

Theology Matters

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A Theological Guide for Pastoral Nominating Committees

by William Lewis

Congratulations, you've been selected to find your church's next pastor! This is an exciting period in the life of a congregation, evoking emotions of anticipation about the future and anxiety as change brings the unknown. As you have already begun to realize, this is a serious task which can be quite arduous. The process of calling a pastor in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. is a system similar to dating with an eye toward marriage.

The complexities of each particular congregation requires investigating more factors than might go into hiring a professional with adequate credentials in the business world. The wrong selection can be painful, even devastating to a congregation. Imagine, for instance, the uneasy exchange of glances between several former Pastoral Nominating Committee (PNC) members as their new pastor informed the Bible study group in their conservative church, "it is a biblical fact that Jesus and John the Baptist had a homosexual relationship." Obviously, this pastor's theology will be seen by her conservative congregants as faulty at a fundamental level. It is more than a little disappointing for a traditional congregation when their pastor suddenly refers to God as a

"She" or interprets Scripture to imply that Abraham was "schizophrenic" as opposed to actually "hearing" the voice of God. Unfortunately, the ramifications for these conservative churches is that they must now endure a pastor whom they consider to possess erroneous biblical interpretations, which often spirals into conflict situations until finally, after an exodus of members has occurred, the pastor leaves.

Other pastors leave their congregations too soon, as in the case of a California pastor who left his church less than two years after being called by the PNC, frustrated by what he considered to be confining *denominational* stances on homosexuality issues.

Even though his congregation completely supported his views on this social issue, the pastor's form of protest was to leave the Presbyterian denomination completely. On the other end of the spectrum, a pastor recently left his church and the denomination after a two year stint because the PC(USA) affirms women in the ministry. The irony of this situation was that the next PNC called a woman pastor!

The Rev. Dr. William Lewis, PC(USA) pastor in PA, is also a visiting lecturer at Princeton Theological Seminary. He has served on the Presbytery of Philadelphia's Subcommittee for Churches Seeking Pastors of the Committee on Ministry.

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Unfortunately, the early departure of these pastors left their churches dazed, disillusioned and faced with the strenuous task of putting together yet *another* PNC. These are only a few examples of what surprises or disappointments can lay in store for a church which finds itself with a new pastor who is theologically incompatible with the congregation.

The goal of this article is to provide a panorama of information which can assist a PNC in calling a pastor—specifically for an Evangelical /Conservative church. My insights and perspectives come from serving six years on the Subcommittee for Churches Seeking Pastors of the Committee on Ministry in the Philadelphia Presbytery. It is my desire to help the laity become familiar with a variety of sometimes confusing theological terms which often appear on Personal Information Forms or during the interview process. Also, to provide a sampling of questions for the candidates and later an analysis of how to read between the lines of some answers. Since each church has its own peculiar characteristics, it is first necessary for the church to engage in a self-evaluation to discern your own identity and the best match for your church.

It is probable that your PNC is composed of people with diverse stances on the theological scale. Such a mix requires employing mutual respect for one another's faith journey. The ideal candidate will be able to touch souls beyond the theological boundaries.

Theology Matters

Theology is what we believe about who God is and what He has done. This is of great importance because how the pastor understands God and the various components of dogma will translate into the message from the pulpit and how the programs of the church are carried out. On an even deeper level the theological position of a pastor will determine how a congregation is spiritually fed and how he or she will lead church membership into the mission of the church and motivate the congregants to service.

Understanding Postmodernism

Today's pastor must have a clear theology based on Scripture and the Confessions and then must be able to make that theology meaningful to the church and the unchurched. Let us look briefly then at the prevailing cultural view called, "postmodernism."

From 315 A.D., when emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, through the Medieval Ages, Christianity established the underlying rules of society. The church influenced and dictated every aspect of life and thought, including government, education, art, architecture, literature, music, personal morality, community life and economics (Hunter 1992, 23). Percolating over the last five centuries, however, has been a secularization process that has culminated in the present non-Christian world view. While life in America was once characterized by coinage

imprinted with the words, "In God We Trust," a school day typically started with a Scripture reading, and a community celebrated the Christmas season with a nativity scene in the public park (Klaas 1997, 3), now such Christian symbols are subjects for litigation, and are defined as politically-incorrect manifestations of religion.

Since the turn of the 20th century, the Western world has operated on two flawed theories: *first*, was the modern notion that through the application of scientific reasoning, humanity was guaranteed unlimited, unending progress *and second*, that this quest for knowledge would ultimately result in creating a kind of modern utopian society free of disease, poverty, crime, illiteracy and prejudice. In reality, while this modern era was successful in producing a wide variety of new technology, easing life's physical burdens with modern gadgets, vaccines, employment opportunities, social advances and higher education, it was unsuccessful in producing a better human being (Miller 1996, 11). In short, while science and technology managed to feed the human mind and body, their vast accomplishments failed to satisfy the longings of the human soul. Even worse, the realization followed that not only had science failed to unlock the mysteries of the universe and lead humanity into a new utopia, but science had actually opened a Pandora's Box of new ethical horrors, not the least of which were atom bombs, germ warfare, fetal tissue research, cloning and genetic research.

This has left the *Postmodern Generation* with a rather bleak outlook on life. They believed science had replaced religion as the "savior" that would bring health, wholeness and happiness. Yet, now it was clear that science and human reason had failed to fulfill their promises. Postmodern people in their disillusionment and yearning for something spiritual, have turned "inward" to the Self for spiritual fulfillment: to self-satisfaction, self-worth, self-esteem, self-gratification, self-knowledge, self-fulfillment—*whatever the self desired!* This is now life's orientation. Sometime between the late 1960's and the 1980's, people slowly moved from a quest for *scientific* knowledge (the worship of matter) to a quest for *self*-knowledge (the worship of humanity).

As a result, where once God and the church were at the center of the universe, now "nothing" is central. There are no fixed reference points anywhere, nothing is stable to which we can anchor ourselves. All that remains is the "Self", autonomous, free, accountable to no one. The "Self" decides what is true, what is real, what is good. (Henderson 1997, 2). "Self made religion," captures the spirit of the age better than any other. It sums up our beliefs, moral standards, and our evaluation of what makes life worth living. "True pleasure," as a recent television commercial claims, "is making up your own rules."

The preacher therefore has to combat this chaotic meaningless self-centered world view by demonstrating how Christ imbues life with purpose and how biblical principles offer tangible guidance. The following chart summarizes the various world views. For a fuller explanation of postmodernism, see David Henderson's book, *Culture Shift*.

The following chart summarizes the major differences in world views (Henderson 1997,2):

	<u>Pre-Modern Era</u>	<u>Modern Era</u>	<u>Postmodern Era</u>
<i>world view</i>	theistic	secular/naturalistic	pluralistic
<i>final authority</i>	Scripture	reason	feelings
<i>life governed by</i>	theology	principles	personal preference
<i>place of God</i>	over all	distant/absent	replaced by spiritualities
<i>place of self</i>	under God	at the center; under no one	dislocated, final arbiter of all things, responsible to no one
<i>place of others</i>	there for the self to serve	there for relationships of mutual benefit	there for the self to use
<i>place of creation</i>	-serving the self	under the self	over the self
<i>morality centered on</i>	virtue	ethics	choice

Definition of Terms

Now that we have explored “what” cultural influences confront the contemporary pastor, it remains to explore “how” these cultural influences have effected the theology of potential candidates.

