

The Presbyterian OUTLOOK

Apologia Progressiva

By Paul Rack, stated clerk, the Presbytery of Elizabeth

It is safe to say that our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is currently undergoing a major “schism,” in that many of our more conservative sisters and brothers are choosing to separate from us and join denominations they find more congenial to their views. They have been threatening this for a long time. The recent move to drop the categorical ban on ordaining active gay and lesbian persons brought this matter to a head, and many presbyteries are finally allowing churches to take their property with them when they go. This flow may only intensify in the next couple of years when the denomination may change its rules to allow gay marriage.

Having listened carefully to the concerns of those who advocate separation, I must say that I don’t always recognize the denomination of which these voices are so vociferously critical. Let me address some of the more common charges made against the PC(USA) by people building a case for departure.

Apostasy?

First of all, I take issue with the charge that the PC(USA) has drifted into “apostasy” and is no longer an expression of the catholic and apostolic Christian faith. I am not sure those claiming this have worked through the consequences of this opinion. If the PC(USA) is no longer a Christian church, then a congregation would have to *re-baptize* PC(USA) members who wished to join. It also means that members of PC(USA) churches would not be welcome at the Lord’s Table in their churches. Is that really what they intend? I doubt it. So maybe the hyperbolic, incendiary rhetoric should be toned down.

Trinity

Some have implied that we of the PC(USA) deny the traditional formulation of the Trinity and that creative experimentation with the language in which the

truth of the Trinity is expressed is a transgression of the third commandment. Yet, the church has throughout its history done just this. Are our critics prepared to condemn such luminaries of the faith as Augustine (who developed both a psychological analogy and one of lover-beloved-love), Patrick of Ireland (who is said to have used a cloverleaf to illustrate the Trinity), John of Damascus (sun-light-heat), Mechtild of Magdeburg (heart-body-breath), Catherine of Siena (table-food-server) and many other perfectly orthodox teachers of the faith on the same grounds?

The PC(USA) does not suggest that different ways of talking about the Trinity in any way *replace* the traditional terminology, which remains the indispensable anchor of our understanding of God. Indeed, the use of the traditional language from Matthew 28 remains mandated for the Sacrament of Baptism in our Book of Order. One of the motivations for the paper they find

so offensive, “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing,” was actually to lead the church away from the dangers of Unitarianism and Modalism.

The Trinity is a great mystery beyond human comprehension. To reduce it exclusively to three particular words which contain their own baggage in people’s perceptions and experience — and then refusing even to discuss analogies that might make it more clear and accessible — veers dangerously close to idolatry.

Biblical authority and interpretation

Critics also express frustration with the views and practices of the PC(USA) concerning biblical authority and interpretation. However, it is simply not true that the PC(USA) no longer accepts the Bible as authoritative in its life and work. We believe that the Holy Spirit is always opening the mind of the church to new nuances and readings in Scripture. Passages once considered marginal come to the center; once authoritative passages are viewed more in context. As the church strives to make the good news of Jesus Christ intelligible to people in new times and places, the Spirit leads us to new understandings. But different interpretations do not diminish Scripture’s authority for us. Indeed, they are a result of taking the *whole message of the Bible* with great seriousness.

In short, the PC(USA) has been more faithful to the fullness of the scriptural witness in all its diversity. We are willing to question whether traditional readings are indeed still faithful to the good news of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. The Reformed tradition has an acute allergy to idolatry in all its forms, especially when dressed in orthodox language. We admit that we may occasionally need our perspectives broadened to appreciate a wider view of the biblical witness.

For instance, the church came to the decision to welcome women into ordained ministry, *not* by simply caving in to contemporary cultural standards and political pressure (as some charge), but by listening carefully to the full witness of Scripture. We found women in leadership positions in Paul’s churches. We decided it was important that the primary witnesses to the incarnation, the passion, and the resurrection of Jesus were all women. We noticed women wielding authority in the Old Testament, especially Deborah the judge and the prophetess Huldah who is the first person to validate Scripture as the Word of God. We decided that this wider witness

overrode Paul’s handful of scattered comments mostly referring to particular women in one or two particular churches of his time.

