

Theological Concerns Workshop Meetings – January

The PCUSA is Changing

The PCUSA is in the midst of becoming a new denomination.

We know this not just by studying the changes in the new Form of Government but also by reading the writings and listening to the statements of its top officers (often speaking in their official capacities) declaring that the PCUSA is “in the midst of another reformation” and that “God is creating a new church in and through us.”¹

Another source of information on how the PCUSA is becoming a new denomination is the 50+ videos by Gradye Parsons (our Stated Clerk) that you can find on YouTube discussing the future of the PCUSA and the question: “where are we going?”² You can also see an indication of the changes taking place within the denomination by studying the PowerPoint presentation by the Stated Clerk Parsons available on the PCUSA’s website in which he lists a number of the authors and speakers influencing the denomination’s leadership and in which he also traces the writings of one of them to the recent changes in the Form of Government.³ You can read on the denomination’s website the quotes of a key author speaking to the staff in Louisville: “Don’t bring folks to where you are... Don’t leave them where they are... Go with them to a place neither of you has been.”⁴ You can also add to your understanding of where the PCUSA is going by reading about Progressive theology (and its various sub-groupings).⁵

¹ Letter signed by Gradye Parsons, Cindy Bolbach and Landon Whitsitt (October, 2011)
<http://bit.ly/vroUeD>

² See for example - <http://bit.ly/tjjw9R>

³ See Gradye Parsons’ PowerPoint presentation title “*The Calling of the Church*” wherein he asks “Where the heck are we going?” <http://bit.ly/sozrwS>

⁴ See <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2010/12/10/brian-mclaren-looks-future/>

⁵ See for example www.progressivechristianity.org

While the image of the intended destination does become clearer by studying these resources, it is important to note there is not a single paper or source describing that destination. Also, the folks intending to take the denomination to a new place may not completely agree with each other in their own theological beliefs. Therefore, it is necessary to build a composite image of our destination from the various pieces of information available to us.

A confirmation of the changing nature of the PCUSA can be seen in the reactions from other Presbyterian churches around the world. The calls have come from these churches (such as Mexico, Brazil and East Africa). The list includes churches that have traditionally looked to the PCUSA as a mother church; churches which now call the PCUSA to repent and return to its historical orthodoxy.⁶

Developing an Ear for the Changes

It is important to develop an ear for the changes taking place in the PCUSA. New meanings may be attached to familiar terms. For example, instead of the “Word of God” meaning the Scriptures, the term may be used to refer exclusively to the person of Jesus. Another example would be the term “church” which no longer means the local, particular church such as First Pres, but now means the denomination.

Another way to tune your hearing is to listen for new phrases that have a familiar ring or sound but have an unfamiliar meaning. For example, the phrase “the Way of Jesus” may sound consistent with orthodox terminology. However, what the speaker maybe communicating is that they believe in Jesus’ teachings on to how to live but not in Jesus’ divinity or atonement through His death on the Cross.

⁶ See examples <http://bit.ly/tlhG9W> <http://bit.ly/tK0OWX> <http://bit.ly/tcRsp6>

Work We Have Done

The Session has been in an extended period of discernment. First of all, we have prayed. We have also traveled, read, listened and sought input from knowledgeable individuals from around the country. We have met with representatives of our Presbytery. Some of them share our concerns while others have told us that in their opinion “nothing has changed”... but if it has, it will be awhile before the rulings are issued by the denomination to confirm that those changes have actually taken place.

The Session has been motivated by the belief that this congregation will be best served by understanding the primary underlying trends within the PCUSA.

Remarkably, through this process, the relationships within the Session have become stronger and deeper as it has moved towards and continues in unanimity in its conclusions.

Broad Theological Trends Within the Denomination

The theological trends that we see can be organized in the following areas:

- A. Whether the Scriptures carry the weight of God speaking or are there new ways of determining what truth is?
- B. Is atonement for sins necessary and does everyone receive eternal life?
- C. Who is Jesus and are there other ways to be reconciled to God?

Scripture as the Word of God

The historic position of First Pres has been declared on our website with the affirmation that we are part of the Confessing Church Movement. The confessional statements of this movement include the statement that *Holy Scripture alone is God’s revealed Word, the Church’s only infallible rule of faith and life.*⁷

⁷ See <http://firstpresnpb.org/aboutus/>

Some of those who support the direction of the PCUSA advocate that every 500 years the Church goes through a reformation. They believe that the reformation 500 years ago replaced the pope in Rome with the Scriptures, as a paper pope. They assert that the Church in the current reformation will dispose of the idea that Scriptures are the Word of God as if it was a family disposing of items from their attic in a yard sale.⁸ The Stated Clerk of the PCUSA has adopted this analogy and modified it as a wagon train discarding the family heirlooms at the side of the trail as it heads west because they have become too burdensome.⁹

It is now common to hear statements that “the Bible **contains** the Word of God,”¹⁰ that we are to “**listen for** the word of God”¹¹ or that “the Bible **becomes** the Word of God”¹² as alternatives to an affirmation that the Bible **is** the Word of God.

