

Theology Matters

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From Father God To Mother Earth: The Effect of Deconstructing Christian Faith on Sexuality

by Berit Kjos *

“God is going to change. We women . . . will change the world so much that He won’t fit anymore.”¹
Naomi Goldenberg in *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*

“I am the Goddess! We are the Goddess!”²
About 700 women dancing around a totem pole in Mankato, Minnesota

“While women sleep the earth shall sleep. But listen! We are waking up and rising, and soon our sister will know her strength. The earth-moving day is here.”³
Alla Bozareth-Campbell, Episcopal priest, 1974

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* Editor’s note: While Mrs. Kjos emphasizes the ways in which radical feminism is promoting neo-paganism, her writing applies to men, as well as women, who are accepting neo-pagan beliefs as they deconstruct Christian faith.

“Religion and culture are ever changing, ever transforming. . . . We are the transformer, maker and creator of our own religious and cultural traditions.”⁴
“Women, Religion, and Culture” seminar, Beijing Conference

“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”
Jeremiah 2:13

Peggy’s struggles seemed endless. She wanted to be close to God, but she rarely felt His presence. She wanted her teenage son to love Him, but the occult posters in his room became daily reminders of unanswered prayer. She joined a Christian ministry, but satisfying fellowship with God kept eluding her. Eventually she left the ministry to return to college.

She called me a few years later. She had begun to find herself, she said. Her search had led her beyond the familiar voices that had provided “pat answers” to her spiritual questions. The biblical God no longer seemed relevant or benevolent. A college teacher had been especially helpful in her journey toward self-discovery. This teacher-counselor called herself a witch—one who believes in the power of magic formulas and rituals to invoke power from spiritual forces.

Some years passed. When she called again, she had left her husband and moved away. "I had to find me," she explained. "My spiritual journey has opened my eyes to a whole new paradigm. . . ."

"A new paradigm?"

"Yes. A brand new way of seeing God and myself—and everything else. It's like being born again."

"Who is Jesus Christ to you now?" I asked.

"He is a symbol of redemption," she answered. "But I haven't rejected the Bible. I'm only trying to make my spiritual experience my own. I have to hear my own voice and not let someone else choose for me. Meanwhile, I'm willing to live with confusion and mystery, and I feel like I'm in God's hands whether God is He, She, or It."

"Do you have friends or relatives on similar journeys?" Like millions of other seekers, Peggy longs for practical spirituality, a sense of identity, a community of like-minded seekers, and a God she can feel. She remembers meaningful Bible verses, but they have lost their authority as guidelines.

She wonders why God isn't more tolerant and broad-minded. After all, He is the God of love, isn't He? Maybe a feminine deity would be more compassionate, understanding, and relevant to women. Perhaps it's time to move beyond the old boundaries of biblical truth into the boundless realms of dreams, visions, and self-discovery?

Multitudes have. What used to be sparsely traveled sideroads to New Age experiences have become cultural freeways to self-made spirituality. Masses of church women drift onto these mystical superhighways where they adapt their former beliefs to today's more "inclusive" views. After all, they are told, peace in a pluralistic world demands a more open-minded look at all religions and cultures.

Those who agree are finding countless paths to self-discovery and personal empowerment through books, magazines, and new kinds of women's group. They meet in traditional churches, at the YWCA, at retreat centers, living rooms . . . anywhere. Here, strange new words and ideas—such as "enneagrams," re-imagining, Sophia Circles, global consciousness, and "critical mass"—offer modern formulas for spiritual transformation. Therapists, spiritual directors, and others promise "safe places" where seekers can discover their own truth, learn new rituals, affirm each other's experiences, and free themselves from old rules and limitations.

This new movement is transforming our churches as well as our culture. It touches every family that reads newspapers, watches television, and sends children to community schools. It is fast driving our society beyond Christianity, beyond humanism—even beyond relativism—toward new global beliefs and values. No one is immune to its subtle pressures and silent promptings. That it parallels other social changes and global movements only speeds the

transformation. Yet, most Christians—like the proverbial frog—have barely noticed.

This spiritual movement demands new deities or a re-thinking of the old ones. The transformation starts with self, some say, and women can't re-invent themselves until they shed the old shackles. So the search for a "more relevant" religion requires new visions of God: images that trade holiness for tolerance, the heavenly for the earthly, and the God who is above us for a god who is us.

The most seductive images are feminine. They may look like postcard angels, fairy godmothers, Greek earth goddesses, radiant New Age priestesses, or even a mythical Mary, but they all promise unconditional love, peace, power and personal transcendence. To many, they seem too good to refuse.

The Masks of the Feminine Gods

You probably wouldn't expect to find goddesses in a conservative farming community in North Dakota. I didn't. But one day when visiting my husband's rural hometown, a neighbor told us that a new bookstore had just opened in the parsonage of the old Lutheran Church. "You should go see it," she urged.

I agreed, so I drove to a stately white church, walked to the parsonage next door, and rang the bell. The pastor's wife opened the door and led me into a large room she had changed into a bookstore, leaving me to browse. Scanning the shelves along the walls, I noticed familiar authors such as Lynn Andrews who freely blends witchcraft with Native American rituals, New Age self-empowerment, and other occult traditions to form her own spirituality.

Among the multicultural books in the children's section, one caught my attention. Called *Many Faces of the Great Goddess*, it was a "coloring book for all ages." Page after page sported voluptuous drawings of famed goddesses. Nude, bare-breasted, pregnant, or draped in serpents, they would surely open the minds of young artists to the lure of "sacred" sex and ancient myths.

Driving home, I pondered today's fast-spreading shift from Christianity to paganism. Apparently, myths and spiritualized sensuality sound good to those who seek new revelations and "higher" truths. Many of the modern myths picture deities that fit somewhere between a feminine version of God and the timeless goddesses pictured in earth-centered stories and cultures. Yet, each can be tailor-made to fit the diverse tastes and demands of today's searching women:

* Angels. Terry wears an angel pin on her jacket. She believes that today's popular angels offer all kinds of personal help, guidance and encouragement. While God seems distant and impersonal to her, she counts on her personal angel to help and love her. She showed me a set of angel cards on a rack in her gift store. "May this Guardian Angel . . . give you hope and strength to meet each new

tomorrow,” suggested a sympathy card, complete with a tiny golden angel pin.

* Sophia. “Sophia, Creator God, let your milk and honey flow. . . . Shower us with your love. . . .” chanted more than 2000 women gathered at the 1993 Re-Imagining Conference in Minnesota. “We celebrate the sensual life you give us. . . . We celebrate our bodiliness. . . . the sensations of pleasure, our oneness with earth and water,”⁵ continued one of the leaders. Representing main-line denominations, the women had come from the Presbyterian Church (USA) (about 400), the United Methodist Church (about 400), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (313), the United Church of Christ (144), and Baptist, Episcopal, Church of the Brethren about (150). About 230 were Roman Catholics. To most of these worshippers, Sophia symbolized inner wisdom and “the feminine image of the Divine.” Playful, permissive, and sensuous, she has “become the latest rage among progressive church women.”⁶

* Mother Earth. Tracy is a regional Girl Scout leader in Santa Clara County, California. To prepare young girls for an “Initiation into Adulthood” ceremony, she uses guided imagery to alter their consciousness and help them visualize a “beautiful woman”—a personalized expression of Mother Earth—who will be their spirit guide for life. Each girl is free to imagine the spiritual manifestation of her choice or to welcome whichever spirit appears.

* A goddess. Sharon grew up in a Christian home. Disappointed with her church’s chilly response to her environmental concerns, she turned to witchcraft. Since her coven accepts any pantheistic expression, Sharon simply transferred what she liked about God to her self-made image of the goddess. She describes her feminine substitute for God as a loving, non-judgmental being who fills all of creation with her sacred life. Sometimes this goddess appears to Sharon, bathing her in bright light and a loving presence.

