leaders, Herod and Pilate, and so on? In the section on “Ministry” we are told that “Jesus Christ called all humankind to conversion and to repentance,” but again did all respond? We are left with the impression that being called is the same as being saved or reconciled.

There is no reference to evangelism in *The COCU Consensus*. Under “Truly Evangelical” we are told “the Church offers new possibilities and resources for both individuals and institutions” (p. 18). Is this the same as salvation or new life in Christ? Or is it the case that everyone already is redeemed so that the focus of mission is now “to address the contemporary issues of public life” since “Christ has redeemed the world to God?” (p. 32).

In discussing reconciliation, it is significant that 2 Cor. 5:20 is not mentioned which refers to the call for people to “be reconciled to God.” It seems to be the case then that “Inclusiveness” is an article of faith for COCU, one which in its logical extension carries into a basic understanding of Universalism and a particular social and political agenda which, while strongly emphasized, is never delineated.

“Inclusiveness” is an article of faith for COCU

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The COCU Consensus* presents a theological perspective which is a continuation of the understanding of Liberal Protestant Theology going all the way back to Jean Jacques Rousseau. It should not be surprising that the latest trend in this perspective, with its rejection of objective revelation and emphasis on experience, is now toward pagan celebrations of nature and even goddess worship.¹⁰ The theology that is at least implicit in the COCU documents strongly suggests an affinity with these tendencies which have surfaced several times in recent years in ecumenical events associated with the member churches of COCU.¹¹

Themes such as cooperation among the churches, inclusiveness, diversity, and a critical examination of tradition are all important subjects to be addressed. But, they should not be addressed the way *The COCU Consensus* defines them. Nor should local congregations have requirements imposed on them by the COCU covenanting councils.

The theological issues raised by COCU thus far have not been given the kind of analysis and attention they deserve.

This is all the more disturbing since the *Book of Order* clearly requires that an ecumenical statement approved by the General Assembly “shall be submitted to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes . . .” (G-15.0302). This should have been the case with the COCU documents but was not. The formative documents of COCU: *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting, 1985 and Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting*, have not been submitted to the presbyteries for their vote. Before we proceed further with COCU, we need to analyze clearly its theological position. COCU represents a serious departure from the very foundations of our Reformed theological belief.

¹ Identifying Scripture as the Word of God is central to John Calvin’s understanding of the knowledge of God, cf. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, VI/2.

² Tracy, David, *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics and Church* (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1994) p. 121.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For a carefully nuanced discussion of this point see Karl Barth’s chapter on “Scripture as the Word of God” in *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956) I/2, pp. 473-537.

⁵ See “The Creed of a Savoyard Priest” in Rousseau’s novel *Emile* (Rutland: Everyman’s Library, 1974), pp. 228-278.

⁶ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, “On Civil Religion” in *The Social Contract* (London: Everyman’s Library, J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, 1973), p. 298-308.

⁷ Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), pp. 675-685.

⁸ Barth, Karl, *Protestant Theology in the 19th Century* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973), pp. 174-233.

⁹ See the discussion by Karl Barth of “Jesus Christ the Objective Reality of Revelation” in *Church Dogmatics* I/2, pp. 1-24.

¹⁰ In May, 1995, a chapel worship service at the United Methodist Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois included “A Psalm in Search of the Goddess” by Miriam Theresa Winter. This unfortunately is not a unique event in some mainline Protestant seminaries.

¹¹ The most notorious of these was the much discussed, “Re-Imagining Conference” held in Minneapolis in November, 1993 which was underwritten with \$66,000 of Presbyterian Church (USA) funds.

COCU’s Time Has Come and Gone

by Robert Dooling*

Rev. Dooling presented the substance of this paper to the Commissioner’s Committee on Catholicity which dealt with COCU at the 208th General Assembly in 1996. Rev. Dooling was an overture advocate supporting the Presbytery of the Plains and Peaks’ overture calling for the PCUSA to withdraw from COCU. It is used with permission.

Shortly after I was ordained in 1968, twenty-eight years ago, the very first job that I was given was to review, with

a committee of elders, the original COCU proposal. The acronym, *COCU*, in those days stood for Consultation on Church Union. It was a plan for the organic merger of several mainline denominations. So, during the last quarter century COCU, and some other folks in this room, and I have grown old together.

