

Constitutional Musing

Misrepresentations about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The Office of the General Assembly has had an increase in the number of inquiries about printed materials from outside of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), being distributed within congregations, that ascribe to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) beliefs and standards which are meant to show that the church is no longer worthy of support. Over the past years the list of these misrepresentations have varied little and most have been answered in detail in the religious press, study papers adopted by the church or by specific action of the General Assembly.ⁱ Whenever possible, the Office of the General Assembly directs those who inquire about specific conclusions drawn by these papers to resources which give a broader understanding of the issues.

Typically the materials being circulated focus on four broad areas of concern, each of which speaks to the core of who we are as a denomination and a covenant community. In response to these recent inquiries, we remind the church about who the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is both historically and in our current ministry.

1. It is said that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has distanced itself from historical tenets of the faith, especially identifying the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture.

The Lordship of Jesus Christⁱⁱ and the authority and centrality of Scriptureⁱⁱⁱ are clearly expressed in the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). These affirmations of our Reformed tradition found, most notably, in *The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity* in the *Book of Order* and in *The Book of Confessions* present the fundamental proclamation of the church concerning our historical faith.

There is no clearer refutation of this allegation than the witness articulated in the answers to the constitutional questions asked at ordination.^{iv} In ordination, and subsequent installations, every deacon, ruling elder and teaching elder stands before the church proclaiming their trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior and their acceptance of Scripture as the authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God's Word to them. One cannot embrace a view of the whole church that claims distance from the Lordship of Jesus and the authority of scripture while every person serving in ordered ministries of our church has steadfastly proclaimed their personal commitment to these very truths.

No other actions of the church, or parts of the church, can dispute the primary commitment of the ordained leadership of the church to their vows of ordination and to the affirmation of reformed theology set out so clearly in the constitution.

2. It is said that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has adopted a liberal political agenda as a core mission.

The *Book of Order* describes the core mission of the church this way: "In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by
proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love,
offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and

calling all people to discipleship in Christ.”^v

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expresses God’s mission differently in each of its 10,000 congregations, 173 presbyteries, 16 synods and six agencies. Historically this mission has been active in promoting the social good. At the second meeting of the original presbytery of our denomination, in Philadelphia in 1706, the presbytery adopted as a goal that “every minister of the Presbytery supply neighboring desolate places where a minister is wanting and opportunity of doing good offers.”^{vi} This commitment to doing good in wanting places has been lived out in our powerful history of starting public schools, building hospitals, reaching out to the poor and those cut off from family, in promoting racial equality and lifting up the whole society by standing with those alienated from it. The church’s commitment to doing good in wanting places has never wavered.

While a few of these ministries have been interpreted by some as being part of a liberal political agenda, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) understands that it is the mission of God in Christ which gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church.^{vii}

3. The decline in church membership is cited as a marker of spiritual illness and a failure of the church as a whole.

Leaders on all levels of the church are concerned about the decline in Protestant churches across the nation.^{viii} This is not a uniquely Presbyterian issue, nor is it unique to churches, for a profound cultural shift in what it means to join a society and engage in committed covenants has affected religious, civic and volunteer organizations equally.

More important than identifying these trends is listening to Christ’s call to fulfill a dynamic mission in a way most appropriate to the mission field around us. The Church continues to be “sent to be Christ’s faithful evangelist:

making disciples of all nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; sharing with others a deep life of worship, prayer, fellowship, and service; and participating in God’s mission to care for the needs of the sick, poor, and lonely; to free people from sin, suffering, and oppression; and to establish Christ’s just, loving, and peaceable rule in the world.”^{ix}

The church’s vision for 1001 New Worshiping Communities^x is one example of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) responding to this challenge. To do this the church is encouraging entrepreneurial young leaders and finding ways to provide a structure which supports the historical faith in innovative ways. A less-restrictive Form of Government and a focus on governance at the more local levels all give credence to our trust that Jesus Christ is not finished with this vibrant church.

4. It is said that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is at odds with the global Presbyterian Church.

A unifying element of the global partnership of Reformed churches is a principle of our order and government that: “...every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal

government which Christ hath appointed ...”^{xi} There are times when it is necessary for a church to make a decision on theological grounds about which other churches might not necessarily agree. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s actions which make it possible for sessions and presbyteries to ordain people without regard to their sexual orientation is one such instance and has placed the church in a minority within the world community of Reformed churches. One of our global partners has broken relations with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) over the decision and the church’s leadership is actively engaged in conversations with other partners who have also expressed their dissatisfaction.