In other words, everything they complain is a “rejection of Biblical authority” has actually been the church responding self-critically to the broader witness of Scripture. We feel this holds the Bible in *higher* regard than to force it into a doctrinal straitjacket based on a few verses arbitrarily chosen to prop up the values, doctrines, principalities and powers of another age.

In short, we agree wholeheartedly with Heinrich Bullinger when he writes in the Second Helvetic Confession: “We hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contribute much to the glory of God and [human] salvation” (*Book of Confessions*, 5.010). Amen.

To sum up, the case may be made that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is *more* confessional, responsible, and open to following and being critiqued by the good news and the complete biblical witness than those who try to force the scriptural text into narrow theological categories and strict moral rules reflecting the cultural conditioning of previous generations. The case may be made that the PC(USA) is being far *more* responsive to the movement of the Holy Spirit than churches retreating into doctrinal shelters sealing them away from the present world.

Atonement

Those seeking to depart complain rather bitterly that the PC(USA) allows and encourages the work of people who question what is called the “penal-substitutionary” theory of the atonement. In fact, they seem to assume that this is the only orthodox way to understand the saving work of the Lord on the cross.

Many Presbyterians find it unpalatable to have a doctrine of the atonement in which God apparently demands the suffering and death of God’s son to somehow appease God’s wounded honor or overflowing wrath — as if Jesus had to die in order to protect us from this violent and vindictive deity. This gives us an image of

an abusive and heartless God, which is far from Jesus' depiction of his Father in a parable like the prodigal son. Did Jesus die to protect us *from* God or to reconcile us *to* God?

The Confession of 1967 holds that "God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the Scriptures describe in various ways. It is called the sacrifice of a lamb, a shepherd's life given for his sheep, atonement by a priest; again it is ransom of a slave, payment of debt, vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty, and victory over the powers of evil. These are expressions of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory in the depths of God's love for [humanity]. They reveal the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of God's reconciling work" (*Book of Confessions*, 9.09).

We believe faithfulness to Scripture is more important than adherence to particular historically-conditioned theological doctrines, or even to the confessions of the church. The PC(USA) recognizes that the Word and Spirit of God may be leading the church to hear Scripture in ways that do not reflect a medieval, feudal and patriarchal understanding of society.

The particular view of the atonement that they advocate is found in neither Jesus nor Paul, and was not fully articulated in the Western church until Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century. (The Eastern church doesn't hold this doctrine at all.) While the PC(USA) certainly accepts this as one way of framing the atonement, we do not find it wise to close ourselves off to others, especially theories that are more ancient, more universal, more relevant to contemporary experience, and more faithful to the whole witness of Scripture.

Simply forcing people to assent to doctrines that are not required by Scripture and that do not make sense to 21st century people is not something the PC(USA) finds to be in the interest of effective evangelism.

Some are offended by the willingness of the PC(USA) to entertain and permit theological questions and reflections that extend rather far from what has been considered traditional orthodoxy. Yet, we Reformed Christians have always held that "the life of the mind is service to God." While we may not embrace the findings of those exploring the extreme frontiers of Christian doctrine and practice, we feel that allowing — and even encouraging such efforts — strengthens the church in both its encounter with the world and its faithfulness to the Word and Spirit of the living God. After all, many of

those who "pushed the envelope" of doctrine — including numerous great saints as well as the Reformers and many others whom the church has eventually followed — served to keep the message of Christ fresh and relevant to new generations.

And, when some go too far, rather than wielding the heavy hammer of ecclesiastical discipline, we find simply hearing them out to be much more effective. In the end we trust the wisdom of Presbyterians gathered in councils, guided by the Holy Spirit, to sort out what actually gets preached and taught in our churches.

Universalism

Some advocates for separation say that the PC(USA) has fallen into "universalism," which they seem to think means denying the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the essentiality of faith in him alone for salvation. On the contrary, our denomination has never adopted any form of universalism.

