

## PCUSA DISCERNMENT AND THE WORTHINGTON PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

We, the majority of members of the Worthington Presbyterian Church (WPC), have become alarmed by the rapid diversion of the PCUSA from the fundamental concepts of the Christian Reformed Theology upon which our denomination was built and confirmed by the 2001 Confessing Church Movement.

Members of our congregation have asked “How did we (PCUSA) ever get to this point?” In order to fully answer this question, we need to go all the way back to the Confession and Ordination vows of 1967. *“An escape from the authority of written scripture was crafted in the Confession of 1967, adopted by the United Presbyterian Church, USA. The confession altered the doctrine of Scripture found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, substituting the Barthian position that the Bible contains prophetic and apostolic witness to revelation, but is not to be identified with revelation.”*<sup>1</sup>

The Confession and Ordination vows contain phrases such as “...The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, **are nevertheless the words of men**, and “Scripture is God’s word to **you**.” These statements opened the door for proponents of *The Confession of 1967* to choose to deal with social issues rather than matters of faith as guided by the authority of scripture.

*“The Confession of 1967 claims that the Words of Scripture are the words of men, that they reflect current views of life, and that there are a variety of such views in the Bible. Then an amazing conclusion is offered: This gives the church confidence that He will continue to speak to men in a changing world and in every form of human culture. In other words, God will continue to give revelation (called tradition by the Roman Catholic Church) by the Spirit through the Church. And this new revelation will soon be obsolete as the world and culture change!”*<sup>2</sup>

Compare the aforementioned statement with the defining truths upheld in the Westminster Confession. *“The Westminster Confession, on the other hand, maintains the credibility and authority of Scripture rests directly upon God and that our full assurance of Scripture’s infallible truth is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit.”*<sup>3</sup>

The shift to accommodate social issues is evident as the position of PCUSA on the **covenant of marriage** starts to evolve. While the GA actions to replace the Fidelity and Chastity Amendment with milder language opened the door for the ordination of non-celibate homosexual clergy; redefining marriage permitted same-sex marriage ceremonies in PCUSA churches by PCUSA clergy. In essence, both actions constitute the condoning of sexual practices outside the covenant of marriage. The covenant of marriage is established by God in the Creation narrative of the Old Testament<sup>4</sup> and affirmed by Jesus in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> WPC upholds the creation marriage covenant and maintains that being a practicing homosexual

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<sup>1</sup> Clowney, *The Church*, 105

<sup>2</sup> J. Marcellus Kik, *Two Confessions*, 7

<sup>3</sup> Kik, 7

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 2:23-25

<sup>5</sup> Matt 19:3-12

is just one of many sexual practices that fall outside of the covenant of marriage and are clearly identified in the Bible as sinful.

Rev. Dr. James R. Edwards professor of theology at Whitworth University echoes those sentiments when he writes: *“The action of the 2014 General Assembly to permit same-sex marriages by ministers of the PCUSA and to redefine marriage as a covenantal relationship between ‘two people’ rather than between a man and a woman places the PCUSA in irreconcilable conflict with both Scripture and its confessional tradition.”*<sup>6</sup>

The Church needs to uphold this truth to the secular world rather than adjust to societies view. *“The need of the secular world is greatest at the very points where its criticism of the church is most intense. . . . The church is the community of the Word, the Word that reveals the plan and purpose of God. In the church the gospel is preached, believed, obeyed. It is the pillar and ground of the truth because it holds fast the Scriptures (Phil.2:16).”*<sup>7</sup>

Many voices within the PCUSA view their change in attitude toward non-celibate homosexuals as a necessary cultural change that began in Biblical times and evolved to today. Carson says, *“But the overt appeal to think of God in line with what appears acceptable to the contemporary spirit is a strange one – as if God changes with the cultural mood.”*<sup>8</sup> Throughout the Bible, Scripture offers a clear voice against homosexual practice. Throughout Christian history, the practice of homosexuality has been universally understood to fall outside of God’s will. Edwards speaks to this saying *“I know of no doctrine or practice in Christianity that better qualifies for Vincent of Lerins’s famous definition of orthodoxy – that which has been believed and practiced ‘everywhere, always, and by all’ – than the definition of marriage as one man and one woman before God.”*<sup>9</sup>