These and countless other women share two radical views: traditional Christianity with its biblical boundaries are out, and boundless new vistas of spiritual thrills and skills are in. Anything goes—except biblical monotheism, belief in one God. The broad umbrella of feminist spirituality covers all of the world’s pagan religions—and many of today’s popular distortions of Christianity. Most seekers simply pick and mix the “best parts” of several traditions. Someone might start with Buddhist meditation, then add Chinese medicine, Hindu yoga, and a Native American wilderness initiation called “Spirit Quest.” Some of these combinations match today’s feminist visions better than others, but most involve—

* Pantheism: All is god. A spirit, force, energy or god(dess) permeates everything, infusing all parts of creation with its spiritual life.

* Monism: All is one. Since the pantheistic god is everything and in everyone, all things are connected.

* Polytheism: Many gods. Since the pantheistic force or god(dess) makes everything sacred, anything can be worshipped: the sun, trees, mountains and eagles—even ourselves.

* Paganism: Trusting occult wisdom and powers. Throughout history, tribal shamans, medicine men, witchdoctors, or priests have contacted the spirit world using timeless rituals and formulas which are surprisingly similar in all the world’s pagan cultures.

* Neopaganism: New idealized blends of old pagan religions. To make paganism attractive in today’s self-focused atmosphere, its promoters idealize tribal cultures and pagan religions. Instead of telling the whole truth and nothing but, they tell us that spiritual forces link each person to every other part of nature. Anyone, not just spiritual leaders, can now function as priestess, contact the spirit world, manipulate spiritual forces, and help create worldwide peace and spiritual oneness.

Gateways to the Goddess

Like most Neopagans, Diane believes that earth-centered spirituality brings peace and personal empowerment. A pretty young woman with long black hair and the slender look of a vegetarian, she is a local hairdresser. She is also married, looking forward to starting a family, and a member of the Bay Area Pagan Assemblies. While cutting my hair one day, she told me how she discovered the goddess.

“I always liked to read,” she said, “especially books about magic and witchcraft.”

“Which was your favorite?” I asked.

“Margot Adler’s book, *Drawing Down the Moon*.”

“That’s almost an encyclopedia on witchcraft. How old were you?”

“A senior in high school.”

“How did you find it?”

“Browsing around in the library. But I had already read some other books, like *Medicine Woman* by Lynn Andrews.

My thoughts drifted to another young woman who read *Medicine Woman* some years ago. Lori’s high school teacher had encouraged her to explore various spiritual traditions—even create her own religion. Fascinated with Lynn Andrews’ blend of Native American shamanism and goddess spirituality, Lori ordered a Native American tipi from a catalog, set it up in her backyard, and used it for candle-lit rituals inspired by Wiccan magic (witchcraft). Like most contemporary pagans, she had learned to mix various traditions into a personal expression that fit her own quest for power and “wisdom from within.”

Some months before Diane first cut my hair, I had met a charming Stanford University student who also called

herself pagan. Beth, an education and philosophy major, had read my book about environmental spirituality and wanted to discuss it with me. While we ate lunch together at the college cafeteria, she shared her beliefs.

“Who introduced you to witchcraft and lesbianism?” I asked after a while.

“Two of my high school teachers,” she answered.

I wasn’t surprised. By then I knew that an inordinate number of pagan women have chosen the classroom as their platform for spreading their faith and transforming our culture.⁷ Like the rest of us, they want to build a better world—one that reflects their beliefs and values.

While Beth talked, I glanced at her jewelry. The golden pentagram and voluptuous little goddess dangling from a chain around her neck spoke volumes about her values. So did her earrings: two large pink triangles pointing down, an ancient symbol of the goddess as well as a modern symbol of lesbianism.

“What about your jewelry?” I asked. “Do people know what the pentagram and triangles symbolize? Do they criticize you for wearing the little goddess?”

She smiled. “No. Everybody here is supposed to be tolerant of each other’s lifestyles. Nobody would dare say anything.”

I pondered her statement. What does it mean to be tolerant—or intolerant—these days? If intolerance is the self-righteous attitude that despises people with “different” values, it would be wrong. Jesus always demonstrated love and compassion toward the excluded and hurting women of His times. Yet, He never condoned destructive lifestyles or actions that harmed others. What would happen in a culture that tolerates everything?

One result is obvious. The last three decades have produced an unprecedented openness to what used to be forbidden realms. Fortune telling, occult board games, and Native American rituals, along with countless other doorways to paganism, have spread from the hidden chambers of professional occultists and tribal shamans to our nation’s classrooms, environmental programs, Girl Scout camps, and churches.

Leading “Christian” theologians no longer hide their spiritual preference. “The deconstruction of patriarchal religion—in bland terms, the assisted suicide of God the Father—left many of us bereft of divinity,” explains feminist theologian Mary Hunt. “But the human hunger for meaning and value . . . finds new expression in goddess worship.”⁸

This human hunger for meaning was designed to draw people to God. He created us to need Him, not man-made counterfeits. As the 17th-century philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, “There’s a God-shaped vacuum in every heart.” But, like Beth, Diane and Peggy, an astounding number of women try to fill that void with alluring counterfeits. In the

process, they are shifting the foundations of our nation from biblical truth to pagan myths.

The Paradigm Shift

“I was raised in a no-you-don’t world,” sang Streisand, dramatizing her disdain for traditional values. But “you and I are changing our tune. We’re learning new rhythms from that woman. I said, the woman in the moon. . . . O ye-ah, ye-ah!”⁹

Women everywhere are learning follow the rhythms of that “Woman in the Moon,” a song that helped Shawntell Smith win the 1995 Miss America contest. Despising God’s standard for holiness, they create their own. To leading feminist theologian Mary Daly that “involves breaking taboos,” being “wicked women,” “riding the rhythms of . . . rage,” and “seeking sister vibrations.”¹⁰ For “sisterhood means revolution”¹¹—a rising revolt against biblical beliefs and values that is proving the timeless allure of pagan spirituality.

As many of you know, that allure drew over 2000 women from mainline churches in 49 states and 27 countries to Minneapolis in 1993.¹² They came together to re-imagine Jesus, themselves, their sexuality, and their world. Funded in part by their Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Lutheran denominations,¹³ the four-day conference sent shock waves across our nation that are still shaking the Church.

At this Re-Imagining conference, Cuban theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz called for “a new Pentecost”—a new way of seeing reality. “We need to develop . . . a lens . . . to understand that the way things are is not natural,” she explained, “[so that] we can change them radically.”¹⁴

Ms. Isasi-Diaz was talking about a paradigm shift. Her “lens” is like a mental filter that narrows her vision of the world to fit her new convictions. Like the popular Native American fetish called a dreamcatcher, it permits only ideas that support the “right” beliefs to settle in the mind. It rules out all contrary ideas. This new view of “reality” looks something like this:

- * Everything is connected to the same god or goddess.
- * Therefore everything is naturally sacred and good.
- * Therefore insights from my “inner Self” are true and the biblical view of sin is merely a patriarchal club for controlling women.
- * Therefore the Church, the cross, and male authority obstruct spiritual progress.
- * Therefore biblical Christianity doesn’t fit.

To establish this new paradigm, the old biblical “lens” must be altered or replaced with a new feminist lens. The Re-Imagining Conference, like our changing schools, used guided imagery and pagan rituals to accomplish the shift. Those new experiences—whether imagined or acted out—desensitized participants to biblical taboos and made paganism seem as normal as Christianity. It also helped them “discover” and define their own truth.