The purpose of this next section is to help PNCs to better understand the diverse theologies held by contemporary pastors. Below are some helpful terms and definitions that your PNC is bound to encounter.

***Evangelical**—Emphasizing the basic tenets of the faith, as set forth in the Bible and expressed in the Confessions. This would be pre-modern on the chart above.

***Conservative**—Upholds the traditional doctrines of historic Christianity based on Scripture. This would be pre-modern on the chart above.

***Liberal**—Adapting religious ideas to modern culture and modes of thinking. This would be post-modern on the chart above.

***Reformed**—Holds five truths as essential to understanding Christianity:

1. The total depravity of humanity.
2. Unconditional Divine election.
3. Christ’s atonement is limited to the elect.
4. Divine grace is irresistible
5. Perseverance of the elect to the end.

***Fundamentalist**—Reaffirms the traditional teachings of Christianity in defense against liberal theology, Darwinism, German higher criticism and secular humanism, all of which undermine the Bible’s authority. The essential doctrines include:

- 1) the inerrancy of Scripture
- 2) the virgin birth of Christ and His Deity
- 3) the substitutionary atonement of Christ.
- 4) Christ’s bodily resurrection.
- 5) the historicity of the miracles

***Natural theology**—The attempt to construct a doctrine of God without an appeal to faith or special revelation

(Scripture), but on the basis of human reason and experience alone.

***Pluralism**—Liberals tend to believe that all religions rest upon a common perception of God and therefore show a hostility toward any exclusive claims for Christian faith. This would stem from postmodernism on the chart above.

***Pantheism:** All is God. A spirit force permeates every thing, infusing all parts of creation with its spiritual life and binding all things together in itself. This would stem from postmodernism on the chart above.

***Liberation Theology**—Interprets Christian faith from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. For example, black theology, feminist theology, sexual theology all interpret Christian faith through the lens of their victimhood. While Evangelical theology struggles to find expression in the postmodern world, combating the skepticism of a scientific world, the Liberation theologian searches to find the God of righteousness in a world of injustice. Liberation theologians focus on the victims, not the sinner. This would stem from postmodernism on the chart above.

***Process Theology**—Find God through human history, reason and experience. Knowledge of God is continuously unfolding (evolving) through our intellectual insights. This would stem from postmodernism on the chart above.

Finding the Right Match Theologically

Confused? Don’t be. Basically, there are two positions: Liberal or Evangelical. The two groups depart from one another, most basically, with their understanding of the Bible. The Liberal sees the Bible as “containing” the Word of God while the Evangelical sees the Bible as “The” Word of God. If one believes the Bible *contains* the Word of God, it becomes the reader’s task to discern what is and what is not God’s Word. The tendency for the Liberal is to measure the scriptural content against modern scholastic and scientific perspectives. This postmodern viewpoint espouses that, as humanity has progressed, the Word of God has become outdated. However, the Evangelical

would caution that when the standard for discernment regarding what is true and what is false is based upon our personal interpretations, then Scripture no longer has authority over our lives. We have authority over Scripture.

This authority over Scripture is demonstrated in the debates over homosexual practice. To promote the acceptance of homosexual behavior, Scripture that prohibits homosexual practice is rejected or reinterpreted. This leads to an eclectic spirituality that is determined by one's own agenda.

So, how does a church PNC find a pastor who is a good fit? Let's start by exploring what exactly are the differences between Liberal and Evangelical thought.

The PC(USA) is unique in that we have made a home for both Evangelical and Liberal thought. Today it is common for candidates to avoid theological conversation by keeping their responses vague. When asked, "How would you define yourself theologically?" a common reply is, "I don't like labels." Only when pressed or backed into a corner, do candidates provide insights into where they actually stand on theological issues. Furthermore, I have heard candidates cover all bases by saying, "I'm an Evangelical Liberal." (Whatever that means, since these are two diametrically opposed ideologies.) Obviously, particular themes from both realms are being embraced, but which ones? It becomes the PNC's difficult task to discern if the candidate is compatible with the mainstream of their church.

The following paragraphs are an attempt to simplify terms, "Liberal" and "Conservative/Evangelical"—no longer black and white, but gray areas. Whereas today's Evangelical generally expects to find Jesus in a personal relationship, in an atmosphere of solitude and meditation, today's Liberal looks for Christ in a social context of worldly involvement. The rift this has caused is all too apparent. When the Evangelical looks at Liberal theology he sees a vague speculation that has lost the centrality of Christ. The Liberal, in contrast, feels Evangelicals are so comfortable in their self-centered relationship with Christ that they are satisfied studying theology and thus are not pulled to step outside the community of faith into the secular world (Coleman, 1980). Let's explore this further.

Liberal Theology

Liberals tend to return to "human experience" as a legitimate starting point in order to integrate Christian belief with the everyday experience of contemporary men and women. Modern Liberals tend to think that a spiritual relationship with the Jesus of Scripture is impossible because historical research cannot guarantee the details about his life. Thus they consider "modern" thought superior to all past forms of understanding reality and therefore normative for Christian faith and life (Coleman, 7). In other words, Jesus can only be understood in terms of contemporary models of humanity. Albert Schweitzer's chronological survey of the many "lives of Jesus" (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus* [1906]) has left the Liberal

with no doubt that every age paints its own picture of Jesus.

In the last decades Liberals have been returning to the nineteenth century assumption that theology should begin with man and move to God. In a culture where relativity and secularism have triumphed, the starting point for theology is the ordinary experience of human beings. Theology cannot go on presupposing an ultimately fixed order that people draw meaning and standards for life, because in reality ultimate meaning and coherence have disappeared. If faith must begin with beliefs about God, it must begin with objective statements about His nature. This will never do, the Liberal argues, because there is no possible way to verify such statements. And statements that cannot be tested, such as miracles, are unreal and irrelevant to the modern technological person.

We may illustrate the Liberal movement graphically as follows:



Therefore, the Liberal's faith is demonstrated by the movement from love of neighbor to love of God. Only as you love your neighbor, whom you can see, can you love God, whom you have not seen (Coleman, 72).

Both Liberals and Evangelicals believe that Jesus brings individuals into a new personal relationship with God, but for the Evangelical, he does so by leading men and women to believe in Him as the Son of God, while for the Liberal, Jesus brings people closer to God by showing them how to love their neighbors as children of God.

The Liberal argues that Jesus is the rightful Lord of man's existence by example. Above all other men, He is the one who is a human example of the divine calling. This Lord of life is a paradigmatic model who can only influence people's lives as one who stands in the past. Since the historical Jesus cannot transcend natural time, the only way people can know him is through historical inquiry or through the Christian community that preserves his memory. People relate to Christ, then, as they would relate to any other historical figure such as Mahatma Gandhi.

The Liberal's relation to Jesus, therefore, is totally dependent upon people's power of memory and ability as historian. The Liberal gives us a Christ who revealed what humanity should be, but who is not a Savior who frees humanity from sin so they can become what they are not. The understanding of salvation that emerges from this theology has the undertone of a "do it yourself" activity which over-estimates the power of man and under-estimates the power of sin.

Evangelical Theology

The Evangelical is primarily concerned with bringing the individual into a personal relationship with Jesus, because

this is the way God is known to him. It is important, therefore, for the believer to know the nature and work of Jesus, for otherwise a personal relationship with him is meaningless if not impossible.