At the same time, some Presbyterians may notice that the idea that it is God's sovereign will to save/restore *the whole world* (John 4:42; Acts 3:21; 1 John 4:14; etc.) has a long, venerable and *scripturally-based* history. For instance, Paul's argument in Romans 5:18, "Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all." Or in 1 Corinthians 15:22, "As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ." Does "all" mean, well, *all*? No less an orthodox theologian than Gregory of Nyssa held to a form of universalism. The wider church never officially agreed with him, but his opinion in this matter did not prevent his being lifted up as a great saint and theologian of the faith.

Perhaps what gets mistaken for universalism is the reticence of many Presbyterians to automatically judge and even condemn to hell their neighbors of other faiths. Frankly, we know too much of a history in which Christians committed horrible atrocities. In addition, we have also known of too many who do *not* call themselves Christians, who nevertheless appear to live in greater conformity with Jesus' actual life and teachings than many Christians do. We can no longer accept a facile equivalence between being nominally a "Christian" and actually living in ways God calls on us to live.

Our church has awakened to the mature realization that it is possible to live a life in obedience to God's law and at the same time not be part of our faith commu-

nity, as Paul affirms in Romans 2:14-16. Jesus himself allows that he has “other sheep that do not belong to this fold” (John 10:16). We long ago acknowledged that Jesus could have sheep in folds that do not call themselves “Presbyterian” or “Reformed” or “Protestant.” Is it beyond possibility that Jesus could have sheep who belong to folds that do not call themselves “Christian”?

So, we continue to confess that salvation comes by no other name (Acts 4:12) and that there is no other way to God but through him (John 14:6). We simply recognize our own imperfections and humbly decline to reduce salvation to something dependent on our human names and rituals. Neither do we presume to make this evaluation on the Lord’s behalf, but we leave it up to him to recognize his own at the Day of Judgment.

This means approaching our neighbors with the good news humbly and incarnationally, rather than with a superior, patronizing, exclusionary or even threatening attitude. Maybe, while affirming that trust in Christ alone remains a necessity, we also confess that the true uniqueness of Jesus Christ is found precisely in his inclusion somehow of *all* in God’s plan for salvation.

Salvation vs. liberation

Proponents of separation charge that we have replaced a traditional emphasis on salvation with a new stress on liberation. We hold that if salvation does not include liberation, it is an empty word. Jesus comes into the world to set people free from sin and from institutions and beliefs that keep people in bondage. When he heals the sick, drives out demons, welcomes women and children and proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God, Jesus is a liberator. To be saved is to be set free. Even the Greek word usually translated as “forgive” is rooted in the word “release.” Salvation is emancipatory.

This liberation is not merely spiritual or psychological. It also calls to be realized in our relationships, from the family to the world. Jesus did not simply preach; he was probably better known in his own time as a healer, exorcist and community organizer. His work was more than talk; it was saving and liberating actions. Salvation that is just a matter of words and opinions is incomplete at best; salvation is only real when it is extended into our life in community.

We find it disingenuous when some (though certainly not all) who complain that we reduce salvation to liberation, appear to benefit morally and materially from un-

just social structures, oppressive institutions and exploitative practices. It makes us wonder if they aren’t more concerned with protecting a profitable and comfortable status quo than with obedience to the radical demands of the Lord Jesus.

Abortion

The position of the PC(USA) on abortion is far more nuanced than critics charge. It is not simply a blanket affirmation of the “pro-choice” position. Our denomination never advocates or recommends that anyone get an abortion for any reason. We do not take the position that abortion is always justified just because it is a woman’s choice. We do allow that there are extreme circumstances when the decision to have an abortion may be morally justifiable. We also hold that many abortions are morally wrong. We believe this intensely personal decision should be left to a woman, her family, and her church community to address prayerfully. We find this approach more faithful and pastoral than advocating that the state prohibit it in all, or almost all, cases.

Seeing such difficult and complicated personal moral issues in black-and-white, either-or terms, relegating them to the often sordid and corrupt political machinations of the state, and taking the decision away from the church and individual believer is not in our view faithful — or even effective — in reducing the number of abortions.