Kathleen Fischer summarizes the process in her book, *Women at the Well*:

Attentiveness to a person's experience is, of course, central. . . . What a feminist perspective adds to this emphasis is belief in the authority of women's experience, confidence that we are engaged in a new encounter with the divine through that experience, and the conviction that it is a norm for the truthfulness of the tradition.¹⁵

In other words, a woman's experience, not God's own revelation, determines the truthfulness of the new beliefs. If something feels good, sounds loving, and seems empowering, it must be right. Few seekers heed the warning in Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things. . . . Who can know it?"

"We can!" say feminist leaders. Though most of the women at the Re-Imagining conference belonged to mainline churches, they had little resistance to the kinds of occult suggestions that beckoned them. Told to ignore the "inner voice" of their Bible-trained conscience, they embraced new "truths" designed to confirm feminist visions.

BASIS FOR FAITH IN THE:

CHRISTIAN PARADIGM	FEMINIST PARADIGM
1. The Bible	1. Imagination (or experience)
2. Spirit-given insights into truth	2. Experience (or imagination)
3. Experiences that affirm Scriptures	3. Preferred Bible verses that affirm experience

Sex and Feminist Spirituality

The new truths came with built-in values made to sound and feel good. Who wouldn't want love, peace, justice and unity? But in today's climate of politically correct tolerance, the loftiest values often fade in the light of earthier wants such as clothes, sex, fame, and power.

It's easy to hide human lusts behind noble dreams and earth-centered spirituality. That's what psychotherapist Deena Metzger did in her article, "Re-Vamping the World: On the Return of the Holy Prostitute:"

Once upon a time, in Sumeria, in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, in Greece, there were no whorehouses, no brothels. . . . There were instead the Temples of the Sacred Prostitutes. In these temples, men were cleansed, not sullied, morality was restored, not desecrated, sexuality was not perverted, but divine.

The original whore was a priestess, the conduit to the Divine, the one through whose body one entered the sacred arena and was restored. . . .

It is no wonder that . . . the prophets of Jehovah all condemned the Holy Prostitute and the worship of Asherah, Astarte, Anath and the other goddesses. Until the time of these priests the women were the one doorway to God.

Do you see the two paradigms? One sees reality through the filter of biblical truth; the other looks through the lens of feeling-based paganism.

From Ms. Metzger's new-paradigm perspective, the sex rites of ancient Middle Eastern paganism sound great. To the Old Testament prophets, they looked bad. Ms. Metzger needed a story that would tell her side, so she used her imagination. It filtered out facts that clashed with her vision and embellished those that fit. She understood the process well:

Whatever rites we imagine took place . . . [depends on] whether we elevate them as do neopagans or condemn them as do Judeo-Christians.

Today, some link the ancient prostitutes to "orgies and debauchery." Others link them to cleansing and divinity. Most choose something in between.

Some of Ms. Metzger's feminist sisters would probably disagree that the ancient practice of "sacred" and compulsory prostitution is good for the soul, but that doesn't matter. Women don't have to agree. Today, each woman may claim the right to stand unchallenged on her own truth and values, and Metzger's "truth" sounds good to those who prefer to cloak sex with spirituality.

Janie Spahr, co-founder of CLOUT (Christian Lesbians Out Together), links sex to sacredness. "Sexuality and spirituality have come together, and Church, we're going to teach you!"¹⁶ she announced at the Re-Imagining conference. Her theology, she explained, is first of all informed by "making love with Coni," her lesbian lover. Was she implying, as modern pagans do, that sex is a channel for spiritual energy?

"Sexuality is a sacrament," writes Starhawk, a Wiccan author. "Religion is a matter of relinking, with the divine within and with her outer manifestation in all of the human and natural world."¹⁷

"In a sacred universe," continued Ms. Metzger, "the prostitute is a holy woman, a priestess. In a secular universe, the prostitute is a whore. . . . The question is: how do we relate to this today, as women, as feminists? Is there a way we can resanctify society, become the priestesses again, put ourselves in the service of the gods and Eros? As we re-vision, can we re-vamp as well?"

The answer is a resounding "yes." People have already re-visioned sex. The "vamping" process is well under way. Just look at television and newspaper ads. Our Sunday morning papers as well as contemporary women's magazines parade the same titillating pictures once hidden in private pin-up calendars. That the feminist movement

flows in the same direction as other pagan blends makes it all the more acceptable. Anything goes—except biblical intolerance—the refusal to accept what God forbids.

Unholy Tolerance

Life has changed at St. Olaf College since I was a student there. Years ago, Minnesota’s venerable “college on the hill” seemed the ultimate in both Christian and Lutheran education. But multicultural education has replaced biblical integrity, and a new global emphasis has opened the door to professors who promote Hindu and other “mind-body” beliefs instead of biblical truth.¹⁸ The chapel, once a sacred sanctuary for worshipping God, has become a moral battleground.

One spring morning in 1989, English teacher Rebecca Mark gave the chapel talk. She first introduced the point of her message:

To speak the words, ‘I am gay. I am proud to be gay,’ at this place where silence has reigned too long, is not enough. I am not alone. . . . I am called upon to be the voice of many who have been silent. . . .

As a gay woman I speak through the earth. The word gay comes from the goddess Gaia, the Greek earth mother goddess. I speak not as a sinner, but as the Mojave shaman. . . . I speak from the voice of thousands of gay spirit leaders, healers and teachers in Indian culture. . . . I speak as . . . those who have known death and rebirth. And I too mourn. . . .

Ms. Mark mourned the cruel slurs and spiteful rejection suffered by gay students, and she was right to do so. God calls us to love, not hate those who miss the mark. His love reaches out to all who hurt, including those who yield their bodies to promiscuous lifestyles, whether homosexual or heterosexual. But her call reached far beyond a condemnation of cruelty. It sent a vision of multicultural solidarity that demands a radical change in the very heart of Christianity. It summoned God’s people to not only approve promiscuous and destructive lifestyles,¹⁹ but also embrace the pagan spirituality that sacrilizes sex.

She ended her talk with a sensual poem by an American Indian woman who blended lesbian love with a spiritualized earth mother. Then she invited the students and faculty—all who “can wear the pink triangle proudly”—to come forward as a “sign of community and liberation.” Singing “We are gay and straight together,” they streamed to the front of the church to claim the badge of their new identity.

The enthusiastic response was no surprise, for our today’s culture prefers tolerance to truth. So did ancient Israel. “Why do you tolerate wrong?”²⁰ God asked the people He loved, knowing that their presumptuous tolerance would lead to violence and destruction. They didn’t listen. Neither does our culture today. (Look up tolerance in your Bible concordance and see what God says about it.) Instead, we

excuse what He calls sin and mock the peace He longs to give. The results are devastating. Read what He says about sex outside marriage.

Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s. (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)

The Nature of Temptation

God shows us that sexual sins are especially damaging to us both physically and spiritually. Yet, neopagans tout the healing and cleansing effects of “sacred” promiscuity. Interesting twist, isn’t it?

Those who tolerate sin become blind to its danger. Women cannot maintain utopian illusions unless they hide opposing truths. They can’t trust their sacred self without rationalizing away its unholy bent. So they shift God’s label for sin away from the things they want and attach it to the things they despise: Promiscuity? That comes from loss of self-esteem caused by the guilt feelings stirred up by Christians who criticize my lifestyle. Anger? Try the same reasoning.

Do you see how easy it is to be “good” if you use the “right” reasoning? Just re-imagine the old values. Base your beliefs on your momentary feelings, not on God’s time-tested Word. Look at the difference a paradigm shift makes.

SIN IS . . .