The Evangelical claims that true faith begins when individuals are confronted with their sin and need for Christ's atoning work on the cross, not when they experience love, forgiveness, or mercy through human relationships. Priority must be given to an individual's relationship with God, otherwise without the presence and power of God an individual will never transcend his or her own limitations and sin.

Theology must likewise begin with the objective revelation God has given of himself to humanity in the Bible. If instead we began with humanity's reaching out to understand God, we would have to settle for a philosophy based upon human insights conditioned by time and place. One's starting point makes all the difference. Only when the movement is from God to man can people have any hope of being able to distinguish God's ways from our ways, His Word from our thoughts (Coleman, 72). The Evangelical movement may be represented graphically as:



Since ministers identify themselves as Liberal, Evangelical or anywhere in between, it is crucial that the PNC use the interview process, with carefully crafted questions, to determine the candidate's theology. "Good chemistry" is not a substitute for good theology!

The Interview Process

And You're Off

1. Personal Information Form (PIF)—The candidate's Resume or Dossier

Number and make a copy for all members. An evaluation format needs to be established providing the PNC members with criterion to approve going to the next step. These issues can be discerned and identified by the Church Mission Study and Church Information Form (CIF) conclusions.

2. Sermon tape

Establish a criterion by which you evaluate the sermons, such as a 1-4 rating system for: Biblical content; Contemporary application; Delivery.

3. First Interview (preliminary)

This is usually a telephone call (1/2 to 1 1/2 hours), a teleconference via satellite, a written request for the candidate to speak into a tape recorder or fill out an essay addressing specified issues.

The goal of the PNC is to investigate a candidate's vision and skills, ultimately on the lookout for suitability. It is a

"weeding out" process. Obviously, when five gentlemen on the PNC say "yes!" and five women say "no way," this is an intriguing candidate, but there is no reason to pursue him (or her) further, since there is such a discrepancy of opinion.

4. References.

Don't pass over these. In fact, ask for extra references from the references themselves.

5. Red Flag Checks.

A wise PNC pays attention to these. Remember, Presbytery is not the enemy. PNC's have ignored accusations that their favorite candidate did not pay their income taxes, had sexual issues or abused alcohol, even a candidate accused of stealing church finances. Every one of these churches ignored the Red Flags and each lived to rue the day.

Pastoral Integrity

An imperative part of the process is the "Red Flag" check. Often a church will fall in love with a candidate before this check is made and then refuse to objectively receive negative character reports from Presbytery. While a PNC might be willing to "forgive and forget" its candidate's past sins, it is Presbytery's job to protect the church. And it is my observation that in almost every case, problems of pastoral integrity that occurred in previous pastorates—resurface. When pastors had financial troubles at their past church, guess what reoccurs at their new church? Although these are extreme examples, even pastors who simply have trouble working with staff, will inevitably suffer "staff conflicts" at their new call. This is especially difficult when an associate pastor is beloved and well established within the congregation.

6. Second Interview (In person)

Here it is necessary for all concerns to be voiced and leave no stone unturned. Some PNC's will do this in a two hour conversation while others will turn the interview into a two day affair. Look for the following:

Pastor as Shepherd

Visitation? Counseling? One pastor said he liked to go "hide" between services, because he wanted to avoid people. Humble? Integrity? Open to change? How does he/she take criticism?

Pastor as Administrator

Dictator? Delegator? Collegiate? Conflict manager? Does he or she govern by the "letter" of the law, or by the "spirit" of the law? Process or people oriented?

7. Neutral Pulpit and/or Candidating Sermon For Congregation

Look for style of preaching, eye contact.

Pastor as Preacher

This is an area of supreme importance, because it is from the pulpit where the congregation as a whole will be spiritually fed on a weekly basis. When listening to audio, video and neutral pulpit sermons, it is necessary to have a

criterion established as to PNC priorities. Sermon content: Is the message grounded within the biblical text, or is the Scripture merely a convenient reference point from which the preacher expounds upon his (or her) own ideas? Is the message Christ-centered or a social commentary? Is the sermon a lecture, a pitch from a political stump, or an exhortation intersecting God's Word with our lives? Is the sermon a moralistic message affirming God's law or a contemporary application of grace? Is the sermon a conceptual doctrinal exposition (yawn) or does it speak to the soul? What style of preaching does the minister use? Does he (or she) read from his manuscript or is he free from his notes? Does she come out from behind the pulpit? Does the preacher use a monotone voice? Is she articulate? Does he incorporate humor? Does the message challenge, inspire and convict? What is the best style for your church? How adaptable is the candidate to the congregation?

Beware: If this is a "so/so" sermon, it is probably representative of his (or her) best effort.

The Interview

Here it is, the day your committee has anticipated for months. Dinner the night before went well, the candidate was pleasant. Chemistry is sparking. Now, he (or she) is finally seated at your board room table, ready for the real test to begin. In the next few hours the church and candidate will learn how compatible they are. And here is where a PNC can begin to make costly mistakes. The temptation is to focus on the insignificant characteristics of the candidate. Perhaps unconsciously, a PNC is focused on finding someone who is just like their beloved former pastor, or rather, who is mercifully the opposite. One congregation, whose PNC I moderated, had a rather gruff, domineering minister whom certain elders secretly called, "The Fuhrer," and so the next time around they looked for a jolly, outgoing sort. They ended up with a jokester in their pulpit who could spin a good story but whose sermons had no power. The congregation slowly starved for the Word and began to drift away.

Forget the former minister when you are looking for a new one. "Remember not the former things," God says in Isaiah. "Behold, I am doing a new thing" (43:18-19). Start fresh and search for the best preacher you can find. Focusing on the candidates superficial "chemistry" while ignoring his or her theology can end in disaster for the church.

By now, your committee should be feeling a strong pull toward either the Liberal or the Evangelical camp. Which is not to say it is impossible to incorporate qualities from both perspectives into the church vision. In fact, the larger the congregation, the greater its tendency to be theologically diverse. However, my experience has shown that a wise PNC will strive to find a pastor who will take them in a common direction. This is where the Church Mission Study and resulting CIF plays a critical role.

The PNC should discern their theological identity early in the process and then *remain faithful to that vision* throughout the search process, pulling the Church Mission Study out when clarification is needed. The end of the process, after the committee has already suffered the expense of flying its final two candidates across the country for the deciding interview, is not the time to debate these potentially divisive theological issues! I have observed PNC's end up with two final candidates: one Liberal and one Evangelical. While this may appear on paper to be a commendable effort at compromise, ultimately committee members tend to polarize into Liberal versus Evangelical factions. In one case, I actually witnessed the Conservative members of a PNC try and seek the resignation of its Liberal members. If this is happening on the PNC, imagine the ripple effect of such divisive behavior throughout the congregation.

Ask the Right Questions

How does a PNC go about asking the right question? Even after the question is answered, what does the candidate really mean? For starters, avoid wasting your committee's valuable time (or insulting the candidate's intelligence) with "psychological" questions that provide no useful information, such as, "If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?" (Huh?) Unless your committee members have psychology training, what input does such a question provide as to the candidate's suitability should he (or she) answer, "A polar bear!" as opposed to, "A lion?"