So, how is it that PCUSA deems itself qualified to change a covenant made by God? Moreover, how does PCUSA not realize this failure to uphold the Word of God places them outside of the Reformed tradition? *“Christians, by definition, believe Christ to be God-made-man, God-in-the-flesh. His claims cannot be amended, watered down, relativized, negotiated away or nuanced into acceptability.”*<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, *“To charge that they are being stubborn and arrogant about their position, Christians reply that it is Jesus’ teachings, not theirs, that they are being stubborn about; and it is not arrogant, for they do not arrogate to themselves the power to change them. Christians simply do not have the authority to do that, because “authority” means author’s rights, and Christians are not the authors, nor even the editors, but only the mail carriers, of God’s words.”*<sup>11</sup>

A move toward pluralism may also explain our waning enthusiasm for evangelism. *“Pluralism is an affirmation of the validity of every religion, and the refusal to choose between them, and the rejection of world evangelism...”*<sup>12</sup> The year 1978 marked another change in

<sup>6</sup> James R Edwards, *Presbyterian News*

<sup>7</sup> Clowney, 16.

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 225.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards

<sup>10</sup> Kreft and Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* ,347

<sup>11</sup> Kreft and Tacelli.,348

<sup>12</sup> Orange County Register, from “Interview with John Stott”,1998-Oct 3

focus from Scripture to social issues, this time in the area of evangelism. The GA (PCUS) redefined "Missions" as "mission", a change which the PCUSA later incorporated also. Up until this time, "Missions" was the word commonly used by the church to describe its response to the Great Commission, sending evangelistic missionaries throughout the world to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and make disciples. The replacement "mission" was defined as "everything the institutional church does." How can we minimize the need for "Missions" in a world that needs to know the saving grace of Jesus Christ? *"If Christ is the only Savior and all other religions of the world deny this, then logically and necessarily all the other religions are dead wrong about this crucial point. It does not follow that non-Christians must be condemned, but that they must be told the truth, out of love for them and the truth."*<sup>13</sup> Are we denying Jesus Christ as the means for all to be saved? *"And really, when it comes down to it, what is that objection to conversion of the whole world to Christ, if not that the claims of Christ are not true? That the attempt to convert everyone to Christ is loveless and lacks compassion? It is precisely love and compassion that motivates missionaries to risk martyrdom. It is love and compassion that once converted the world and can do it again."*<sup>14</sup>

The "Missions" committee at WPC has been seeking to reestablish our role in "Missions" by sponsoring a missionary couple embedded in a Muslim community in France. In addition, we also sponsor a young woman working with CCO at Clarion University. Our committee was both surprised and dismayed to discover approximately half of the "mission" money received by the Kiskiminetas Presbytery stays in the presbytery to pay administrative expenses. It seems that the Kiskiminetas Presbytery, in accord with PCUSA, has changed its focus from that of being the greatest "Mission"-sending denomination the world had ever seen to instead, embracing their role in "mission" as social activism.

At GA 2014, the PCUSA narrowly passed a resolution calling for divestment from companies including Hewlett Packard, Caterpillar, and Motorola Solutions who were doing business in Israel. Then GA 2016 passed several resolutions aimed to pressure Israel to leave territories it has occupied since its 1967 war with neighboring states. *"For those who seek an enduring Israeli-Palestinian peace it is deeply disappointing that a major Protestant denomination in the U.S. with deep roots in the Middle East has chosen to be a cheerleader for those whose vision of peace does not include the State of Israel."*<sup>15</sup>

WPC acknowledges that *"Israel is imperfect, like all nations in this fallen world; but it ranks among the most impressive and venerable nations that this fallen world has ever produced. Christians who care about their co-religionists in the Middle East, who care about justice and who hate injustice, must keep faith with the Jewish state. To break with it would be to break with their history and some of the key moral commitments of Christianity."*<sup>16</sup> God made promises to Abram in Genesis 12: 3, *"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* Moses reminds Israel of the Promised Land in Deuteronomy 6:10. The words of Deut 20:3, 4 *"Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be faint-hearted or afraid; ... For the Lord your God is the*

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<sup>13</sup> Kreft and Tacelli, 335