BIBLICAL PARADIGM	FEMINIST PARADIGM
separation from God rebellious against God	separation from nature ignoring the god(dess) in self
self-centeredness	not loving self first or enough
pride lack of self-discipline disobeying God	lack of pride limiting self-fulfillment submitting to a patriarchal god
tolerating sin	not tolerating sin

Tolerating sin destroys shame. Some years ago, I watched the pastor’s wife in a Presbyterian (USA) church teach a Sunday school class called “Women at the Well.” She first “centered” the class with a chant by medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen whose pantheistic images sounded more Buddhist than Christian. Then she read a quote by Thomas Merton, the Catholic mystic who embraced Tibetan Buddhism. Finally she gave us a two-page handout from a book called *Soul Friend: An Invitation to Spiritual Direction*.²¹ It told me that today’s mysticism, which

blends acceptance of sin with a permissive feminine God, isn't all that new:

In the fourteenth century in Europe there was a great flowering of mysticism, and out of this period came some of the greatest spiritual guides of all time whose writings are highly relevant today. . . .

Julian of Norwich. . . . claims that 'God showed me that sin need be no shame to man but can even be worthwhile.' She seems to mean by this that sins are disguised virtues, for 'in heaven what sin typifies is turned into a thing of honour.'²²

. . . In Julian's theology, we find the fullest expression of the concept of the femininity of God. 'God is as really our Mother as he is Father,' she says. 'Our precious Mother Jesus brings us to supernatural birth, nourishes and cherishes us by dying for us.'²³

It's true that our sins show us our need for Christ's redemption, but they are not "disguised virtues." They don't typify something of honor, nor can they be softened by putting a feminine face on God. We can live without shame only because God has forgiven us, not because sin has lost its sting. If I condone my own sins, I will neither come to the cross nor appreciate God's wonderful mercy. Nor would I fight the seductive pull of Satan's temptations—especially those that look almost too good to resist.

Satan can only pervert God's good. Our Father invented delightful food, human affection, sexual pleasure, satisfying work, spiritual insights . . . Everything good came from Him. Satan can only distort and imitate God's precious gifts, or tempt us to grasp too much or too little, or take it at the wrong time, or in the wrong place. You know the results: pain, confusion, anger, addiction, broken relationships, decaying culture and much more (see the rest in Galatians 5:19-25).

The things God labels as sinful lust, the world now sees as normal behavior or psychological addiction or obsession for which a person is not responsible.²⁴ Decades of sex education promoting promiscuity and perversion in our schools have accomplished just what feminist leaders demanded: a cultural acceptance of their own radical values. Listen to the philosophy behind the sex education promoted by SIECUS (Sex Information and Education Council of the United States):

The purpose of sex education is not . . . to control and suppress sex expression, as in the past. . . .The individual must be given sufficient understanding to incorporate sex most fruitfully and most responsibly into his present and future life.²⁵

SIECUS has been working with Planned Parenthood to bring social change. The behavior inspired by their irresponsible agenda has brought devastating results. Consider these statistics:

Every 24 hours in this nation more than 12,000 teenagers contract a sexually transmitted disease. Thirty percent of all STD's contracted are incurable.²⁶ Each year 1.3 million new cases of gonorrhea are reported²⁷ One million teenage girls, nearly one in 10, become pregnant each year.²⁸ About one and a half million unborn babies are aborted each year.

"Current sex education programs are designed to destroy the normal embarrassment and modesty of children," writes Stanley Monteith, M.D., author of *AIDS: the Unnecessary Epidemic*, in his informative newsletter, "yet it is that modesty that has traditionally been a barrier to early sexual experimentation and promiscuity."²⁹

The root problem isn't homosexuality or promiscuity or even paganism. It is the loss of truth as our moral standard. When school teachers blur the line between right and wrong, why should students say "no" to temptation? Why not try all the "new" sensations that beckon? Young people do—and face cravings they can't control. Unlike biblical love, lust will not wait; and obsessive lust has a way of displacing God's kind and patient love.

Bondage can follow any repeated sin. "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts,"³⁰ warns Paul. But many feminist who claim control over their bodies have already yielded that control to a stronger force.

It doesn't take long to see results. We have become a society obsessed with sex, food, looks, shopping, drugs, gambling, and coddling our feelings. But we feel no shame, because we dare not name sin. As a schoolgirl said when her 15-year-old classmate stabbed another student in the back. "What's the big deal? People die all the time. So what?"³¹

From Tolerance to Truth

Any sin is a big deal. Even the smallest ones will separate us from God if we don't follow His way back to peace. Neopagans may deny sin's power, Buddhism may offer noble alternatives, and the New Age movement may inspire a massive leap in consciousness, but they all miss the point. Humanity can never evolve beyond its need for the cross.

The root problem is as old as history: rebellion against God. Human nature doesn't change, that's why history keeps repeating itself. In Old Testament days, it didn't take more than a generation for Israel to shift its loyalties from the Shepherd who protected the people to "other gods" who destroyed them. As faithful Samuel told Saul, the first king of ancient Israel,

. . . rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,
And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
He also has rejected you from being king.
(1 Samuel 15:23)

Saul had followed his feelings rather than truth, therefore God could no longer use him as a leader. Soon an unholy, “distressing spirit” began to torment him, driving him to murderous fury. Only the sweet music played by the shepherd-boy David could soothe his troubled mind. Having rejected God’s gentle guidance, Saul faced the terrors of a demonic substitute.

Romans 1:18-32 shows what happens when we ignore God’s protective boundaries and “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” First, when people hide the truth, they are left without a standard or reference point. Now they have no way of knowing whether they are taking the right or the wrong way. They become “unrighteous”—they don’t do right—and they despise the standard that proves them wrong. All the more, they mock God’s truth and vilify His way. Look what happens next:

- * “they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts. . . .” (v. 21)
- * “their foolish hearts were darkened.” (v. 21)
- * “Professing to be wise, they became fools. . . .” (v. 22)
- * They “changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.” (v.23)

The last point was the purpose of the Re-Imagining conference. The leaders tried to change the eternal God into mental images of created beings that decay and die. The result is a fixation on corruptible things—including self—that decay and die, followed by an endless stream of disappointment and grief.

The downward progression doesn’t stop here. Three more devastating consequences follow, each starting with the words: “God gave them up (or over) to. . . .” indicating that God pulled back His needed resources and left them—both individually and collectively—to face their capricious human nature:

1. Therefore GOD ALSO GAVE THEM UP to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves. . . . (Romans 1:24-25)
2. GOD GAVE THEM UP to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men . . . burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. (Romans 1:26-27)
3. GOD GAVE THEM OVER to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. . . . They disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:28-32)

All kinds of personal struggles, obsessions, addictions, and misery can be explained simply by understanding what happens when people turn from God to the seductions of

popular paganism. Unlike God who loves us, Satan loves no one, nor does he hesitate to inspire and energize the worst in human nature.

When people reject God, He “gives them over” to who they really are. Left to their own resources and Satan’s schemes, they face the driving force of their own desires. The more they feed their wants, the more cravings increase. Following that insatiable nature, they violate the natural order established by God. Deep inside, they know they are “unclean,” but in their struggle to accept themselves, they blame others and run further away from the only source of lasting help.