And, in light of the fact that it has taken us so long to get where we are, the question my presbytery wants you to

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consider is this: is COCU an idea whose time may just have come and gone? This is made increasingly evident by Mr. Andrews' [the PCUSA stated clerk] remarks yesterday afternoon, that the world into which we are moving is one in which centralized authority will increasingly fail.

Lots of things about COCU have changed over the past 28 years. Some basic concerns have not changed. The Episcopal Church, for instance, says that the church exists only where there are bishops who alone are able to ordain women and men to ministry. They continue to require Presbyterians to participate in a rite during which a bishop can validate my ordination by laying hands on me and praying the proper prayer over me. This, *of course*, begs the question: what about all those things that I did as a minister during the last 28 years? --all those baptisms and weddings, all those communion services--were all of those somehow *invalid*?

None of the other COCU denominations require us Presbyterians to have bishops or to have our ministries "RECONCILED" in order to consider our ordinations to be valid--none of them. Now, the standing Committee on COCU has publicly assured us time and again that this rite of reconciliation is NOT really re-ordination. But, several years ago over lunch, when I asked a prominent member of the COCU standing Committee, Horace Allen, why the prayer in the reconciling liturgy is to be prayed silently, he chuckled and said, "*That's so that you can think what you want to think, and the bishop can think what he wants to think.*"

The inference, of course, was that the bishop gets to think that he is re-ordaining us but we do not have to concur. When I pointed out that this approach seemed to lack a certain degree of moral and intellectual integrity, the gentleman just shrugged his shoulders and chuckled again and said, "*Well, that's the way it's going to have to be in order to make this thing work.*"

But, interestingly while the COCU standing Committee has continued to propose this somewhat strange method for squaring the circle of our different understandings of ordination, the Episcopal Church has not bought into it. It appears that they have the same problem with it that I do, that it does not treat either of our traditions honestly and fairly. In a report to the 1994 House of Bishops (which meets only every three years), the Episcopal standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations said that the rite of reconciliation is "FLAWED."

They said that their tradition has been treated superficially and that the documents do not provide, "*sufficient theological basis for the covenanting acts.*" In plain language, they said that the rite of reconciliation as proposed in the COCU documents is little more than smoke and mirrors designed to be all things to all people and that to participate in it would be to compromise both their tradition and integrity.

Now, the House of Bishops did not heed the recommendation of their Commission and withdraw forthwith from COCU. But, according to a friend of mine,

a retired Episcopal bishop, until we Presbyterian ministers agree openly and without hesitation to be re-ordained by validly consecrated bishops, Episcopal participation in COCU is functionally a dead letter. So, the bottom line is that what you are being asked to do is to recommend to this Assembly a series of radical changes to our constitutional tradition that will alter forever the nature of Presbyterian governance. You are being asked to do it notwithstanding the fact that even if we provide for the consecration of Presbyterian bishops the COCU proposal may still be fatally flawed because the rite of reconciliation lacks integrity and the House of Bishops will continue to reject it as currently proposed.

That's what my grandfather used to call, "buying a pig in a poke," which is always unwise. And in this case, it is particularly unwise because, as the Overture that I represent points out, we do not need an organizational structure and official sanction from on high in order to make an ecumenical witness. You know and I know that we are already doing it right alongside the Episcopalians in every one of the cities and towns in which we live, all across America, indeed, and all around the world. Methodists and Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Disciples and Lutherans are already working together usually right alongside Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics.

**the existence of denominations
is NOT . . . a scandal to the gospel
but rather a sign of the
wonderful diversity of God's people**

You know it and I know it, because we participate in it. You know and I know that we do not all have to live in the same house in order to be a family. The price that Presbyterians are being asked to pay in order to move into the same house is simply too steep and dear. This is particularly true in light of the fact that we have absolutely no documented assurance that it will be enough and that even more will not be required in the future to close the deal. Furthermore, the Presbytery of Plains and Peaks wants you to know that we believe that the existence of denominations is NOT, as some would suggest, a scandal to the gospel but rather a sign of the wonderful diversity of God's people.