In stark contrast, the following are some questions which address the main "hot topics" of concern. Since three-quarters of the congregations in the PC(USA) define themselves as Conservative/Evangelical, I have concentrated on an interview format designed to meet the needs of the Evangelical church. First, I have included *theological* questions and then *social* questions. These are the questions typically asked by PNC's with examples of some typical answers. The problem for the PNC becomes, did the answer meet their expectations? What was the PNC hoping to learn from the question? Does the answer really enlighten them? Or do they need to dig deeper? What terminology should send up "red flags" for the Evangelical church?

The *Book of Order* and the *Book of Confessions*, together form the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The *Book of Order* declares,

"The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions*. In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world
who and what it is,
what it believes,
what it resolves to do.

These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the

essence of Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation.

These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. . . .The church is prepared to counsel with or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions.” (G-2.0100-2.0200)

The place for the PNC to begin then is with a careful study of the *Book of Confessions* and the first four chapters of the *Book of Order*. Evangelicals accept the Confessions as a reliable exposition of Scripture’s witness.

1. THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE:

Evangelical: Scripture is the Word of God and is to be believed and obeyed.

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16).

“All which are given [books of the OT and NT] are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life” (Westminster Confession 6.002).

“The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (Who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God” (Westminster Confession 6.004).

Liberal: Liberals reject the Bible as authoritative. Instead, all beliefs must pass the tests of reason and experience. The Bible was written by fallible men limited by their times. The Scripture is neither infallible or supernatural and thus does not contain absolute authority. The Liberal believes the essence of Christianity replaces the authority of Scripture. The role of God is not to be glorified but to serve humanity by enabling people to integrate their personality and thereby attain perfection as individuals and as a civil society. Self-actualization, positive thinking, psychological analysis, all become part of the wholeness of the individual.

Question: “On what matters must the Bible be correct in order for it to be considered trustworthy? Can the Bible be authoritative on matters concerning salvation without being authoritative on scientific and historical matters?”

Red Flag Answer: “I think a big mistake of the Evangelical church has been its superficial treatment of the historical-critical method. Also, its separation of faith from culture and the social sciences. I think it’s wrong to

put our emphasis on man’s inadequacy rather than his possibilities in a new era of technology.”

Concern: For the Evangelical, the Bible is the inspired Word of God. When approaching it, Bible-believing Christians know they must do their best to remove their lenses of experience, relying upon the Word to speak and breathe. The individual endeavors to read meaning *out* of the Word rather than *into* the Word.

2. JESUS IS GOD

Evangelical: Jesus is fully divine, fully human, of the same essence as God. Jesus has total and exclusive redemptive power to transform and sustain new life.

“[We believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. . . .” (Nicene Creed 1.2).

Liberal: Jesus was a God-inspired man rather than part of the Godhead. Christ was merely an example of moral excellence. Liberals believe that all religions rest upon a common perception of God and tend to be hostile toward any exclusive claims for Christ.

Question: “How would you lead someone to Christ?” His/her answer will show you what part of the gospel message they embrace. This question is also a good theological barometer of how well the pastor can reach out to the unchurched and bring people to Christ.

Red Flag Answer: “Through serving humanity.”
or.....

Question: “Amendment A refers to Jesus Christ as ‘a’ Lord, not ‘the’ Lord; and challenges the Lordship of Christ, doesn’t it?”

Red Flag Answer: “On the contrary, Amendment A inserts back into the ordination standards the requirement for church officers to lead lives ‘in obedience to Jesus Christ.’ instead of prior Amendment B’s ‘in obedience to Scripture.’ It is Christ who calls us to serve in church office, not the Bible. It is to Christ whom we are bound in our ordinations vows, not the Bible. It is Christ who calls the church into being, not the Bible. Christ is Head of the Church, and we are bound to His authority and thus free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God.” (*Book of Order*, G-1.0100d).

Concern: Once again, the danger lies in the tendency for pastors to conclude and therefore preach that the authority of Scripture is not in the text, but in the dynamic revelation of God in Christ. And as Christ is ever changing with each new generation, He becomes pretty much whoever we want Him to be, saying whatever we want Him to say.

3. ORIGINAL SIN

Evangelical: Scripture and the Confessions are clear that human beings are fallen. Human beings have a natural, inborn propensity to rebel against God. Human beings commit sinful acts because they are sinners. Human nature is distorted. The only remedy for this natural state is to be reborn by the Spirit of God.

“All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquities of us all to fall on Him” (Isa 53:6).

“for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Ro 3:23).

“are we so perverted that we are altogether unable to do good and prone to do evil? Yes, unless we are born again through the Spirit of God” (Heidelberg Catechism 4.008).

“From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions” (Westminster 6.034).

Q. 18. Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell? A. The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell consists in: the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it” (Shorter Catechism 7.018).

Liberal: Liberal theology often claims that human beings are basically good but that cultural influences and social systems have corrupted the human personality. The solution therefore can be found by exposing faulty teachings and dismantling corrupt human social systems in order to restore human goodness. Corruption is peeled away like layers of skin on an onion until the original blessing or goodness is rediscovered.

Question: “G. K. Chesterton said that the one thing 4,000 years of human history has proven is the doctrine of original sin. What is original sin? Do you believe that human beings are at their center basically good or basically sinful?” “What is the remedy for original sin?”

Red Flag Answer: “Original sin is the corruption of society that we are all born into. The story of Adam and Eve is a myth to explain that we are born into a society that immediately corrupts our natural goodness. The solution is to uncover this corruption and fix it by changing our society. Patriarchy is one area of corruption that we are all immediately born into because Western society is based on a patriarchal system. We need to change patriarchy.”

Concern: If we are not born sinners, unable to change ourselves because it is our very nature that is corrupted, then there is no need for a Savior. If we are corrupted by society, after we are born, then the remedy is cultural

change, not a Savior who died on the cross to pay the debt for our sin and give us new birth.

4. SIN

Evangelical: Evangelical faith based on Scripture affirms the universal sinfulness of humankind and the provision of salvation only through Jesus Christ. For the Evangelical, the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the Word of God to convict us of our sin, wretchedness and the depravity that pervades our entire being. Because of the pervasive impact of sin, humanity stands under the condemnation of God, unable to change our status or condition.

“While we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Ro 5:8).

Q.14. “What is sin? A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (Shorter Catechism 7.014).

Q.3. “Where do you learn of your sin and its wretched consequences? A. From the Law of God.

Q. 4. What does the Law of God require of us? A. Jesus Christ teaches us this in a summary in Matthew 22:37-40; ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Cf. Luke 10:27).

Q. 5. Can you keep all this perfectly? A. No, for by nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor” (Heidelberg Catechism 4.003-4.005).

“For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son. . . “ (Jn 3:16).

Liberal: The Liberal sees sin and evil as imperfection, ignorance, maladjustment, immaturity, but it is not the fundamental flaw in the universe. Reason and education will overcome the sinfulness within us, attaining utopia through moral perfection.

Question: “Explain your understanding of sin/human nature.”

Red Flag Answer: “Sin is not fulfilling our human potential to love others.”

Concern: All accountability to God is removed. There is no need for a Savior. There is no need for Jesus.

5. THE ATONEMENT

Evangelical: Salvation is entirely the work of God. Because of the pervasive impact of sin, humanity stands under the condemnation of God, unable to change its status or condition. Christ’s purpose was to save His people from their sins.

“While we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Ro 5:8).