There is no freedom for those who follow the flesh and ignore God’s truth. Those who have struggled with addictions to alcohol, to drugs, to food or even shopping can testify to our human resistance to doing right. No one described that struggle better than Paul. “What I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. . . .” (Romans 7:15)

Everything changed when Paul surrender His life to Jesus Christ and joined his inadequate will to God’s perfect will. His desire became Paul’s desire, and God’s strength became Paul’s strength. Now he could exult with all God’s followers who have discovered the freedom of the cross, the wonders of God’s love, and the victory of the exchanged life:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

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1. Naomi R. Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism & the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 3.
 2. Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, “Every witch way to the Goddess,” *The Sunday Telegraph*, October 17, 1993.
 3. Alla Bozarth-Campbell, *Womanpriest: A Personal Odyssey* (North Carolina State Press, 1978), back cover.
 4. Nancy Smith and Donna Maxfield, “Spiritual Quest in Beijing,” *Good News* (November/December 1995); 34.
 5. Re-Imagining Conference Tape 12-1, Side B.
 6. Mark Tooley, “Great Goddess Almighty,” *Heterodoxy* (October 1995); 6.
 7. In *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, New Age leader Marilyn Ferguson wrote: “Of the Aquarian Conspirators surveyed, more were involved in education than in any other single category of work. They were teachers, administrators, policymakers, educational psychologists. . . .” (page 280) My own observations confirm Ms. Ferguson’s assertion. Since I wrote *Under the Spell of Mother Earth*, I have received reports from parents across the country documenting the use of Native American or Wiccan rituals by enthusiastic female teachers as part of environmental, global, or multicultural education.
 8. Mary Hunt is co-director of WATER (Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual) in Silver Springs, MD. “Mary Hunt: Goddess Equals diversity, Pluralism,” *Religious News Service*, July 16, 1993.
 9. *A Star is Born* (Producer: Barbra Streisand), Warner Brothers, 1976.
 10. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), xxv.
 11. *Ibid.* 59.
 12. Katherine Kersten, “God in Your Mirror?” *The Lutheran Commentator* (May/June 1994); 1.

13. All funders were listed in the Re-Imagining program booklet, p 66. The largest single contributor was the Presbyterian Church (USA) which gave \$66,000 from their Bicentennial Fund. An additional \$20,000 covered staff expenses to attend and scholarships for Presbyterians. Other contributors included the ELCA (Lutheran), Baptists, and United Methodist.
14. *Ibid.*, Tape 5-1, Side A.
15. Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 6. The words deleted in the first sentence were: "to any spiritual direction context." You can check the meaning in the glossary.
16. Re-Imagining Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 4-7, 1993.
17. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 23.
18. Among the books authored by St. Olaf College faculty and endorsed and reviewed on page 5 in St.Olaf (November/December 1994), were *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas* by Anantanand Rambachan, a religion faculty member, and *Consciousness and the Mind of God* by Charles Taliaferro, which offers "a holistic understanding of the dualist person-body relationship." Rambachan leads a weekly Hindu fellowship for Hindu students and others interested in Eastern spirituality.
19. Romans 1:32.
20. Habakkuk 1:3. See also Habakkuk 1:13; Revelation 2:2, 2:20 (NIV)
21. Cited by class "hand-out" from Richard J. Foster, *Renovare: Devotional Readings* (Vol. 1, no. 43, 1991), no page number shown.
22. Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: An Invitation to Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 146. Leech cites Julian's Revelations of Divine Love, 35, 37-39. These pages don't match the translations I have examined. The closest translation I could find was Julian of Norwich: Showings (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) translated by Edmund Colledge, page 154: "God also showed me that sin is no shame, but honour to man. . . . It is to them no shame that they have sinned—shame is not more in the bliss of heaven—for there the tokens of sin are turned into honours." These words are taken out of context; they do not reflect Julian's overall view of sin. However they do show how certain passages are being used to validate the feminist concept of sin.
23. *Ibid.*, 147. Leech cites pages 59-61 in *Divine Revelations*, but again, these page numbers do not match the translations I found. Instead, I would like to cite a few similar quotes from Julian of Norwich: Showings (detailed above): "As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother, and he revealed that in everything, and especially in these sweet words where he says, 'I am he . . . the power and goodness of fatherhood; I am he, the wisdom and the lovingkindness of motherhood. . . I am he, the Trinity; I am he, the unity; I am he, the great supreme goodness of every kind of thing. . . . As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms.'" (pages 295-6) Julian also wrote, "The second person of the Trinity is our Mother in nature. . . in whom we are founded and rooted, and he is our Mother of mercy in taking our sensuality. . . . So our Mother works in mercy on all his beloved children who are docile and obedient to him." (page 294)"So our Lady is our mother, in whom we are all enclosed and born of her in Christ, for she who is mother of our saviour is mother of all who are saved in our saviour; and our saviour is our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come." (p. 292)
24. Romans 6:11-23.
25. Lester Kirkendall, in his article included in *Sexuality And Man*, a collection of articles written and compiled by SIECUS board members.
26. Haven Bradford Gow, "Consequences of Sexual Revolution," Christian News, July 3, 1995.
27. *Ibid.* (Haven)
28. Associated Press, "Experts Say New Generation Is in Trouble Already," San Francisco Chronicle, June 9, 1990.
29. Stanley K. Monteith, "Anticipated Worldwide Death Toll: 1 Billion People," HIV-Watch (Vol. II, No. 1); 7.
30. Romans 6:12.
31. William K. Kilpatrick, "Turning Out Moral Illiterates," Los Angeles Times, July 20, 1993.

Book of Order G-6.0106b

"Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament."

Proposed Amendment A. If a majority of presbyteries vote against this proposed amendment, it will not replace G-6.0106b in the Book of Order.

"Those who are called to office in the church are to live a life in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and instructed by the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to demonstrate fidelity and integrity in marriage or singleness, and in all relationships of life. Candidates for ordained office shall acknowledge their own sinfulness, their need for repentance, and their reliance on the grace and mercy of God to fulfill the duties of their office."

Amendment A: Where Are We Headed?

by Paul Leggett

The current issues being faced by the Presbyterian Church (USA) deal with the very foundation of our faith. The action of last June's General Assembly which recommends altering the recently passed *Book of Order* G-6.0106b (Amendment "B") raises far greater questions than those dealing with sexual morality. The heart of the debate currently taking place in the PCUSA is not about the ordination of self affirming gay/lesbian persons or whether sexual intimacy belongs in marriage alone, as important as those topics are. The true issue is now nothing less than what it means to be a confessional church in the Reformed tradition.

Two contradictory themes have emerged from the supporters of proposed Amendment "A." The first is that this new amendment actually brings us closer to the historic Reformed understanding of authority in the church. Second, we are also told that our confessionals standards, as they currently exist, are defective. In fact, as was reported by Dr. Laird J. Stuart, chairperson of the General Assembly committee which proposed Amendment "A," our standards "need grace to temper them and keep them from becoming too severe."¹

The supporters of Amendment "A" have challenged the validity of *Book of Order* G-6.0106b's call to "obedience to Scripture . . . in conformity to the historical confessional standards of the church." They have claimed that the standards of Scripture and the confessions are subservient to the supreme standard of Jesus Christ. They have affirmed that there is a ranked hierarchy of authority in the Reformed tradition.

The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, the Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, has agreed with this claim stating that "our standards of authority are in descending order beginning with Jesus Christ, then turning to the scriptures, then to the confessions." To reinforce this statement supporters of Amendment "A" claim that its language which speaks of "a life in obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of Scripture and instructed by the historical confessional standards of the church" is taken from the ordination vows which presently are affirmed by all church officers. Obedience in the church properly is given to Jesus Christ rather than to the Scriptures, we are told.

So which is it? Is it the case that the proposed new amendment "A" is more in conformity with "the historic

Reformed understanding" or is it that our confessional standards as they now exist are deficient since they apparently "need grace?" Answers to these assertions are far more vital than the continuing discussion about particular standards for ordination in the PCUSA.