Moreover, putting the words "Church of Christ Uniting" under the words "Mountain View Presbyterian Church" on our sign out on Garfield Avenue in Loveland is not going to lure anyone off the bus or win anyone to Christ. All it will do is create more meetings for God's people to attend and more costly bureaucratic structures for God's people to support in lieu of mission. It will promote the clericalization of the church, which is a fancy way of saying, that there will be less and less power in the hands of the laity where we Presbyterians have always said it ought to be.

Questions and Answers on COCU

Polity Issues

Question 1: If the COCU amendments are approved, will participation in COCU by the GA, synods, presbyteries and sessions be mandatory?

Answer: Yes, participation will be mandatory. The 208th General Assembly approved the following statement: “The Special Committee on the Consultation on Church Union recommends that the 209th General Assembly (1997) approve the provisions of these amendments, pertaining to presbyteries or sessions, and that they shall be permissive as to each particular presbytery or session after the national service for the inauguration of covenanting until the formation of the regional or local covenanting council in the area embracing that particular presbytery or session, at which time, any mandatory language contained in those provisions shall become binding upon that presbytery or session.”(16.077) The proposed amendment to G-10.0102 of the *Book of Order* reads, “The session . . . has the responsibility and power [items a. through s. remain the same.] t. to participate in the establishment and maintenance of the local covenanting council of the Church of Christ Uniting. (G-15.0401f).” Similarly the presbytery is to participate in regional covenanting councils. (underlines by editor)

Question 2: Is this another bureaucratic structure being established?

Answer: Yes. There will be local, regional and national bodies established with representatives of covenanting churches. These structures will participate in ordinations for all member covenanting churches, they will oversee mission, and insure that “common celebrations of the Eucharist be scheduled with regularity.” (proposed amendment to *Book of Order* G-15.0401). With regard to missions, proposed amendment G-15.0401 further states, “Congregations and regional governing bodies of the covenanting churches shall reach out in mission through shared ministries and resources. The covenanting councils will provide opportunity for shared decision making in the covenanting churches’ common engagement in Christ’s mission in the world.”

Question 3: Is there a process for amending the COCU defining documents?

Answer: No.

Question 4: Who will financially support this new structure?

Answer: There has been no statement of who will support the structure, but it can be assumed that covenanting churches will bear the cost.

Question 5: Will the Presbyterian Church (USA) be able to ordain ministers, elders and deacons without the participation of COCU regional covenanting councils?

Answer: No. The proposed amendment to G-15.0401 states, “From the date of such reconciliation at the regional level, ordinations shall be carried out with the participation of the regional covenanting councils for all candidates approved and put forward by the covenanting churches.”

Question 6: Can a COCU regional council block the ordination of a Presbyterian Church (USA) candidate because they object to the candidate’s theology--for example if the candidate is pro-life or believes homosexual practice is contrary to God’s will in Scripture?

Answer: This seems possible. The language in proposed amendment G-15.0401 is “ordinations shall be carried out with the participation of the regional covenanting councils...” Proposed amendment G-14.0401 states, “The ordination shall be carried out by the presbytery with the participation of as many covenanting churches as possible from the regional covenanting council...” The question is whether “as many as possible” can be zero. Notice this seems to mean not just representatives from member churches but individuals identified as sitting members of the COCU regional council.

Question 7: Is the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) which includes the *Book of Order* and the *Book of Confessions* a higher authority than the COCU documents: *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting* and *Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting*?

Answer: No. It is no where stated that the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church is a higher authority. And, in fact, the COCU documents and the Constitution disagree on many points including the issue of ordination of people who continue to practice homosexual behavior. The Confessions view homosexual practice as a sin, the COCU documents call it a gift.

Question 8: Are there any checks and balances in place to limit or review the decisions of these councils?

Answer: No.

Question 9: Sessions will send representatives to local covenanting councils; synods will establish a commission to represent Presbyterians on regional covenanting councils and the General Assembly will establish a commission to represent Presbyterians on the national covenanting councils. Normally, “commissions” are established for specific, limited tasks. How will a commission established by the synod be accountable to the presbyteries? What authority will they have to speak on behalf of the presbyteries and sessions in making commitments? Is this a workable plan when there has been discussion in the Presbyterian Church about the eventual elimination of synods?