<sup>14</sup> Kreft & Tacelli, 357

<sup>15</sup> Emily Soloff, American Jewish Committee

<sup>16</sup> Peter Wehner, A Christian Defense of Israel

one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.” contain assurances for Israel. Those promises, and countless more, were made to the Jewish patriarchs. But do those promises apply to the modern day nation of Israel? Luke Moon tries to put the dilemma of choosing against supporting Israel in perspective saying, *“Those Christian organizations and leaders who promote an anti-Zionist agenda must tell us precisely how a future Palestinian state would be a blessing to Palestinian Christians, Israel, and the surrounding nations. If they will not or cannot, American Evangelicals should think very hard about whether they want to give up the opportunity to be a blessing to the nation that blessed us with Jesus Christ.”*<sup>17</sup>

## Supporting Scriptures

### Authority of Scripture/God’s Will

- Psalm 119 and 160
- Proverbs 30:5-6
- Romans 12:1-2
- Galatians 1:6-7, 10
- James 4:12
- 2 Timothy 3:16
- Titus 2:11-13
- Revelation 22:18-20

### Covenant of Marriage vs. Sexual Sins

- Genesis 2:20-25
- Matthew 19:4-9
- Mark 10:6-9
- Leviticus 18:22, 29-30; 20:13
- Proverbs 6:32
- Romans 1:26-28, 32; 13:11-14
- 1 Corinthians 10:8-9; 5:1-11; 6:9-11, 18-20
- Ephesians 5:3, 5-7
- Colossians 3:5-6
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8
- 1 Timothy 1:8-11
- James 4:4
- Jude 6-7, 17-19

### Evangelism/The Great Commission

- Psalm 105:1-4
- Matthew 5:14-16; 28:16-20
- Mark 8:35; 16:15-16
- John 15:1-8
- Acts 13:47; 20:24
- Romans 10:17

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<sup>17</sup> Luke Moon, The Latest Threat to Evangelical Support for Israel

- 2 Thessalonians 2:14-15
- Titus 2:1

### **Exclusivity of Jesus/Exaltation of Jesus**

- Isaiah 45:21-23
- John 1:1, 14, 29; 3:16; 5:23-24; 8:23-24; 10:7-10; 14:6; 15:18-21
- Acts 4:8-12; 16:30-31
- Matthew 7:21-23
- Romans 10:9-10
- 2 Corinthians 5: 17-18
- Philippians 2: 9-11
- 1 Peter 1:18-19

### **Promises to Israel**

- Genesis 12:3
- Deuteronomy 6:10; 20:3-4
- Isaiah 54:5-8
- Zechariah 10:9-10
- Romans 11:25-27

### **Do Not Conform to the World**

- Romans 1:28-32
- Romans 12:1-2
- Revelation 3:15-22

These supporting scriptures are by no means an exhaustive list; rather, they are a sampling of the many available scriptures on these topics.

PCUSA as a body is not trying to be transformed by the Lord<sup>18</sup>; rather, they are conforming to the world in order to try to be inclusive and non-judgmental, perhaps in order to increase their numbers. Unfortunately, conforming results in the compromise of the Gospel and its teachings. This compromise finds PCUSA on the threshold of schism from the Reformed tradition while seeming to embrace both the sentiments of pluralism and inclusivism.

John Calvin wrote with great disdain concerning schism in the church. Because he no longer considered it as a “true” church, Calvin separated from the Roman Church: “*For the Lord nowhere recognizes any temple as his save where his Word is heard and scrupulously observed.*”<sup>19</sup> Calvin would again define the “True” church as that church built upon the Word of God with Christ ruling in the church through that Word: “*Paul reminds us that the church was founded not upon men’s judgments, not upon priesthoods, but upon the teaching of apostles and prophets... To sum up, since the church is Christ’s Kingdom, and he reigns by his Word alone, will it not be clear to any man that those are lying words by which the Kingdom of Christ is imagined to exist apart from his scepter (that is, his most holy Word).*”<sup>20</sup> WPC stands convicted by the words of Calvin and seeks to remain faithful to the “True” church. Consequently, because of this conviction, remaining a member of PCUSA becomes more difficult by the day since PCUSA chooses to depart from the proper preaching and teaching of God’s Word and to ignore Christ’s authority through the same Word.