We are being called to find "common ground," to pursue unity in the church. Our sole basis for any common ground or unity as a church denomination can only be found in our constitution. Certainly "God alone is Lord of the conscience." It is also true in the words of the "Preliminary Principles" that "there are truths and forms with respect to which men (sic) of good character and principles may differ." Yet none of these statements can have any force or validity if we are not in agreement on the fundamental character of our constitution. The issue before the Presbyterian Church (USA) at this moment is nothing less than the spiritual life and death question of whether we are prepared to live according to our foundational beliefs as stated in *The Book of Confessions* (Part I of our Constitution) or whether we have in effect abandoned these documents as offering the fundamental definition of our faith as Reformed and Presbyterian Christians.

Attempt to Separate Christ from His Word

The first assertion is that Amendment "A" is more in conformity with "the historic Reformed understanding" of a ranked hierarchy in which one begins with Jesus Christ and then turns in *descending order* to the Scriptures and then to the confessions. This is truly an astonishing assertion, all the more so because it has been made by no less a figure than the Stated Clerk of our denomination. Nonetheless, it is a statement that is wrong both historically and theologically. To say that Jesus Christ *apart from Scripture* is the authority for the church is to say something that is outside the entire Reformed church tradition. To claim that we begin with Jesus Christ as our authority and then we turn in *descending order* to the Scriptures is to take a position that is not only contrary to Reformed theology and confession from the sixteenth century to the present but one that would also be completely unintelligible to Reformed theologians from John Calvin to Karl Barth. Who is this Jesus who can be known and obeyed apart from Scripture?

It is certainly correct to maintain that Jesus Christ is, in the words of the Barmen Declaration, "the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." Holy Scripture is the "Word of God written" (*Book of Confessions* 6.002, 9.27). Jesus Christ is the sum total of the Scriptures. They bear witness to him. This is as true of the Old Testament as it is of the New

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(Calvin, *Institutes* Bk. II, IX/1; *Book of Confessions* 3.04, 6.041). What, however, is incorrect is to assert that Jesus Christ is the authority for the church distinct from and superior to the authority of Scripture and that, somehow, the Scriptures exist as an authority in a secondary, descending order.

In the Reformed tradition authority begins with the Scriptures. Through the Scriptures as the Word of God written we come to see Jesus Christ. Scripture is the source of all true knowledge of Jesus Christ, this especially refers to saving knowledge by which we know that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again “according to the Scriptures” (I Cor. 15:3-4). It is in his recourse to the witness of the Scriptures that the apostle Paul is able to counter the claim of “another Jesus” who was the product of a “different gospel” (II Cor. 11:4; cf. II Cor. 4:13-14). The order here is unmistakable. We come first to Scripture, the Word of God in written form. As we study the Scriptures we find their central message is the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ (John 5:29; Luke 24:44-47). Scripture is the sole source of saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Any knowledge of Christ outside of Scripture is not that found in saving faith. The Westminster Confession summarizes this eloquently in Chapter 14 “On Saving Faith” (*Book of Confessions* 6.079):

By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein. . . . But the principal acts of saving faith are, accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

In other words, it is only as we come to recognize Scripture as true, as having the authority of God speaking in it, that we can have any faithful understanding of Jesus Christ. So, rather than turning to Scripture as a secondary source in some descending order after we affirm Christ, we begin with Scripture and only then do we come to Christ as Savior and Lord. The Second Helvetic Confession can speak of preaching as the Word of God only because true preaching is the proclamation of the message of the Scriptures (*Book of Confessions* 5.003-5.004). This is the thrust of the historic Reformed understanding of authority in the church. John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* begins with Scripture as the source of knowledge in faith, a knowledge which leads to Christ the Redeemer (*Institutes* Bk. I chaps. VI-IX). Calvin goes so far as to say that those who seek some other way of reaching God than by following Scripture are “not so much gripped by error as carried away with frenzy” (*Institutes* I/IX/1). When we turn to our *Book of Confessions* we find that they continually affirm the need to begin with Scripture. This is the clear statement of the Scots, Second Helvetic and Westminster Confessions (*Book of Confessions* 3.18-3.19, 5.001-5.003, 6.001-6.010). The Barmen Declaration contains the sober warning, “If you find that we are speaking contrary to Scripture, then do not listen to us!” (*Book of Confessions* 8.05). The Confession of 1967 states:

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* (italics mine) (*Book of Confessions* 9.27).

The Brief Statement of Faith summarizes, “The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life *in Christ through Scripture*” (italics mine) (*Book of Confessions* 10.4, lines 58-60). The center of our faith is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ but it is Jesus Christ “as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture.” This is the consensus of the Reformed faith as stated again and again in the historic creeds of the Reformed Church, not only those included in our *Book of Confessions* but in others such as the First Helvetic Confession, the Genevan Confession, the French Confession and the Belgic Confession among others.

Over against these historic affirmations, the claim that “the historic Reformed understanding” of authority is in descending order Jesus Christ and then the Scriptures and then the confessions is not only wrong but is an outright distortion. The historic Reformed understanding begins with Scripture as the true and fully authoritative Word of God in written form and then finds Jesus Christ as the message of the Scriptures. The role of the confessions is to interpret the Scriptures. While Scripture, Christ and confessions of faith can, and must be, distinguished from each other, they can never be separated. The test of faith is always, “Does it conform to Scripture?” To suggest that there is some hierarchy of order in faith in which Jesus Christ can be separated from Scripture (since we turn to Scripture presumably after beginning with Jesus Christ) and then we turn to the confessions after turning to the Scriptures is not Reformed theology at all.

The Scriptures are our sole authority for knowing about Jesus Christ, his gospel and his will for us. The confessions aid us in our understanding of the Scriptures. We do not turn to the confessions after we have consulted the Scriptures. Rather we use the confessions as we study the Scriptures. And if the confessions are found to be contrary to Scripture we amend the confessions. Jesus Christ, however, can never be set over against the Scriptures since the Scriptures bear witness to him uniquely and authoritatively. We may correct an interpretation of Scripture but to suggest that Jesus Christ stands over against or separate from the Scriptures is to depart seriously from a Reformed and Presbyterian understanding of Christian faith.

Attempt to Clear Way for Ordination of those Practicing Homosexuality

The issue before the church in Amendment “A,” as it is being presented, is nothing less than an ersatz understanding of Christianity. This becomes more evident as one looks at the accompanying arguments on behalf of Amendment “A” from another angle. Having been told that

Amendment “A” is closer to “the historic Reformed understanding”(which it is not) we are then told that some change in our historic understanding is necessary since the standards of the church, presumably the confessions, “lack grace.” One of the more grace oriented themes of Amendment “A,” apparently, is that by replacing G-6.0106b it would remove the “basis for a continuing ban on the ordination of self-affirming and practicing gay and lesbian people.” This assertion was made in a sermon given by Dr. Stuart, chair of the GA Commissioners Committee that passed proposed Amendment A, shortly after the Assembly.¹ This assertion is particularly revealing in the light of his committee’s insistence that it was not seeking to overturn the General Assembly’s position of definitive guidance, later reaffirmed as authoritative interpretation, in forbidding the ordination of self-affirming and practicing gay and lesbian persons. In addition to this concern the statement is made that the confessions, as they now stand, cannot provide clear ethical guidance since they contain a catalogue of some 670 sins which are defined as “cumbersome and confusing.” So while we are told on one hand that Amendment “A” is necessary to restore the historic Reformed understanding in the church, we are told, on the other, that this same historic Reformed understanding lacks grace, and is confusing and cumbersome.