The global church is hardly of one mind on this or any number of issues. Some within the community still object to our decision 50 years ago to ordain women, though there is virtual agreement across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that it is the correct action. Many of our global partners consider holding the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) accountable to justice and stewardship issues, expressed in the Accra Confession, to be of primary importance in our dialogues. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues to engage in building relationships with open humility with all those whom Christ has called.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a member of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. The WCRC has a global membership of over 80 million congregants in over 200 denominations. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church is a member and the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians has applied for membership.

Prayer for Guidance

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with your most gracious favor and further us with your continual help, that in all our works, begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name, and finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.^{xii}

ⁱ For example: the 1993 “Reimagining God” conference is often listed as proof of a move away from reformed standards. Seldom do those making this accusation include the response of the following (1994) General Assembly which replied to critics of the church of this conference by, among other things, overwhelmingly adopting the following statements:

- We affirm the one triune God.
- We affirm the uniqueness of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ.
- We affirm the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our salvation.
- We affirm that the Scriptures, by the Holy Spirit, are the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ.
- We affirm, again and again, the faith once delivered historically expressed in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, and the other historic confessions of our church.

We reject teachings that deny the tenets of our faith. Let there be no doubt that theology matters, that our Reformed tradition is precious to us, and that we intend to hand it down to the next generation-our children and our grandchildren.” [Minutes of the 206th General Assembly (1994) page 88]

ⁱⁱ F-1.0201 The Authority of Christ

Almighty God, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, has given to him all power in heaven and on earth, not only in this age but also in the age to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body. The Church’s life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ’s ongoing life and work.

F-1.0202 Christ Calls and Equips the Church

Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission in the world, for its sanctification, and for its service to God. Christ is present with the Church in both Spirit and Word. Christ alone rules, calls, teaches, and uses the Church as he wills.

F-1.0404 Openness

In Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all creation, the Church seeks a new openness to God's mission in the world. In Christ, the triune God tends the least among us, suffers the curse of human sinfulness, raises up a new humanity, and promises a new future for all creation. In Christ, Church members share with all humanity the realities of creatureliness, sinfulness, brokenness, and suffering, as well as the future toward which God is drawing them. The mission of God pertains not only to the Church but also to people everywhere and to all creation.

The Book of Confessions: See 1.2, 2.2, 5.062, 5.131, 6.141, 8.11-8.15, 9.10.

iii F-1.0203 Christ Gives the Church Its Life

Christ gives to the Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its order and discipline. Scripture teaches us of Christ's will for the Church, which is to be obeyed. In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

F-1.0401 Continuity and Change

The presbyterian form of government set forth in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is grounded in Scripture and built around the marks of the true Church. It is in all things subject to the Lord of the Church. In the power of the Spirit, Jesus Christ draws worshiping communities and individual believers into the sovereign activity of the triune God at all times and places. As the Church seeks reform and fresh direction, it looks to Jesus Christ who goes ahead of us and calls us to follow him. United with Christ in the power of the Spirit, the Church seeks "not [to] be conformed to this world, but [to] be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2)

W-2.2001 Centrality of Scripture

The church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. For this reason the reading, hearing, preaching, and confessing of the Word are central to Christian worship. The session shall ensure that in public worship the Scripture is read and proclaimed regularly in the common language(s) of the particular church.

The Book of Confessions: See 3.19, 5.001-5.002, 6.004, 7.002 & 7.113, 9.27-9.30.

iv W-4.4003 Constitutional Questions for Ordination, Installation, and Commissioning

v F-1.01 God's Mission

The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all

people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission.

- vi James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996) 42.
- vii F-1.01 God's Mission
- viii "Nones" on the Rise: *One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*. This report, released in October 2012, was produced by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. The full report can be found at: <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>
- ix F-1.0302 d. The Apostolicity of the Church
- x 1001 Worshipping Communities: <http://www.onethousandone.org/Home.aspx>
- xi F-3.0102 Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction
- xii *Book of Common Worship Pastoral Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 348.