During the opening worship service of the 2016 GA, a “Muslim partner” led the gathered Presbyterians in a prayer to Allah seeking their conversion to Islam. Later, the Assembly issued an apology if some were offended – but did not apologize for the offense itself. Shortly after GA 2016, the newly elected stated clerk of the PCUSA, J. Herbert Nelson, Jr., wrote a letter defending these actions saying we essentially worship the same God as Muslims, and obey the same commands to love the world. Closer to home, a Kiskiminetas Presbytery commissioner to GA expressed disappointment that some candidates for moderator of the next GA stated that although their personal means of salvation was Jesus Christ they acknowledged others may have another means of salvation. By conforming to society rather than transforming, PCUSA seems to be aligning itself with both pluralist and inclusivist points of view.

Some actions and opinions seem to fall within the definition of pluralism which is “*the theory that there are more than one... (kind)... of ultimate reality and/or truth – and that therefore more than one religion can be said to have the truth (way to God, salvation, etc.)*”<sup>21</sup> “*From the Christian’s perspective, the religious pluralist, however sincere, is both misguided and an idolater.*”<sup>22</sup> While other actions are better defined as inclusivism “*the view that all who are saved are saved on account of the person and work of Jesus Christ, but that conscious faith in Jesus Christ is not absolutely necessary.*”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>19</sup> Inst., 4.2.3, *Calvin Institutes of the Christian Religion*

<sup>20</sup> Inst., 4.2.4

<sup>21</sup> Anton Hein, webmaster of the *Apologetics Index* discusses religious pluralism at <http://www.gospelcom.net/>

<sup>22</sup> Kreeft & Tacelli, 238

<sup>23</sup> D. A. Carson, 278

While PCUSA embraces pluralistic and inclusivist views, the term “exclusivism” describes WPC’s belief that there is only one means to salvation and that means is Jesus Christ. *“In other words, Christian exclusivism .... is the claim that Jesus is the only objectively real Savior. So if a Jew, Hindu, pagan or atheist is saved, it is not by Judaism, Hinduism, paganism or atheism but by Christ.”*<sup>24</sup> The acceptance of the words written about Jesus in the New Testament as truth is essential to our belief in the exclusivity of Christ Jesus. *“Objectively, the New Testament insists that Christ is the only Savior: ‘There is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4:12). Jesus himself insisted: ‘I am the way....No one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6). Christians believe Jesus is the only Savior because he said so. If this is not true, he is no Savior at all, but a liar, a blasphemer, and an incredibly egotistical fool.”*<sup>25</sup>

When PCUSA conforms to the world, they compromise God’s Word and potentially take people down a dangerous road with respect to their salvation. *“The real religion of most Americans is equality; that is their absolute, self-evident value. God must be an American, an equal-opportunity employer. All religious roads, if only followed sincerely, must equally lead to God. This way of thinking is very comfortable and seems enlightened – until someone starts to think logically and ask obvious, hard questions like: Does that include Jim Jones’s road to Jonestown? Satanism? Where do you draw the line?”*<sup>26</sup> Common sense should dictate that *“If there is a real God (and if not, religion is a lie and a sham) there must be a real road that leads to him and a real road that leads away. So the immensely popular image of all roads converging at the top of the mountain is simply false. No, not simply false, disastrously false. It is a lie that costs souls. Some roads go down, not up.”*<sup>27</sup>

In 1910, the General Assembly adopted a set of five “essential and necessary” doctrines for Presbyterian ministers (Five Points): The inerrancy of the Bible; The virgin birth of Christ; Christ’s substitutionary atonement; Jesus’ bodily resurrection; and the authenticity of miracles. Unfortunately, for the most part, these tenets have been replaced by openness to the Spirit led conscience of each individual and the variant standards of presbyteries. A 1674 devotional by Jodocus van Lobenstein, an important figure in the Dutch Second Reformation, contained the statement “the church Reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God” which viewed the church as always created and renewed by the Word of God rather than the spirit of the age. However, this statement is often misrepresented today as “always reforming”. We hear this “Reformed, always reforming” mantra cited within our own presbytery as justification for adjusting their doctrine, worship and discipline in the light of ever-changing cultural contexts.