Our Reformed forebears would have been shocked to be told that their definitions of the faith lacked grace! One could argue that the hallmark of the Reformed church is its radical view of God’s sovereign grace, that no matter how sinful we are, God’s grace in Jesus Christ is all sufficient to pardon, forgive and restore us. To say that this theme is stressed in the *Book of Confessions* would be a tremendous understatement. It is in fact the understanding of grace which lies behind the much debated doctrine of election or predestination. God saves us utterly apart from anything we have done or might attempt to do. The doctrine of sin in the Reformed tradition not only strips away any pretense we might have of justifying ourselves, it is also a good lesson in democracy. None of us is ultimately any better (or any worse) than anyone else. We all stand indicted under God’s law, powerless to help ourselves. This we have seen to be the meaning of the statement that we are dead in trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1). Contrary to all attempts in the history of the church to minimize the reality of sin and the sovereign power of God’s grace, from Pelagius who opposed Augustine on this point, to Medieval attempts to forge some cooperative view of humanity and God working together in salvation, to later Methodist and Holiness understandings of some residue of human spiritual ability, to the contemporary redefinition of sin as essentially a need for therapy, the Reformed view has maintained the priority of salvation being received solely by grace through faith. In the words of the Scots Confession:

For by nature we are so dead, blind, and perverse, that neither can we feel when we are pricked, see the light when it shines, nor assent to the will of God when it is revealed, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus quicken that which is dead, remove the darkness from our minds, and bow our stubborn hearts to the obedience of his blessed will. And so, as we confess that God the Father created

us when we were not, as his Son our Lord Jesus redeemed us when we were enemies to him, so also do we confess that the Holy Ghost does sanctify and regenerate us, without respect to any merit proceeding from us, be it before or be it after our regeneration. To put this even more plainly; as we willingly disclaim any honor and glory for our own creation and redemption, so do we willingly also for our regeneration and sanctification, for by ourselves we are not capable of thinking one good thought, but he who has begun the work in us alone continues us in it, to the praise and glory of his undeserved grace. (*Book of Confessions* 3.12).

To say that our confessions lack grace is like saying Notre Dame lacks a football team. The claim is not so much wrong as simply incomprehensible.

Still, how can grace be reconciled with those 670 sins which G-6.0106b now confronts us with since its inclusion in the *Book of Order*? This complaint against the wording of G-6.0106b has focused on the last sentence which states, “Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.” There has been a sustained effort to misconstrue this sentence ever since it was presented at the 1996 General Assembly. Nothing is said here about complying with a list of aggregate sins. The focus is on what the confessions (plural) call sin. The appeal is to the confessions as a holistic source. Individual confessional documents occasionally define particular sins in different ways. For example, the Westminster Confession prohibits “works, words and thoughts” about “worldly employments and recreations on the Sabbath.” However the accompanying Larger Catechism adds the qualifying word “needless” in reference to “words, works and thoughts about our worldly employments and recreations.” The Shorter Catechism uses the adjective “unnecessary” in a parallel sentence. The point is the confessions confront us with a set of criteria which guide us in matters over which there will clearly be differences of opinion

As another example, while the confessions specifically condemn all marital infidelity, they only offer criteria for evaluation in other sexual areas. Therefore dancing itself is not prohibited but, rather, “*lascivious* songs, books, pictures, dancing. . . ”(italics mine). What constitutes “lascivious” invites a matter of opinion which obviously will change not only from one historical period to another but from one person to another (cf. Rom. 14, I Cor. 8). The issue is repentance not legalistic observance. To comb through the *Book of Confessions* citing historical examples, general criteria and specific prohibitions all on the same level is to engage in ridiculous caricature rather than serious discussion.

Finally, the point has been stressed that Amendment “A” is in conformity with the ordination vows which all church officers must take. This is not the case. For example, the wording of Amendment “A” states, “Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and instructed

by the historic confessional standards of the church.” Actually the ordination vows call officers to be “*instructed and led*” (italics mine) by the confessions. The point has already been made by others that being instructed and led is far more than simply being instructed. I may be instructed by an editorial I read in the morning newspaper but that may be very different from my being led or guided by what I read. Those who want to separate G-6.0106b’s call to obedience to Scripture from Amendment “A”’s reference to obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of Scripture may well need a remedial course in Reformed theology. The ordination vows themselves make clear the call to obedience to Scripture by referring to it as “God’s Word to you.” The confessions are cited as “authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do. . . .” These questions precede the reference to serving “in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and be continually guided (as opposed to only ‘instructed’) by our confessions.” The confessions make clear that Scripture is to be obeyed (*Book of Confessions* 6.004, 8.04, 9.27). This is a hallmark of Reformed belief going back to Calvin (*Institutes I/VI/2*).

The Reformed insistence on the unique authority of Scripture distinguishes it from the Roman Catholic understanding of authority which includes tradition and papal pronouncements. It is also to be distinguished from the quadrilateral Methodist view which includes reason, tradition and experience alongside Scripture. The Reformed view is *sola scriptura*, “Scripture alone,” one of the key concepts of the Protestant Reformation (*Book of Order G-*

2.0400). This view also clearly marks off the Reformed view from modern and indeed post-modern views of authority centered in some understanding of the autonomous individual. The Reformed view of Scripture in no way diminishes the focus on Jesus Christ the Word incarnate who is the sum total of the message of Scripture. Any attempt to separate Christ from Scripture is a violation of the essential belief of the Reformed tradition. There are and will remain differences in the church. There is however a profound distinction between views which are based on the authority of Scripture and those which seek to bypass Scripture or relegate it to a secondary position behind some pious but vague reference to Jesus Christ. The Jesus Christ who is encountered outside Scripture is the “different Jesus” against which the apostle Paul warned the Corinthians. The real issue at stake in the debate over Amendment “A” in the Presbyterian Church (USA) is whether or not we are a church seeking to be obedient to Holy Scripture. In the words of Karl Barth:

It is therefore true that Holy Scripture is the Word of God for the Church, that it is Jesus Christ for us, as He Himself was for the prophets and apostles during the forty days (after the Resurrection) . . . if Scripture is not the Word of God for the Church, then the revelation of God is only a memory, and there is no Church of Jesus Christ.” (Church Dogmatics 1/2 p. 544).

1. Sermon given at Calvary Presbyterian Church, San Francisco, June 29, 1997, entitled “B+.”

Think About This: Is the PCUSA Worth Our While?

by Julius B. Poppinga

“It has outlived its usefulness. It is beyond repair. There have been too many near disasters. It’s not worth the time, effort and resources needed to keep it going. We don’t need it anyway.”

Does this sound like the debate raging over Space Station MIR? Or is it the kind of talk you hear about the PCUSA?

No analogy is perfect; the parallels break down at some point, but this much is clear: both MIR and the PCUSA face changes in their components, in their mission, in how they are provisioned and how they are peopled.

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And the debate will go on. “Why keep trying to work with people who speak a different language? Why do they have so much trouble lining up with the Sun for their power supply? Maybe some have been around the MIR project so long they’ve stopped believing in Gravity. Can’t we do better on our own?”

With all the negative talk, one can easily lose sight of the reasons for carrying on. Someone has to say, “Wait a minute, have you thought of this?”

For now, let others worry about Space Station MIR. Let us think about the PCUSA. What makes it worth our while to put time, effort and resources into it? What is there to work for beyond Amendment B, or is it A?

The answer is, plenty. Consider:

1. The PCUSA is a major repository of the Reformed Tradition, of Reformed theology at its best. It is not the only repository, and perhaps not the primary one. But to read Chapters I, II and III of the Book of Order is to realize that here we have a priceless treasure that has been entrusted to us to cherish, to preserve, and to pass on.
2. The PCUSA best exemplifies the ideal of shared ministry between professional clergy and informed laity.
3. The PCUSA honors the principle of accountability, not just in theory but in practice; pastors to sessions, sessions to congregations, both to presbyteries, and an established church court system. Is it perfect? Of course not. But try to find a polity that is better conceived and more time-tested.
4. The PCUSA has faithful professors in leading seminaries throughout the land. These faculty members and scores of committed students constitute an invaluable resource.
5. The PCUSA is central to the call to ministry of thousands of its pastors. The completion of their careers within the denomination is profoundly related to the full realization of that call.
6. The PCUSA is similarly related to the Christian identity of vast numbers of its members. As a friend put it, "If our church were to leave the denomination I would feel as if I had been orphaned."
7. Last on this list (which is surely incomplete and has not touched on property ownership, pension rights and other material advantages) is the relationship between the PCUSA and Presbyterians the world over. The

Presbyterian Church of Korea is a source of spiritual energy and missionary vision that inspires and challenges us all. We may well need it more than it needs us, but clearly we have an obligation to stand by our overseas brothers and sisters in the faith, to maintain the globe-encircling tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.