“Further by his passion and death and everything which he did and endured for our sake by his coming in the flesh, our Lord reconciled all the faithful to the heavenly Father, made expiation for our sins, disarmed death, overcame damnation and hell, and by his resurrection from the dead brought again and restored life and immortality” (Second Helvetic Conf 5.077).

Q. 25. How doth Christ execute the office of a priest? Christ executeth the office of a priest in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us” (Shorter Catechism 7.025).

Liberal: Christ was an example of how to pursue God, but His death on the cross was not the atoning moment. Christ’s death on the cross is obsolete. He is just one of many ways to faith.

Question: “Describe your image of Jesus. How important are the historical details of His life to your Christian faith?”

Red Flag Answer: “Jesus shows us how to attain human potential. He’s ever new, becoming, moving. God reveals himself indirectly as a creative power within history. Basically, I want to facilitate people in finding their own Jesus.”

Concern: This could mean the pastor’s approach is “anything goes” (inside or outside the Bible.) Such an “experiential” approach to Jesus is seen by the Evangelical as setting out to criticize and dismantle sacrificial theology by denying the virgin birth, the efficacy of the cross and personal salvation through faith in the living Christ. The cross, in fact, is seen by a growing number of pastors, as an instrument of torture. The idea that reconciliation with God might be obtained through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is viewed by some as a theory of divine child abuse (the Father sending His innocent Son to his death to satisfy His wrath). The cross is stripped entirely of redemptive value and seen only as a tool for the sanctioning of violence and victimhood.

6. MIRACLES including Bodily Resurrection.

Evangelical: Biblical Christianity worships the fully human, fully divine Jesus Christ and affirms His virgin birth; His ministry; His death on the cross; His bodily resurrection and His ascension into heaven. Believers look forward to His second coming.

“And [I believe] in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose from the dead . . .” (Apostles’ Creed 2.2).

Liberal: The Liberal has a skeptical view of miracles and the supernatural and replaces Scripture’s claims with a demand for scientific proofs.

Question: “What is your interpretation of the virgin birth /resurrection /miracles?”

Red Flag Answer: “Miracles stopped with the Apostolic age. The biblical concept of miracles runs contrary to the observed process of nature. Basically, they’re just myths—stories with moral significance.”

7. PRAYER

Evangelical: Prayer is the chief avenue to the power of God. It is our response to the saving work of the Lord. It is only as a result of Christ’s death that we can approach God in prayer. For Christians, prayer is the acknowledgment of God as the source of all goodness and therefore the One who can meet human need and longing. Prayer is not to be confused with “positive thinking.”

“Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. . . .” (Matthew 6:9).

Liberal: Liberals tend to magnify the “social humanity” as the purpose of faith and prayer rather than establishing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Question: “Do you believe that our prayers today have the ability to influence the will of God?”

Red Flag Answer: “I don’t necessarily see prayer as entering into the presence of God, but as a tool to heighten my spiritual sensitivity, my sense of self-control, and inner peace.”

Concern: The emphasis is on self-reliance. Getting in touch with the God within us. There is no need for Jesus.

8. GENDER OF GOD

Evangelical: God is neither male nor female since sexuality is part of creation and God is not a created being. God has revealed himself, however, as the Father of Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ as the Son of the Father. That is God’s self-identity. The names “Father,” “Son” and “Holy Spirit” also clearly identify God as three distinct persons. Therefore, it is inappropriate to refer to God as mother, or to refer to God exclusively by his works or attributes such as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Rock, Ground of Being, Wisdom. These works and attributes cloud the threeness of the Trinity and the personhood of God.

An important teaching in Scripture and witnessed to by the Confessions is that God is separate from creation. God spoke and created out of nothing. When God is referred to by female nouns the natural extension is to begin to speak of creation as being “birthed” from the womb of the goddess. Creation then is of the same essence as the creator and is therefore divine. This is pantheism.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. . .” (Apostles’ Creed 2.1).

Liberal: Liberals maintain that Christianity has always adapted its forms and language to particular cultural situations. Since Scripture is just a record of how human males experienced God and since women experience God differently, it is appropriate for the church to use names for God which are more affirming of women and their experience. Therefore, it is appropriate to refer to God as goddess, as *Sophia* (the Greek word for wisdom), or as non-masculine names such as Rock.

It is offensive to some women to claim that their savior is a male, Jesus Christ, therefore it is helpful to re-imagine a more pantheistic God who is present in all of creation, rather than a single man. Human beings as part of creation are also part of the divine and they incarnate God as they love one another into full personhood.

Question: “What would you say to those women who want to re-imagine a feminine image of God, as for example, *Sophia*? How would you counsel women who want to describe one member of the Trinity as feminine. . . or develop the feminine aspect of all three members of the Trinity. . .or add a feminine image of God to the Trinity, thus creating a quaternity. . . .” Look for theology constructed from a woman’s experience, which tends to speak of God in pantheistic terms, stresses archetypal language and the feminine divine and denies the uniqueness and deity of Jesus Christ.

Red Flag Answer: “Unfortunately, traditional Christianity has been patriarchal, woman-oppressing, guilt-producing, enslaving, and overly focused on the hereafter. For a growing number of women, the lamp unto one’s feet is not the Bible, but rather, an individual experience of Jesus Christ. Maybe a feminine side of the traditional 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 self-discovery.”

Concern: The danger lies in the Re-Imagining movement’s emphasis on personal experience and cultural distinctiveness over and against the revelation of Scripture. Such an emphasis leads to a denial of absolute and universal truth, and it allows pluralism and relativism to prevail. For instance the “apple ritual,” first used at the 1996 Re-Imagining Conference, is a celebration and affirmation of Eve’s act of rebellion against God (Gen. 2). Claiming that the Christian tradition has used the Fall narrative in a way that is harmful to women, re-imaginers used this ritual to rebel against church teachings. Leaders distributed apples among participants who were then invited to “honor our mother Eve who was created to know. Let us bite the apple in celebration for we, like Eve, are created to know.” Women defiantly bit into apples as

they were encouraged to “reach for wisdom” and “the wholeness of God” in imitation of Eve.

9. HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE

Evangelical: Homosexual practice, like all other sins, offends the law of God. The remedy, as with all sin, is forgiveness through the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the resurrection to transform a life.

“And He answered and said, ‘Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh’? Consequently they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matthew 19:4-6).

“For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts. . . .” (Romans 1:25-27).

Q 139. What are the sins forbidden in the Seventh Commandment? A. The sins forbidden in the Seventh commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are: adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy, and all unnatural lusts. . . .” (Larger Catechism 7.249).

Liberal: The Liberal believes the essence of Christianity replaces the authority of Scripture. God is found wherever love abides. If love and respect are involved in the homosexual relationship then love supersedes the letter of the Law .

Question: “How do you approach ministry to the homosexual community? Do you see a homosexual holding church office or leading the Youth Group?”

Red Flag Answer: “For long periods in history, the majority of Christians would have said that the Bible clearly and unequivocally supported monarchy, slavery, the subordination of women to men, and the segregation of the races. We have changed our minds on all of those issues. The Bible has not changed. Our interpretations have changed. We need to have serious discussions about our methods of biblical interpretation and be sure that we are applying them consistently. When I was first ordained, divorce was grounds for automatic dismissal from the ministry. We accepted an interpretation of Scripture that made any remarriage after divorce, adultery. We no longer accept that interpretation.”

or . . .