The Confessing Church Movement (CCM) in 2001 was a step toward making a clear distinction between cultural accommodation and historic Presbyterian theology. D. A. Carson addresses the need that exists within PCUSA to reevaluate its priorities concerning the importance of “reformed to the Word of God”. *“All traditions tend to wander off in time. That is*

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<sup>24</sup> Kreeft & Tacelli, 347

<sup>25</sup> Kreeft & Tacelli, 325

<sup>26</sup> Kreeft & Tacelli, 343

<sup>27</sup> Kreeft & Tacelli 318, 319

*one of the reasons why constant checking and reformation are needed. ...the Christian community must consciously seek its own reformation by conformity to the word of God, and all that means for conduct, worship, service, creed, God-centeredness, repentance, faith, and so forth.*<sup>28</sup> The CCM advocated the importance of conforming to the Word of God. The Rev. Paul Roberts, pastor of Summit Presbyterian Church in Butler, Pa., which became the first Confessing Church on March 2, said *“his congregation is not having an identity crisis. We have no problem in saying that Christ is the only way. We don’t find our identity in culture. We find our identity in the Bible. We don’t go to the Bible to correct it, to change it. We believe the Bible is a part of our identity.”*<sup>29</sup>

### **The Confessing Church Movement (CCM) aligns with three foundational truths:**

1. The Bible alone is the Word of God and our soul authority for faith and life.
2. Jesus Christ alone is the Way of salvation, the Truth of God’s Word and the Life of the Church.
3. The Holy Spirit continues to work to bring people into conformity with the will of God, toward holiness, including living with fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.

In support of and in agreement with the truths expressed by the CCM, WPC adopted its Confessing Church Statement on May 7, 2001.

#### **Worthington Presbyterian Confessing Church Statement**

- A. We confess that Jesus Christ is God’s only Son (Luke 9:35) and that he alone is Lord of all (Philippians 2:9-11)
  - We profess and believe that Jesus and God are One (John 10:30).
  - We profess and believe that salvation can only be received through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross (Romans 5:6-10).
- B. We confess that Holy Scripture is the revealed and infallible Word of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
  - We profess that the Bible is God’s Word to us for faith and practice.
  - We Profess that all parts of the Bible, in their original form, are “inspired by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:3-16).
- C. We confess that God’s people are called to Holiness in all aspects of life.
  - We profess that the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman is to be honored as God’s unique gift in creation (Genesis 2:24).
  - We call on all people, including ourselves, to repent of sinful ways and receive Jesus’ forgiveness (I John 1:6).

#### **Worthington Presbyterian Vision Statement**

- A. In keeping with the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20), the WPC seeks to be a dynamic Christian community centered in the worship of the triune God and bearing witness to the Gospel of Jesus, our Lord.
- B. As Jesus’ disciples we strive to build vibrant lives, strong families, and a fellowship in which church members care for and love one another and together seek the well-being of our community.

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<sup>28</sup> Carson, 127

<sup>29</sup> The Confessing Church Movement in the PCUSA, Banner of Truth

- C. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we seek to develop a vital teaching and preaching ministry aimed at drawing people to Jesus, healing, comforting and nurturing them in the faith, equipping them for service and effective Christian living in all walks of life.

*“It is neither the design nor purpose of the Confessing Church Movement to cause schism. It is the design and purpose to bring about reconciliation of the whole PCUSA with God Almighty, Christ Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Scripture, its Confessions of Faith, and one another.”<sup>30</sup>* This is the movement that WPC aligned itself with sixteen years ago, a movement advocating the return of PCUSA to its Reformed values. While we remain true to those Reformed values today, it is difficult to find those values within PCUSA today. Many of the original confessing churches have sought to find peace within other Reformed denominations, acknowledging they lost the fight to unite the PCUSA in conformity to the Word of God.

We understand the argument that the WPC should stay in the PCUSA and continue to argue our opinions vigorously and hope that the liberal decisions made over the last several years, will be reversed. However, we know that as other conservative churches leave the PCUSA, our ongoing arguments will remain a minority opinion.

Therefore, with sadness, we the members of the Worthington Presbyterian Church request “Gracious Dismissal” from the Presbyterian Church (USA) Denomination.

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<sup>30</sup> Reformed Quarterly, Volume 22, Number 1-2