Answer: In the proposed amendment to G-9.0503a, it says, “Commissions appointed by sessions, presbyteries, synods, or the General Assembly may be either administrative or judicial, except in the case of sessions, which may appoint only administrative commissions. The functions ordinarily entrusted to an administrative commission are: [sections 1-4 are the same] 5. to represent the presbytery in membership and participation in regional covenanting councils.”

The proposed amendment to G-12.0102 regarding the synod’s responsibility states, “Synod . . . has the responsibility and power [items a. though t remain the same] u. to participate in the establishment and maintenance of the regional covenanting council or councils of the Church of Christ Uniting..... v. to designate a commission and such other persons as may appropriately represent the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on any regional covenanting council.” (underlines by editor)

Question 10: COCU requires that the PCUSA mutually recognize the ordained ministers of partner denominations. Are the standards for ordination among partner denominations the same as PCUSA standards?

Answer: No. For example, the United Church of Christ ordains those who practice homosexuality. The General Synod of the UCC in 1995 stated, “the place of gay and lesbian Christians in the church is a gift that the United Church of Christ brings into the continuing dialogue within the Church of Christ Uniting.” It would be contradictory for the Presbyterian Church that refuses to ordain those who practice homosexuality to fully recognize ministers who are practicing homosexuality from other denominations. Other issues may also be raised about the use of inclusive God-language and the use of the Trinitarian formula of “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” when baptizing.

Question 11: Can COCU go forward even if the Episcopal Church refuses to participate?

Answer: Yes. There is no stipulation that all nine denominations which were a part of the consultation must agree to participate before COCU can be implemented.

Question 12: Why is this vote on COCU different than other votes in the Presbyterian Church (USA) have been?

Answer: This vote changes our Constitution to provide for our participation in COCU. While other votes were preliminary, this vote is final. This is the last step required for full MANDATORY participation by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in COCU. All that remains is for covenanting councils to be established.

Question 13: According to *Book of Order* section G-15.0302 ecumenical statements “shall be submitted to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes....” (underlines by editor) Was this done with the COCU documents?

Answer: No.

Theology Issues

Question 14: Is the content of Christian faith around which this visible unity is to take place defined in COCU documents?

Answer: No. Dr. Joseph D. Small, Coordinator for Theology and Worship in the Presbyterian Church (USA) in his booklet *Essential Things: A Study of the COCU Consensus and Churches in Covenant Communion* writes, “Detailed discussions of sacraments and, especially, ministry are not matched by explications of theological convictions regarding central elements of Christian faith.”

Question 15: How does COCU define sin?

Answer: COCU defines sin as disunity. “In covenanting, the churches will make an act of common repentance for the sin of disunity among them, and for the sins which inhibit community within the human family” (*Churches in Covenant Communion*, p. 10). The report from the Episcopal standing Commission to the Episcopal House of Bishops observed, “A deeper view of sin touching on our revolt from God’s holiness, is missing[from COCU].”

Question 16: Does COCU take a different view of Scripture than the view upheld in the Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA)?

Answer: Yes. The Confessions state that Scripture *is* the Word of God which is to be believed and obeyed. COCU views Scripture as one source among many that points to the revelation of God in Christ. COCU separates the written Scripture from the Word of God. In COCU the authority of Scripture becomes relative. Scripture is limited to a primary source document.

Question 17: Does COCU believe Scripture alone is the highest authority in the Church?

Answer: No. COCU says, “In the Church, Scripture and Tradition belong together, since each is a manifestation, by and for faith, of the reality of Christ”(p. 30). “By ‘*Tradition*’ (with a capital ‘T’) is meant the whole life of the Church insofar as, grounded in the life of Christ and nourished by the Holy Spirit, it manifests, confesses, and testifies to the truth of the gospel... This uniting Tradition comes to expression in teaching, worship, witness, sacraments, way of life, and order. Tradition is also the *process of transmitting* by which this living reality of Christ is handed on from one generation to another. And, since Tradition is this continually flexible and growing reality as it is reflected, known, and handed on in the teaching and practice of the Church, Tradition is also embodied and expressed more or less adequately in a variety of concrete historical *traditions* (lower case ‘t’)” (*The COCU Consensus*, p. 30, underlines by editor).