“In the New Testament, Paul calls for both oneness in Christ but also the diverse gifts that others bring. I like Galatians 3:28: ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.’ That principal underwrote the church’s involvement in the Civil Rights struggle of the ‘50’s and ‘60’s and today it opens the door for a consideration of ordination of gays and lesbians. It is this oneness in Christ that makes all of us brothers and sisters.”

10. ABORTION/EUTHANASIA

Evangelical: The Evangelical believes that God created each individual and knew him or her before the foundation of the world. Since life belongs to God as the Creator and Redeemer, we may not take innocent life. All human life is sanctified because it is created in God’s image. Adoption is a biblical model (we are adopted into God’s family through the work of Jesus Christ) for those children conceived through rape or incest which the parents feel unable to care for.

“Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man” (Gen 9:6).

“Thou didst form my inward parts; Thou didst weave me in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. . . My frame was not hidden from Thee, When I was made in secret. . . Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Thy book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them” (Psalm 139:13-16).

“. . . you are not your own. For you have been bought with a price” (2 Cor 6:19-20).

“. . . I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. . . .” (Heidelberg Catechism 4.001).

Liberal: Postmodernity assumes that there are no absolute moral imperatives. Since truth varies according to one’s perspective, each situation has its own moral response based on what is most loving for that set of circumstances. Each woman is free to choose for herself what is most loving for herself and her unborn child according to her circumstances and perspective.

This carries over into the euthanasia debate where life is not of intrinsic value because it bears the image of God and belongs to God, but has value depending on circumstances. Disability, pain, unconsciousness may all influence the choice to terminate life in order to promote dignity, love, or some other goal.

Question: “In response to the popular liberal argument that abortion is the ‘woman’s right to choose,’ what do you say to the Evangelical who argues that a woman’s freedom to

act only extends to the point where it impinges upon another’s right not to be acted upon?”

Red Flag Answer: “I think any attempt to basically ‘legislate morality’ in our pluralistic society would be highly inappropriate.”

11. EVOLUTION

Evangelical: Evangelical Christians accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Although the process of the formation of man and woman is not specified in the Bible man and woman are a special creation made in the image of God. Man and woman are not derived from some previously living form.

“And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27)

“Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7).

“We confess and acknowledge that our God has created man, i.e., our first father, Adam, after his own image and likeness, to whom he gave wisdom, lordship, justice, free will, and self-consciousness, so that in the whole nature of man no imperfection could be found. From this dignity and perfection man and woman both fell. . . .” (Scots Confession 3.02).

Liberal: Liberals welcomed the findings of science and readily accommodated the challenge of Darwinism. To the liberal, evolution demonstrated how God slowly built the universe through natural laws. The rise of “higher criticism” also gave impetus to the liberal interpretation of the Bible. While challenging the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, liberals also cast doubts on the originality and authenticity of the biblical records of creation and the flood because of the alleged similarities to the Babylonian versions. The Bible has since been treated by liberal scholars as a great literary work full of human errors and outdated teachings. Original sin is treated not as an act of disobedience of the first human couple, but rather the negative forces of counter evolution—evil. Accordingly, Christ is no longer the Savior of the world from the damnation of sins, but rather the culmination of evolution which gives direction and meaning to the world. (Elwell, 394).

Question: “Do you think science disproves the biblical version of creation? How would you answer the charge that modern liberal evolutionism casts doubts on the idea that humans are accountable to a higher moral standard of a Divine Creator?”

Red Flag Answer: “Personally, I think the mission of the church should be the alleviation of human suffering rather than the spiritual redemption of the world.”

Concern: This humanistic influence in theology, which removes all supernatural factors from the Bible, has downgraded the Bible to be merely a great book of religion instead of the Word of God. The only message of the Bible with all its outgrown traditions is the human experience, exemplified by the Hebrew's aspiration for personal deliverance and culminating in the person of Jesus Christ.

In short, Liberal evolutionism risks placing man in an ethically relative box with no moral standard by which he can evaluate the conflicting moral values he observes in himself and others. Evolutionists see humanity as merely an "intelligent animal" whose sole purpose is to become ever more intelligent and whose only moral accountability is to society.

Conclusion

Liberal theology draws heavily on the postmodern assumptions that 1) there is no absolute truth 2) even Scripture is merely the perspective of its writers and not an objective revelation 3) the universe is a closed system that allows for no supernatural intervention 4) since there is no objective truth, each person must find what is life-enhancing for him or herself, therefore Self becomes the final arbiter of truth. Evangelical theology, which is the historic faith of the church, draws on pre-modern teachings that 1) there is objective, absolute truth revealed by God in Scripture 2) Scripture is uniquely God's self-revelation 3) the universe is under God's control and he may intervene to alter its laws at any time 4) to live under the authority of Scripture is to live in obedience to its teachings.

The Liberal and Evangelical views are not compatible, there is little common ground between them. Therefore, it is crucial that the PNC understand the theological differences and be able to discern through their questions what the beliefs of the prospective candidate are and what the general beliefs of the majority of the congregation are. It is also crucial that a candidate understand the various theological perspectives and be able to speak lovingly and persuasively to those in the congregation who hold divergent views.

Some Additional Interview Questions

Personal Theology

Give brief testimony of your relationship with Christ. How do you view yourself theologically? How have your perspectives changed since you entered the ministry? Explain the dynamics of your call to ministry. Do you have a favorite Bible verse(s)?

Doctrinal Positions

What does salvation/grace mean to you? How is it obtained? What is your understanding of the mission of the church? Tell us your views on: Jesus' nature/ ministry/ Trinity/Holy Spirit/ hell.

Practical Theological Application

How do your theological foundations lead you to address these contemporary issues? Share your perspectives on: Amendments A and B—homosexuality; women's issues; universalism/all will be saved; Liberation Theology; Humanism. How would you interpret these passages. . . (PNC suggest some passages).

Pastoral Questions

How do you minister to theological positions contrary to your own? Dialogue/tolerate/correct.

Conflict Situations

Describe specific situations you've faced. How would you handle . . . (PNC suggest some scenarios).

Visitation

How do you stay in touch with your congregation?

Counseling

Do you have experience in grief or crises counseling? What qualities do you possess that are beneficial for counseling?

Staff/Administrative

Describe your approach to other staff members. Style of leadership: dictator/ shared/ collegiate/ delegate? Biggest contribution you make to other staff? Lay Leadership: training and communication. Describe the role of the laity in your ministry. How do you recruit, develop, and utilize officers/ volunteers? How would you deal with strong, opinionated leaders? What are some of the key issues when working with staff ordained and laity? How do you get results from people and committees?

Financial Matters

Discuss your stewardship campaign experience. Any successful campaigns? Summarize your financial stewardship approach. How would you handle budget shortfalls or building campaign/major repairs/ renovations?

Christian Education /Youth Group

Level of importance/involvement in these ministries. Curriculum opinions and conflict. Leadership training/ recruitment.

Evangelism

Priority, programs, ideas. What part does it play? Community outreach. Ideas? Techniques for increasing membership. Do you call for a confession of faith? Describe a program you have developed. How can laity effectively reach out to the unchurched without embarrassing or turning them off?

Sermon Preparation

What types of sermons do you preach? What do you strive to include when preparing a sermon? Describe your style: Expository, topical, creativity? Delivery issues: stand behind pulpit? notes? robe? conversational? Are there particular passages of Scripture that you like to preach from? What is your goal, intent, hopes, when you step into the pulpit on Sundays?