Still, our churches are free and even encouraged to study the issue and come up with a position they can support in good conscience, even if different from that of the denomination.

Sexuality

In terms of sexual ethics, the Bible’s views are famously diverse, ranging from the forms of polygamy we find in some of the Old Testament to the celibacy advocated by the Apostle Paul and practiced by the Lord. It is the view of the PC(USA) that the relatively few biblical verses that appear to talk about homosexuality need to be read in light of the very many more passages that advocate for justice and inclusion.

While it appears certain that homosexual practice was condemned in Israelite society, so were other practices that Christians now allow. The church has always had to make a determination concerning whether Old Testament statutes refer to the *ceremonial* law, now

fulfilled and completed in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, or the *moral* law, which remains in force for Christians (epitomized in the Ten Commandments). Different generations and families of Christians have always held to different understandings of which specific laws fall into which category.

The prohibition of homosexual behavior is not explicitly included in the Ten Commandments. We find it generally associated with other purity laws we Christians no longer literally keep. Hence the view of some that these laws have no more effect for us than many other *kosher* laws. On the other hand, the mainstream of the church through its history has almost always categorized these laws as moral and continued to uphold them.

The ambiguity is not conclusively cleared up in the New Testament. Jesus says exactly nothing about the matter. The verses in which Paul appears to address it are notoriously difficult to translate from the Greek, which is often done with a remarkable disregard for context. The 1 Corinthians 6:9 passage, while very clear in some English Bibles, is not nearly so clear in the original Greek text, with at least three highly charged words: *pornoi*, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, that scholars, linguists and cultural historians continue to argue about. To assume that these words clearly refer to what we know as same-sex relationships is somewhat presumptuous and perhaps even biased and anachronistic.

Then there is the view that what people in Paul's day knew as "homosexuality" (the word wasn't even invented until the 19th century, by the way), almost always referred to a violent, abusive or coerced sexual act or relationship. There is no evidence that Paul ever personally knew anyone who lived in anything like the same-sex relationships of mutual love, commitment and respect we know today.

Finally, we have to take into account the wildly inclusive practices of Jesus and Paul, reaching out even and especially to people who had been rejected and victimized by the larger society. While there is no mention of Jesus' inclusion of any homosexuals in his circle, it is hard for some Christians today to imagine that the Lord who welcomed prostitutes, tax collectors and other groups of people commonly scorned as wretched sinners would then turn around and reject same-sex partners. The Lord rejected no one who came to him in faith.

It is becoming clear that there is enough ambiguity and room for doubt about homosexuality in the New

Testament that the church needs to exercise caution when issuing blanket prohibitions about it.

The PC(USA) does not condone or approve of any and all sexual behaviors between consenting adults. The removal, in 2011, of the "fidelity and chastity" language from the *Book of Order* does not imply an "anything goes" morality. Adultery and other sexual relationships characterized by lies, abuse, inequality, coercion, violence or those lacking long-term commitment, mutuality and reciprocity remain morally repugnant to virtually all Presbyterians and Christians. We have now returned to a polity in which we trust local councils, those who personally know the individuals coming for ordination, to make their own prayerful and Scripture-guided decisions. We find this preferable to enforcing a simple one-size-fits-all legal edict. (And the implication sometimes made that accepting gays and lesbians somehow opens the door to condoning practices like bestiality strikes many of us as offensive, paranoid and disturbed.)

Furthermore, does merely having a license from the state always make a sexual relationship proper and good? Does nothing immoral ever happen in marriage? Does *not* having a license from the state make a sexual relationship always *wrong*? Does God care about love, commitment, fidelity and trust? Or does God just look at the government paperwork?

We live in a time of sexual confusion and turmoil. While we respect people's right to adhere to and follow a particular standard in their own congregations, we are no longer willing to impose one standard on every session and presbytery absolutely. Rather, we trust councils to seek and rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in assessing the gifts, vocations and moral lives of those they ordain.