Proponents of the new direction assert that new tools of Biblical interpretation render the Bible “a very human document.”¹³ The Bible is relegated to being a respected **guide** in the community’s library.¹⁴ The source of authority is now shifting to the individual’s conscience¹⁵ and the consensus of a particular community, for a particular time.¹⁶

Changes within our Book of Order that reflect these trends regarding the authority of Scripture can be seen in the following examples:

⁸ *The Great Emergence* by Phyllis Tickle, Page 19

⁹ See YouTube video at <http://bit.ly/vgnJPQ>

¹⁰ Elder Eddie Nabhan from time at Princeton Seminary

¹¹ Phoenix Affirmations (ver. 3.8) – Affirmation No. 2 at <http://bit.ly/v0uZQU>

¹² *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality* by Jack Rogers, Page 38

¹³ *Ibid* - Page 39

¹⁴ *A New Kind of Christianity* by Brian D. McLaren, Page 78

¹⁵ Guidelines for Examination of Church Officers by the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (October 15, 2008 edition - Page 4 and November, 2011 edition – Page 4). See also the Statement of Departure by Lisa Larges

¹⁶ *The Great Emergence* by Phyllis Tickle, Page 151

Former Language:

Insofar as Christ's will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed. G-1.0100c (2009-2011)

New Language:

Scripture teaches of Christ's will for the Church, which is to be obeyed.
F-1.0203 (2011-2013)

Former Language:

The Pastor is responsible for studying, teaching, and preaching the Word... G-6.0202b (2009-2011)

New Language:

Teaching elders (pastors)...shall preach and teach the faith of the church (little "c" meaning the denomination) G-2.0501 (2011-2013)

Is atonement for sins necessary and does everyone receive eternal life?

The historical position of First Pres has been declared on our website with the statement that "*Human beings sin and are separated from God.*"¹⁷

The shift underway in this area is away from Original Sin (the Fall) in the Garden of Eden towards a focus on Creation in which the state of things in their natural order is the right and final expression of God's will.¹⁸ The Fall in Genesis is not seen as causing a separation of man from God which requires reconciliation, but rather simply the changing dynamics of a dependent child growing up into adulthood.¹⁹ For some, the idea of God requiring the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross for the sins of mankind sounds like "divine child-abuse" and that if God wants to forgive, "why doesn't he just do it."²⁰

¹⁷ See <http://firstpresnpb.org/aboutus/>

¹⁸ *Why Christology Is An Endangered Species* by James R. Edwards <http://bit.ly/sCKn08>

¹⁹ *A New Kind of Christianity* by Brian D. McLaren, Page 49. See also Vice Moderator Landon Whitsitt's statement on Original Sin at <http://landonwhitsitt.com/2011/01/>

²⁰ *The Story We Find Ourselves In* by Brian D. McLaren, Page 102 as per D.A. Carson, Page 166

Without the enduring problem of man's fallen nature, "salvation" then simply becomes the benefit derived from the teachings of Jesus on morality.²¹ ²² Salvation is not about salvation from hell or eternal life after death.²³ Rather, salvation is about being educated about the proper ways to live life.²⁴

In the destination we are now heading for, the Gospel message shifts away from a story of sin and redemption towards the liberation of oppressed people groups as demonstrated in the Book of Exodus.²⁵

Changes within our Book of Order that reflect these trends can be seen in the following examples:

Former Language:

*Jesus came to seek and **save the lost**, in **his life and death** for others
God's redeeming love for all people was made visible; and in the
resurrection of Jesus Christ there is the assurance of God's **victory over
sin and death** and the promise of God's continuing presence in the world.*

G-3.0102 (2009-2011)

New Language:

The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God...**creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people...liberated** the people of Israel from **oppression**...bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are **blind**, freedom to all who are **oppressed**, and proclaiming the Lord's favor upon **all creation**.

F-1.01 (2011-2013)

²¹ *A Generous Orthodoxy* by Brian D. McLaren, Page 106

²² Vice Moderator Landon Whitsitt's statement on Universalism at <http://landonwhitsitt.com/2011/01/>

²³ *A Generous Orthodoxy* by Brian D. McLaren, Page 101

²⁴ *Ibid*, Page 106

²⁵ *A New Kind of Christianity* by Brian D. McLaren, Page 56

Who is Jesus and are there other ways to be reconciled to God?