Worship

Discuss your contemporary/traditional liturgy and worship preferences. Are you comfortable with contemporary worship? Do you have experience?

Membership/Programs

Fellowship ideas? Do you have experience with small groups? Older adult/younger adult programs. How would you build relationships within the congregation? Do you have a plan for reinvolving the inactive members?

Missions

How do you promote interest in world mission? What methods do you use to support missions? Share your views on mission funding in the context of the overall budget.

Denomination

What are the top challenges facing PC(USA)? What is your relationship and attitude toward Presbytery? What level of involvement do you anticipate?

Personal

What are you looking for in your next church? What vision do you have after reading our CIF? What influences played a major role in your life? What do you feel are your greatest strengths for ministry? What three words would best describe you? What are your plans for continuing education? What are your strengths? Weaknesses? Tell us about your spouse and family? How do you spend your leisure time? What do you like to read? What do you see as the most significant accomplishments in your ministry(s)? Do you feel that you have “failed” in any areas of ministry? What areas of ministry have you found most difficult or challenging? What have been some of your more creative points in ministry? What new ideas have brought growth within the church? What do you see as your most significant accomplishments in your current

and past ministries? How do you balance time between ministry and family?

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The Confessions

A Study of the Book of Confessions Study 7 - The Doctrine of Sin

by Rev. Theresa Ip Froehlich

Jose De Jesus Cabrera Arroyo had turned seven years old just three days before his surgery in Dallas in the spring of 1996. Jose was born to a very poor family in rural Mexico. He entered the world with encephalocele, a birth defect in which the skull bones fuse so that the brain cannot grow normally. The growing brain produces pressure causing the skull to push out and the head to look uneven. He had to endure ridicule and scorn for as long as he could remember. Jose and his mother, Teodora, were hopeless and helpless until they met Dr. Kenneth Saylor, then sixty, a craniofacial surgeon in Dallas.

For over thirty years, Dr. Kenneth Saylor has devoted his life to reconstructing deformity into beauty, transforming misery into joy. He has made it his goal to perform a free operation for every paid surgery he does, making it possible for disadvantaged children like Jose to live their lives with a normal countenance.

On the day before his eight-hour surgery, a light rain began to fall in Dallas. “God is crying,” Jose solemnly announced, “because He knows I’m having surgery tomorrow.”

Jose and his family diligently sought medical help and were grateful when they received the surgery as a free gift. All for one reason: they recognized Jose’s facial deformity as bad news and thus they received Dr. Saylor’s free gift as good news. And they received the gift with tremendous gratitude.

Good News and Bad News

The human condition is like the deformed face of Jose because the image of God in which humans are created has been severely marred by sin. But there is a difference between Jose and the human race. Humans do not recognize the deformity as bad news, or when they do they do not grasp its severity. When confronted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they are unable to appreciate how good the Good News is because they have not grasped how bad the Bad News is.

The Heidelberg Catechism defines the Good News this way: it is the comfort “that I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil.”¹ The Catechism then goes on to enumerate the three things we must know “to live and die in the blessedness of this comfort”²:

- * The gravity of my sin (The Bad News)
- * The gift of gracious redemption (The Good News)
- * The gratitude I owe to God for this redemption. (The proper response to God when the Good News erases the Bad News.)

In order to appreciate the Good News of redemption and be able to respond with gratitude, it is critical for us to grasp the extent of the Bad News about our sin condition.

Is the Bad News Really That Bad?

Contrary to the confessional and Scriptural teachings of the church, modern optimism minimizes the gravity of sin. The following are some examples of modern thought which teaches that the Bad News really is not as bad as the Bible says.³

* The Kantian axiom “I thought, therefore I can” reflects the ever-growing confidence in man’s capacity to ameliorate the human reason’s imperfect mastery of lower impulses. Revelation is not so much a divine intervention into history as a continuous unfolding of the truth that resides within. Human progress is inevitable since reason is all-sufficient for solving the world’s problems. Accordingly, external authorities such as the Bible and the church are no longer necessary.

* Friedrich Schleiermacher’s emphasis on feeling over reason is evident in his definition of sin. Sin is a blocking of the forward movement of the spirit. Salvation is nothing more than a continuous strengthening of god-consciousness within and a corresponding diminishing of sin-consciousness. The kingdom of God is completely synonymous with the advance of civilization.

* Albert Ritschl defines sin as only “a failure to realize ethical values, a seeking after things of inferior rank, an upsetting of the scale of things.”⁴ According to Ritschl, sin does not disable man from resisting evil, and the kingdom of God is an ethical ideal, a kingdom of universal love attained through benevolent action.

* Social Gospel envisions the kingdom of God as a kingdom on earth attainable by human engineering. The goal is to overthrow oppressive social structures so that the kingdom of God can be manifested in the realization of man’s hopes for liberation.

All these views represent a pitifully inadequate view of sin which in turn trivializes the Good News of Jesus Christ. By minimizing the gravity of sin, modern optimism denies the goodness of the Good News: it denies the human need for a Savior and it writes off the atoning sacrifice as superfluous. This modern optimism also elevates human competence as the ultimate source of salvation, thus offering a theology of works devoid of divine grace.

The Gravity of Sin

What was so serious about the Fall in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1-3) that warrants such a costly payment as the bloody sacrifice of God’s own Son Jesus Christ?

Emil Brunner’s title of his book *Man In Revolt* succinctly captures the severity of the Bad News. Over four hundred years ago, Calvin echoed Brunner’s thought with these words, “. . . the first man revolted from God’s authority, not only because he was seized by Satan’s blandishments, but also because, contemptuous of truth, he turned aside to falsehood.”⁵ The Fall is a willful turning away from God and “being caught up in a rebellion against his Creator”.⁶

By their disobedience to God’s command regarding the forbidden fruit, the first woman and the first man (and by means of a spiritual contagion all subsequent women and men also) revolted against God’s purposes for man’s relationship with God, man’s role, and man’s family resemblance to God the Father.⁷

* Relationship

Adam and Eve revolted against God’s design for their relationship with Him. God intended for women and men to love Him with all of their hearts, minds, and strength, a commandment that Jesus lifted up as the first and the greatest commandment (Mark 12:30; Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Indeed, he defined and modeled love as obedience to God (John 15:13-14). By their one-time disobedience to God’s word humankind has forever destroyed its ability to love God through obedience. For this reason, sin is more than just legal noncompliance, but every sin is a personal affront to God Himself (Psalm 51:4) and has the effect of destroying the divine-human relationship.⁸

* Role

Man was created for his place as a creature. His created role is to love God as Jesus loves his father. But Adam was not content with his role as a creature. Instead he coveted God’s place. “To have been made in the likeness of God seemed a small matter to a son of earth unless he also attained equality with God.”⁹ “. . . [Sin] in its essence is prideful defiance, rebellion against God, seeking to be God. It is not the omission of being, but the

presumptuous attempt to be like divine being.”¹⁰ In a nutshell, sin is the refusal of Adam and his descendants to stay in their place as creatures.