Does this mean that councils will ordain people of whom others don't approve? Yes. Will councils err? Certainly.

But we don't feel that errors in this area are necessarily any more egregious than others. Why are sexual sins worse than, say, financial sins (concerning which the Bible has a great deal more to say)? Why are they worse than racism and other forms of bigotry? Why list some sins explicitly in our polity, and leave others out? What about the other, certainly less ambiguous, sins listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10: idolaters, adulterers, thieves, greedy people, drunkards, revilers and robbers? Are these no longer problems in the church?

Syncretism

Some critics habitually charge us with caving to and compromising with — if not actually embracing with enthusiasm — values and practices from the prevailing culture. While the stances and commitments of the PC(USA) may have often appeared to be in harmony with some of the social movements that appeared since the 1950s, we have always responded mainly to our reading of Scripture. Indeed, some of these like the civil rights, anti-war and environmental movements explicitly reflected and expressed the values of the Lord Jesus and Holy Scripture. If we seem to habitually come down in favor of inclusion, economic and ecological justice, equality, peace and non-violence it is because we hear Jesus and the Bible advocating on behalf of the same values.

On the other hand, when some reflexively uphold and defend values more in tune with the policies and traditions of the state, big business, the military, the ruling class and other established, powerful institutions of society we wonder where such loyalties are mandated in Scripture.

The Bible begins with stories of wandering migrants, continues in an account of escaped slaves and settles into a narrative about members of a small, victimized nation. The New Testament presents us with a Messiah who is born in a barn to homeless parents, who even as an adult owned practically nothing and who reached out to all manner of poor, sick, rejected, excluded and oppressed people. The Bible usually speaks from the perspective of the poor, the alien, the disenfranchised, the victims and the weak. This is especially the case when we understand the Bible to reveal the Word of God, Jesus Christ. It is impossible to take the crucified Jesus seriously and still ignore, let alone advocate, the tyranny of the powerful over the powerless.

Therefore, when the Bible is made to support oppression, violence and injustice we feel the text is being seriously misread. We are forced to ask whether many in the church who say they uphold the Bible aren't really just supporting the values of previous supposedly more stable, orderly, prosperous and complacent generations.

Polity

While we understand ordination to be on behalf of the whole church, that does not mean that councils do not still have the right to determine their own membership. They do. This is a core principle of Presbyterian polity.

The PC(USA) does not challenge any session's right in this area. Recognizing that God calls both men and women into leadership, no session or presbytery is required to ordain or even consider for ordination anyone whom it does not deem appropriate. Under the new Form of Government, a council may even formally adopt the standards of the old Form of Government.

As far as the objection to F-1.0403 in the *Book of Order* is concerned, it should not be assumed that theological convictions are of no consequence. (It is in fact often *conservatives* who have generally been advocating for language like this as a way of ensuring their continued inclusion in denominational decision-making processes.) Then there is the final stipulation: "No member shall be denied participation or representation for any reason *other than those stated in this Constitution.*" So the reader is referred to other parts of the Constitution (which includes the *Book of Confessions* as well as the *Book of Order*), where theological convictions matter a great deal. We simply don't feel that the Form of Government is where this belongs.

Schism

Finally, we are reminded that neither Jesus nor Paul, nor even the 16th century Reformers, intended to break away from the religious communions in which they were respectively raised and nurtured, Judaism and Roman Catholicism. In their devotion to the truth, they and their followers became obnoxious to traditionalists in those communions and they were eventually systematically excluded. In the case of the Reformation, actual war was made against them. But they did not choose to separate; they were, as we say, *kicked out*.

It is therefore important, in our view, to state that *all* our congregations remain welcome and valued members of the PC(USA). We don't want *any* congregations to leave. We *value* other voices. We cherish having *different* perspectives among us, even if they do occasionally annoy the majority. The majority sometimes needs to be annoyed.

If one of our presbyteries dismisses a church to another communion, it is with our deep sadness and regret and *at that church's request*. They are choosing to *separate from us*. We are *not* kicking them out. ●

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