Our historical position has been declared on our website with statements that include:

*“Jesus is God” and “Jesus Christ alone is Lord of all, and the way of salvation.”*²⁶

“Pluralism” is the concept that there are multiple paths to God and eternal life.

Therefore, Jesus Christ and His death on the Cross is not the only means of reconciliation.

John 14:6 is the well-recognized verse where Jesus states in an exclusive manner that He is “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” One way that this verse is discounted by those advocating for the current direction of the denomination is to affirm that this statement by Jesus was intended only for His own particular disciples.²⁷

The issue of whether there are paths to eternal life other than Jesus Christ speaks directly to His divinity. If Jesus is not unique then He is not divine. One way that some of the champions for our new direction approach this issue is to affirm that while Jesus perfectly **reflects** God’s self-sacrificial love (in the same way that Gandhi or Martin Luther King did), He was not actually God.²⁸

This position is in direct contradiction with the Nicene Creed displayed on First Pres’ website which states that Jesus is “Very God of Very God” and that He is “one substance with the Father.”²⁹

A corollary to these shifts can be seen in the Book of Order in that the old Form of Government required leaders to have theological positions “**consistent with the**

²⁶ See <http://firstpresnpb.org/aboutus/>

²⁷ *A New Kind of Christianity* by Brian D. McLaren, Page 222

²⁸ See 2006 interview with Brian D. McLaren at <http://bit.ly/uxdHUC> (see in particular the conversation beginning at 6:00 minutes into the video)

²⁹ See <http://firstpresnpb.org/aboutus/>

Reformed tradition”³⁰ but the new language mandates a leader’s qualification “regardless of theological conviction.”³¹

Practical Concerns

From a practical point of view, remaining in the PCUSA will present a number of challenges. One of these challenges involves the ability of our congregation and its pastors to walk with integrity with our historical, orthodox beliefs. One advocacy group, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, has written several editions of its *Guidelines for Examination of Church Officers*³² as a resource to the PCUSA. These documents layout extensive church precedents that:

- Sessions and Presbyteries cannot ignore, or add to, standards, including ordination standards and;
- Pastors may not refuse to perform the unique functions of their office and that those who do refuse may not be able to hold their office.

Another practical challenge involves section G-4.0204 in our Book of Order. This section states that property “used contrary to the constitution” shall be transferred or sold as provided by the Presbytery. It should be noted that the staff at the denominational headquarters in Louisville has developed an aggressive legal plan (as part of the “Louisville Papers”³³) to take control of congregational property in such situations. Page 3 of this document indicates that the denomination has set aside funds to help Presbyteries assume control of congregational properties where it is determined that property is not being used in accordance with the PCUSA’s constitution.

³⁰ Book of Order G-4.0403 (2009-2011)

³¹ Book of Order F-1.0403 (2011-2013)

³² November, 2011 edition of *Guidelines for Examination of Church Officers* are available at <http://covnetpres.org/resources/guidelines/>

³³ Document available for download at <http://bit.ly/rD7uF6>

Conclusions

What we have presented are some of the trends and influences affecting the PCUSA today. The Session has worked to understand these trends as the best indication of what the denomination will look like in the future. However, judgment must be used to form a current conclusion of what that destination will be. Additionally, judgment is currently required to address whether there is a sufficient basis for remaining in relationship with the new majority within the PCUSA.

What we do know is that:

- The Stated Clerk of the PCUSA is comfortable stating that the idea that the Bible contains all the knowledge necessary for salvation and how we should live is a concept that is being taken out of the wagon and discarded on the trail;³⁴
- The Vice Moderator of the PCUSA is comfortable stating that the same idea concerning the Bible is “dead in most places and dying in others”³⁵ and that he is a Christian Pluralist³⁶ and;
- Ordained Ministers in the PCUSA can make statements such as the following without being corrected:
 - Jesus did not die for the sins of humanity³⁷
 - Jesus is not divine³⁸
 - The great Christian doctrines such as Trinity, Creation, Sin, Christology, Atonement and Eschatology are no longer great³⁹

The question therefore now becomes...is this who we are?

³⁴ See YouTube video at <http://bit.ly/vgnJPO>

³⁵ See <http://bit.ly/vAX5I4>

³⁶ See <http://bit.ly/tDterJ>

³⁷ See <http://bit.ly/s7IyPF>

³⁸ See <http://bit.ly/tYDptM>

³⁹ See <http://bit.ly/vZ6yJG>