* Resemblance

God created human beings in His own image in order that they might reflect his glory in much the same way that children of the same family reflect their resemblance to their parent (2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 3:14). “Those who render allegiance to the Kingdom of God, the disciples of Jesus are true children of this heavenly Father, and manifest this by reproducing his character.”¹¹ Indeed, God commanded, “I am Yahweh your God. . . ; be holy, for I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:44). The image of God in Adam and his descendants was marred as a result of the rebellious act in the Garden of Eden. “[After] the heavenly image was obliterated in him, [Adam] was not the only one to suffer this punishment—that, in place of wisdom, virtue, holiness, truth, and justice, with which adornments he had been clad, there came forth the most filthy plagues, blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity and injustice—but he also entangled and immersed his offspring in the same miseries.”¹² This inherited corruption is what theologians term “original sin.” The human face is so deformed by this inherited corruption that it no longer bears the family resemblance.¹³

Consequences of Sin

By their act of disobedience to God, Adam and Eve along with the whole human race have come under the control of a sin orientation. Since they acted as representatives of all humankind, this sin contagion resulting from the Fall brought about several consequences that pervade all of human race.

* Separation from God

Being holy, God cannot be in communion with his creatures who have been polluted by sin. Sin is not something that just happened to us, “but an evil course which man has deliberately chosen to follow. . . it is not something passive for which we cannot be held responsible, but an active opposition to God, and a positive transgression of His law, which constitutes guilt.”¹⁴ This active opposition to God continues to manifest itself in constant transgressions of God’s law. “As it was the spiritual life of Adam to remain united and bound to his Maker, so estrangement from him was the death of his soul.”¹⁵ Man was created to be in a loving parent-child relationship with God. However, as a result of the Fall, man has become God’s enemy (2 Thessalonians 1:9; Luke 16:24,26; Matthew 25:41,46; Revelation 14:11).¹⁶

* Slavery to Sin

Adam was originally created with the freedom that included both the possibility to sin and to refrain from sinning. After the Fall, Adam became incompetent to refrain from sinning and incapable of doing what is good by God’s standard.¹⁷ Humankind has forever become controlled by a sin orientation because the human will is in bondage to sin. Bloesch distinguishes natural freedom

(free will) from an acquired freedom (Christian liberty). “Man’s surrender and obedience to Christ are to be attributed not to his natural free will but to the new freedom created in him by the grace of God. It is not enough for man’s will to be assisted or strengthened. It must be converted or turned in an altogether new direction; the whole orientation of man’s life must be drastically changed. This indeed is the meaning of conversion.”¹⁸

* Spiritual Blindness

The gravity of the fallen human condition manifests itself in several ways: first, in perverted passions (John 1:5,11; 3:19; Romans 1:18; Ephesians 5:8); second, in ruined reason (Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:17-19); third, in darkened will (Jeremiah 17:9; Acts 13:10).¹⁹ “Sin not only enslaves man’s will but also blinds him to the truth about God and himself. . . . Any attempt to take the fall of man seriously will radically call into question the capacity of reason to discover or come to the truth.”²⁰ Calvin is correct when he says, “The light of the Lord alone. . . can open our eyes to behold the foulness which lies concealed in our flesh.”²¹

* Solidarity in the State of Sin

Sin is not only the external actions done by the body. Sin is both the state of guilt and the quality of inner corruption which the entire human race shares. In the sight of God, Adam’s sin was the sin of all his descendants. Man is in the state of guilt because he deserves punishment for violation of God’s standards. Women and men also find themselves infected with this inner corruption, a pervasive and inescapable pollution which directs humans to act and think in hostility to God.²² “The tale in Genesis concerns not only a first fall and first man but a universal fall and universal man. . . [Adam] is a generic as well as firstman. He is Everyman and therefore Representative Man”²³ (1 Corinthians 15:22; Romans 5:12; 1 Timothy 2:14).

Turning Bad News into Good News

These consequences of sin paint a picture of the human race in captivity, locked in the dark prison of evil and wicked orientations, unwilling and unable to re-orient themselves toward God. Man is held captive to an anti-God power, the prince of darkness.

Since man is not competent to free himself from his sin orientation, he is dependent on external intervention from God to deliver him from this bondage. Man can only be set free from the spiritual force of darkness through personal faith in Jesus Christ. The Bad News is turned into Good News when the defaced man not only recognizes his deformity as Bad News, but also acknowledges that the Bad News is so bad that he is incapable of saving himself and thus turns to Jesus Christ for deliverance.

This indeed is the meaning of conversion.

Questions

1. Why does the Heidelberg Catechism teach that it is essential to know the gravity of our sin in order to enjoy the comfort of belonging to Christ?
2. Within your network of relationships, have you encountered professing Christians who embrace beliefs similar to those of Kant, Schleiermacher, Ritschl and the Social Gospellers? Describe their beliefs.
3. Compare and contrast the teachings of modern optimism with those of the Bible and the Confessions. What are the differences?
4. Scriptures define the “love for God” and the “love for our neighbor” as obedience to God’s command (John 15:14; 1 John 5:2-3). By the same token, sin is defined as willful rebellion against God i.e. disobedience to God’s law. Contrast these biblical definitions of “love” and “sin” with the popular definitions of “love” and “sin” in our culture.
5. To what extent have these popular definitions of “love” and “sin” replaced the Biblical definitions in the preaching and teaching of our church?
6. What does the Bible teach us about the holiness of God? How does the holiness of God relate to the consequences of sin?
7. Survey the references of the Confessions in the Endnotes section of this article. Identify the relationship between (a) the incompetence of man to save himself; and (b) the necessity of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

- 1 Heidelberg 4.001
- 2 Heidelberg 4.002
- 3 Bloesch, Donald, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Volume I, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978) p. 109-111.
- 4 Ibid, p. 110
- 5 Calvin’s *Institutes*, Book II, Ch. 1, para. 4
- 6 Bloesch, op. cit., p. 107
- 7 “Man” as *anthropos* in Greek
- 8 Scots 3.03; Second Helvetic 5.037; Westminster 6.032; Shorter Catechism 7.019; Larger Catechism 7.139; 67 Confession 9.13
- 9 Calvin’s *Institutes*, Book II, Ch. 1, para. 4
- 10 Bloesch, op. cit. p. 108
- 11 Bruce, F.F., *The Time Is Fulfilled*, (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978) p. 22
- 12 Calvin’s *Institutes*, Book II, Ch. 1, para. 5
- 13 Scots 3.03; Heidelberg 4.006-4.007; Second Helvetic 5.036; Westminster 6.023, 6.033, 6.034; Larger Catechism 7.127, 7.131, 7.135, 7.185; Brief Statement 10.3 lines 33-35
- 14 Berkhof, L., *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979) p. 231
- 15 Calvin’s *Institutes*, Book II, Ch. 1, para. 5
- 16 Shorter Catechism 7.019; Larger Catechism 7.139
- 17 Scots 3.03, 3.13; Heidelberg 4.005, 4.008; Second Helvetic 5.037, 5.038; Westminster 6.032-6.035; Shorter Catechism 7.014-7.019; Larger Catechism 7.133, 7.138; 67 Confession 9.12
- 18 Bloesch, op. cit., p. 101
- 19 Larger Catechism 7.138
- 20 Bloesch, op. cit., p. 102
- 21 Calvin, J. *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and Thessalonians*, eds. David W. & T.F. Torrance, trans. Ross MacKenzie, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) p. 135.
- 22 Scots 3.03; Heidelberg 4.007; Second Helvetic 5.037; Westminster 6.032-6.034; Shorter Catechism 7.016; Larger Catechism 7.136; 67, Confession 9.13; Brief Statement 10.3 line 33
- 23 Bloesch, op. cit., p. 106

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