Question 18: What does COCU teach about “inclusiveness?”

Answer: COCU assigns doctrinal status to “inclusiveness,” replacing Scripture as the final arbiter of faith and truth. “This liturgical action will fulfill the intention to confess the faith together affirmed in Chapter V of *The COCU Consensus*, where the fundamental sources of the doctrine of the faith are described in detail: Scripture, Tradition, and the creeds and confessions of the church, together with worship, mission, and inclusiveness as forms of confession” (COCU, p. 20). “Inclusiveness is essential to Christian unity...And gay and lesbian persons in most churches seldom are included at all... there can be no unity for the church unless it is truly inclusive” (COCU, p.18).

Question 19: Does COCU view the Confessions of Christian faith such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, as well as the other confessions found in the Presbyterian Church (USA) Constitution, *The Book of Confessions*, as normative statements of Christian faith?

Answer: No. COCU says of the Confessions, “In the diversity of its life, the Church Uniting has room for those confessions which are cherished by any of the covenanting bodies. It will value such confessions as they serve the renewal and revitalization in a common scriptural faith. It will not permit any such confession to become an exclusive requirement for all its members, or to become a basis for divisions within its community” (*The COCU Consensus*, p. 31, underlines added).

Question 20: If Scripture and the Confessions are not authoritative in COCU, what becomes the authoritative standard?

Answer: Personal experience becomes the standard. COCU elevates, “contemporary interpretations” and “earnest thought concerning God’s will for the world and the Church...” (*The COCU Consensus* p. 25).

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* Vol 2, No 2, Mar/Apr 1996 with articles: “Keeping Faithful: Homosexuality and Ordination” by Rev. Dr. Jack Haberer, “The Bible and the Practice of Homosexuality” by Dr. James R. Edwards, and “Why We Believe in Heresy” by Dr. Thomas Oden

* Vol 2, No 5, Sep/Oct 1996 with articles: “The Upward Call of God: Submitting Our Sexuality to the Lordship of Christ” by Rev. Dr. P. Mark Achtemeier, and “Sex and the Single Life” by Dr. Philip Turner

* Vol 2, No 6, Nov/Dec 1996 with articles: “The Church of Christ Uniting (COCU): An Analysis of the Polity Issues” by Rev. Daryl Fisher-Ogden; “COCU: An Analysis of the Theological Issues” by Dr. Paul Leggett, “COCU’s Time Has Come and Gone” by Rev. Robert Dooling; “Questions and Answers on COCU.”

To request copies to give to members of your church or presbytery, write or call, PFFM, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062, (540) 552-5325. These are important resources for people to use in preparing for the vote in presbyteries on the proposed amendments. Copies of *Theology Matters* are sent at no charge.

Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark

CHAPTER 11

(chapter 12 will follow in the next issue)

of THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Observe the text to understand the author's meaning:

This is a chapter dealing with Jesus' authority. Notice how that is developed.

Read 11:1-10. Jesus set out for Jerusalem in Mark 10:1. It has taken him one chapter to reach his destination. On the road to Jerusalem, he gave teachings on the kingdom laws(10:1-24), who will enter the kingdom(10:25-31), what leadership in the kingdom will be like (10:32-45), and Jesus demonstrates his ability to give sight to those who wish to follow him as the king of the kingdom.

Now, Jesus nears the "capital" of the kingdom, Jerusalem. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is in fulfillment of prophecy. Read Zechariah 9:9-17. Who is it that is entering Jerusalem according to Zechariah? What will he do for his people? What is his relationship to the people in Zech 9:16? Do you see this as a coronation of the King?

The term, "blood of My covenant" found in Zech 9:11, is mentioned five times in Scripture--Ex 24:8 when the covenant is ratified, Zech 9:16, and Mark 14:24, Matt 26:28, (Luke words it slightly differently) and Hebrews 9:20. The one who is King will offer his blood to ratify the covenant.

Read Psalm 118:22-26. "Hosanna" is a transliteration of Ps 118:25, "do save, we beseech Thee." "Transliteration" means the Hebrew word was left untranslated in the Greek NT. Like "Hallelujah" which is Hebrew for "praise God," "Hosanna" is Hebrew for "we beseech thee save us."