As noted above, there will continue to be changes in the PCUSA. No institution is static. Hans Koning, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* (September 1997), concludes his observations about the changes in western culture during the twentieth century thus:

The changes presented to us, or put over on us, . . . come from our near neighbors, our fellow men and women. They can be turned to the good or to the bad. They are not fated.

Their perimeters must be our common decision?

These words are apropos to what faces us in the PCUSA. We can let ourselves be frustrated by what is taking place; we can give up; we can resign to it; we can try to flee from it. But none of these reactions is worthy of those who are called according to God's eternal purpose.

Our resolve, our purpose, must be to call all Presbyterians to faithfulness—faithfulness to Jesus Christ as the Scriptures bear witness to Him; faithfulness to the Scriptures as the Word of God written; and faithfulness to the Constitution of the PCUSA insofar as it remains faithful to our Lord and to the Word of God.

Think about this.

Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark

CHAPTER 16

of THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Observe the text to understand the author's meaning:

Read 16:1-8. Notice chapter 15 ends in darkness. . . almost as if it said, "darkness covers the face of the deep." Then chapter 16, "in the beginning—the first day of the week", the sun had risen. . . "let there be light." There is a new creation—a new heaven and earth!

Who goes to tomb? To do what? When do they go?

Do you see this as strict adherence to the pharisee's laws about the Sabbath. To go and anoint the body would have been to work on the Sabbath.

What is the problem they foresee? What do they find? What are the words used to describe the women's response to the empty tomb?

How do you explain the women's response? The women would have been amazed if the man said, "they carried Jesus dead, bloody, lifeless body to Galilee." Instead what does he say? Why do you think the women said nothing to anyone?

Notice that the first thing the women are told is again the fulfillment of Jesus prophecy. What are they told Jesus will do? Look back at Mark 14:28. Why is the fulfillment of this prophecy important?

Notice Jesus singles Peter out. Why do you think he did this?

Read 16:9-11. Who does Jesus first appear to? Is she holy? or a forgiven sinner?

What does she do? Do they believe her? What is the state of the disciples? Why don't they believe her?

Read 16:12-13. Now who does Jesus appear to? How many? What do they do? What is the disciples response?

Read 16:14-20. Now who does Jesus appear to? How many? Notice the number of those who see Jesus increases—1 then 2 then 11.

If they did not believe until they saw Jesus themselves, what does that say about their ministries to “preach the gospel to all creation.” Are people going to believe?

What is the gospel they are to preach? Look back at Mark 1:1. Who are they to preach it to?

This is a restoration of the whole created order? The gospel of Mark is about the restoration of the Kingdom, now we see the kingdom is the whole of creation—not just Israel. Who will be saved? Who will be condemned? Do you see that salvation and condemnation are related?

See John 3:16ff. What power will the disciples have? What is the purpose of the signs? What happens to Jesus? Notice that this is a fulfillment of Mark 12:36. Jesus sits at the right hand of God. The one whom David calls Lord. And his enemies are under his feet—forever subdued.

Interpret the Text:

1. What does this tell us about who Jesus is? Human? Divine?
2. Paul said if the resurrection did not take place then our faith is futile and we are to be pitied. Why is the resurrection so crucial to our faith? What would the meaning of the gospel be without the resurrection?
3. Why does there continue to be disbelief among the disciples? Are we like that today?
4. Is this a continuing issue of the visible and invisible? The disciples bound by the natural order; God not bound?
5. What does Jesus' resurrection tell us about our lives?

INTERPRET THE BOOK AS A WHOLE

1. Who is Jesus? What do we know about him? Was he bound by nature? What is his relationship to creation?

Did he judge? Heal? Restore?
What is forgiveness? What happens when forgiveness is present? When does it occur? Who was forgiven?

When does it not occur? Who was not forgiven?

What does sovereignty mean?

What is true worship?

Who were the disciples? What was their nature? How did they respond to Jesus? How did they behave at the end of the gospel?

Who were the religious leaders? What was their nature? How did they respond to Jesus? What do we assume they were doing at the end of the gospel?

What was Jesus' attitude about the moral law of God—the 10 commandments? What was his attitude about the pharisee's law?

What is the nature of good and evil?
What is the difference between sin and evil?
How does sovereignty relate to sin and evil?
What is the nature of judgment?

Describe what it means to confess Jesus as savior? as Lord? Do you see mercy in the gospel?

What is the relationship between the visible and the invisible? Which is more “trustworthy” to follow? How do we know what the invisible is like? Where do we go to find out?

Other Comments or discussion?

APPLICATION OF THE BOOK TO OUR LIVES

1. What does this say about our nature? Our natural response to Christ? How does an understanding of Jesus nature help us to live? Make decisions?
2. How does Christ's power help us to view our lives? How does Christ's authority and power help us to see value and meaning in our lives?
3. What does it mean for us to confess Christ Lord? When good things happen? When difficult things happen?
4. How are we to live? and make decisions? What is our guide? What remedy is there when we stumble?

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News from Around the World

CLIFF KIRKPATRICK, stated clerk of the General Assembly, charged with upholding the constitution of the church, told renewal leaders at their September meeting in San Antonio, that **“Passage of Amendment A would make it easier to ordain homosexuals.”** While technically definitive guidance and authoritative interpretation remain in place, those may be overturned by a single majority vote of either the Permanent Judicial Commission or a General Assembly.

CHURCH WOMEN UNITED’S (CWU) World Community Day is November 7, 1997. Presbyterian women attending this year’s worship will find, if the CWU liturgy is used, the atonement of Christ mocked and a communion-like ritual using water and raisin cakes. The water represents the blood of women’s monthly cycle and the raisins symbolize the dried up dreams of women oppressed by patriarchy and grain from “our Motheroot.” The worship litany intones that this raisin cake “will feed us for the journey” and “we have tasted the bread of the new covenant.” Biblical theology of “the Fall/Redemption” is cast as a male construct of St. Augustine and described as “individualistic and self-centered, and it supported

the abusive power of men over women.” The litany argues that Fall/Redemption theology “did not promote justice-making and social transformation. It failed to teach love of the earth and care for the beautiful world. . . .” According to CWU’s 1993 budget 42% of their revenue came from offerings collected on World Community Day and World Day of Prayer. PW supports CWU financially.

THE PCUSA ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL WITNESS POLICY has produced a study called, “Building Community Among Strangers.” The Evangelism Subcommittee of the National Ministries Division issued a statement which said, “...there are within it serious contradictions to our Reformed understanding of the Gospel. Therefore we do not recommend this material for further use within the PCUSA.” Copies of the study are being sent to every PCUSA congregation.

The study imagines “God’s great American Banquet” where, “The greatest surprise occurs when the food is blessed, not only in the name of Jesus Christ the Son of God, but also in the name of Allah, the Lord Krishna, Siddhartha Buddha, and the Goddess Gaia!”

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Join us in being a voice calling the Presbyterian Church(USA) and individual Presbyterians back to Reformed Christian faith rooted in Scripture and our Confessions while also rejecting false gods and their ideologies.

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 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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