Who is in control of the events in vs 1-10?

Can you put Mark 11:9-10 in your own words using the meaning of "hosanna," the phrase "in the name of the Lord" and "coming Kingdom of our father David." Who is coming and what will he do?

The word, "Come" is used twice in vs 9-10, who and what is coming?

Why do you think the owner gave Jesus the colt? Who ultimately owned it?

Read 11:11. As soon as Jesus comes to Jerusalem, he goes to the temple. Why? Read the prophecy in Malachi 3:1.

Where is the messenger of the covenant, to suddenly come? Notice Malachi says, "He is coming" and vs 9 said, "Blessed is he who comes." What is the messenger of the covenant going to do when he comes?

Read 11:12-14. Tell in your own words what happens here. (The story continues later in the chapter)

Read 11: 15-19. After spending the night in Bethany, Jesus returns now to Jerusalem. Where does he go? What does Jesus find there? Read Isaiah 56:6. What was the temple to be used for?

Read Jeremiah 7:1-11. What was going on in the temple and in the lives of the people according to Jeremiah. Although Jeremiah was written before the exile of the Southern Kingdom, Jesus quotes it to show the application to his day. Why were the business dealings going on in the temple? What were the doves used for? See Lev 1:14,5:7, 11. Can you speculate on what was happening? Who was getting rich?

What was the effect on the people who were coming to have atonement made for their sins? Do you see that money changers were in effect keeping people from receiving God's forgiveness? What is the response of the scribes and pharisees to Jesus casting out those who are buying and selling in the temple? Why?

We are often told in Scripture to "fear God" what is the difference between that fear and the fear of the scribes and chief priests?

Read 11:20-26. Jesus again talks about the fig tree. Then in vs 27 he is back to the temple. The sequence is:

- vs11 Temple: Jesus comes to the temple and looks around
- vs12-14 Fig: Jesus looks for fruit on the fig and finding none curses the tree for its unfruitfulness
- vs15-19 Temple: Jesus casts out those who are turning the temple into a robbers den
- vs 20-26 Fig: Jesus explains his authority which extends to the disciples
- vs 27-33 Temple: Jesus is back in the temple teaching about his authority.

Do you see any common theme between the passages? Is the common theme perhaps the issue of Jesus authority? He has authority over nature to wither a fig tree, over the temple to cast out money changes from "My House," to assure the disciples their prayers can move mountains. Comments?

There is also an element of judgment in the withering of the fig tree. The tree that does not bear fruit is rejected. The scribes and pharisees who are not bearing fruit in terms of redeemed lives for God are rejected. See Jeremiah 8:13.

Because of Judah's unfaithfulness which is described beginning in Jer 7:1ff, God will render judgment. This is also an affirmation that God will do what God says he will do. God's judgment, which has been prophesied, will happen just as it was foretold.

In vs 20-24, in response to the disciples' observation that the fig tree has withered according to Jesus' command, Jesus explains that the disciples have that same authority. Where does that authority come from? Who has authority to move mountains?

Do you see this as God delegating his authority to those who believe in him and use that authority consistently with God's own being. God will not tolerate an abuse of his legitimate authority by us or nature--the fig tree was created to produce figs, when it failed, it was judged. Nature is under God's authority and so are people.

If our prayers acknowledge God's authority and allow us to receive that authority, what is the requirement that Jesus gives about prayer? According to these verses what two things are mentioned which we are required to do in order for God to act?

Earlier, we learned in chapter 2 that only God has the authority to forgive sins. Do you see this as God delegating his authority to us? Are we to forgive everyone, everything? Who are we limited in forgiving?

Can you speculate on why it makes sense for Mark to talk about forgiveness in this section? Do you see this as the way we acknowledge God's absolute authority and power? Does our forgiving someone who has injured us make sense if God does not possess absolute authority and power?

Read 11:27-33. Where does Jesus return to? Who comes to him?

In this chapter on authority, by Mark focusing on Jesus being in the temple, the focus is on Jesus' relationship to the Father, and his authority which is from the Father.

The climax of the chapter is the chief priest, scribes and elders asking directly, where does your authority come from? Does their question show that in fact they do acknowledge that Jesus possesses authority?

Where are the only two places authority can come from? Can you give an example of each?

If Jesus had said, "From God" can you speculate on what the religious leaders would have said? What did Jesus accomplish by giving the answer that he did? If there were multitudes listening, what do you think

they were saying in their own minds? How would they view the religious leaders afterward? Do you see the religious leaders being threatened by Jesus because he exposes their rebellion against God and allows the multitudes to see the corruption of their leaders?

Interpretation of the Text

1. What does this chapter tell us about who Jesus is? His relationship to God? His authority and power? His relationship to the scribes and pharisees?
2. What does this chapter tell us about Jesus' kingship in terms of power and authority? pomp and circumstance? worldly and spiritual?

Is Jesus' authority over the material and spiritual world or just the spiritual? Do you see Jesus clearly "in charge" in this chapter? Do you see his actions of confronting the evil in the temple in Jerusalem as directly leading to the cross?

3. What does this chapter tell us about the human heart when confronted with Jesus? Does everyone follow him? Who does not? Who does? What is so problematic about the rebellion of the religious leaders in terms of the people? Do they possess authority from God? Who does possess authority from God?
4. What does it mean when God gives us his authority? How is it to be used? for whom? to do what?

BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Mark 11:1-10. Some have said that it was the custom of kings to enter battle on a horse but to come in peace on a donkey. Calvin suggests another interpretation, that Jesus came in poverty, with common people showing their allegiance with leafy branches as almost a mockery of earthly pomp and circumstance. Christ's kingship would not be the outward pomp of the scribes and pharisees or for that matter what the disciples still were looking for in chapter 10. Instead, his kingdom shows the power and authority of a kingdom that does not seek human pomp and circumstance. Comments?

Mark 11:15-19. People were to come to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices for their sins. Since some people came a great distance, they bought their animals at the temple. Also, the priests were in charge of inspecting the animals to make sure they were without blemish. If they found a blemish the animal was not suitable for sacrifice and the person could purchase another one from the priests. Pretty good deal for the priests!

Calvin notes that while Jesus is often in the temple in Matthew, in Mark, this is the only time he is in the temple. It is a culmination of his life and journey. Calvin explains that Jesus' cleansing of the temple testifies "to himself as king and high priest who presides over the temple and worship of God."

News from Around the World

MARK TAMMEN, Manager of Polity Guidance Training in the office of the General Assembly, used the “Polity Reflections” meeting on Presbynet to detail for Presbyterians across the denomination the benefits of presbyteries taking no action on the “Fidelity and Chastity” amendment sent to them by the General Assembly. Using his office to advocate for “no action” on the “highly controversial” amendment, Tammen wrote, “The significance or symbolic meaning for life within the presbytery as a community of faith of not acting upon a controversial question at the present time may be very great. It leaves both sides on a question with some hope that at another time they can try again to resolve the controversy. It avoids dividing the presbytery into winners and losers. It means people don’t have to ride home in the car with someone who voted on the other side.” If a presbytery chooses to “take no action,” it has the same effect as voting against the amendment.

PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, a Presbyterian school, invited Delores Williams, professor at Union Seminary in NY, to be its spring commencement speaker. According to reports, Williams told the graduates and their guests “If God has called gay and lesbian women, God has called them....No church body has the authority to counteract God’s authority.”

Williams became the focal point of the 1993 Re-Imagining Conference controversy when she denied the atonement telling participants, “I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all ...I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.”

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, one of the member denominations of COCU, recently published *The New Century Hymnal*. Dr. Donald Bloesch, emeritus professor of theology, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, reviewed the hymnal in *Christianity Today* and observed, “*The New Century Hymnal*, together with similar endeavors in other denominations, indicates a subtle move in mainline Protestantism from a Trinitarian monotheism to a triadic pantheism in which God and the world are viewed as inseparable and mutually dependent. There is a correlative shift from transcendence to immanence, from the Sky Father to the Earth Mother.”

In attempting to revision God, only 22 of the 617 hymns use the word “Lord.” There is only one reference to “King.” All hymns referring to “Father” have God in the feminine as “mother” in the same hymn. Only 3 hymns out of 617 refer to Jesus with “he/him/his.”

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

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