

Town Hall Meeting-June 15, 2011

“How We Got To Here”

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A few weeks ago, you received a letter announcing the passage of Amendment 10-A in our Constitution, removing explicit language that listed “fidelity in marriage [or] chastity in singleness” as the biblical standard for ordained officers of the Presbyterian Church (USA). In response to this, your Session announced the formation of a Denominational Concerns Task Force charged with considering all options for our congregation going forward, including the possibility of seeking disaffiliation from the PC (USA).

Some of you might have found this action surprising; a sudden and drastic response to a recent event. Actually, you should know that the Chapel Hill session has been dealing with this and similar denominational issues for at least 17 years. It is a long story, and this is my attempt to bring you up to speed on “how we got to here.”

I want to start by saying that we should be proud of our long Presbyterian heritage. Devout Scottish immigrants were among the earliest settlers of the New Land, and the first presbytery was established in 1706 in Philadelphia. John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian, was the only active clergyman who signed the Declaration of Independence. He was later called to serve as the president of Princeton which was formed as a Christian institution for the purpose of training Presbyterian clergy.

For 250 years, Presbyterianism has been a dominant force in American culture. We have planted thousands of churches, established scores of colleges and seminaries and hundreds of hospitals. We became one of the greatest mission-sending denominations in history of our country. On my trip to Korea in the 1990s, I had the chance to visit Presbyterian churches with memberships numbering in the tens of thousands. I finally asked one of the pastors, “Where did you learn how to do this?” His response? “Your missionaries.”

But in the mid-1900s, two seemingly incongruous forces came together that brought significant change to our denomination. First, we adopted a corporate paradigm, a top-down leadership structure modeled after the prevailing business culture. In this model, congregations seemed to serve the denomination instead of the other way around. Upper levels of leadership within the denomination gained increasing power.

Then came the cultural revolution of the 1960s. It was a season of rebellion and rejection of authority. This mood swept through the church, too. Seminaries and seminarians changed, moving further away from orthodox faith. A growing number of faculty rejected the supernatural, e.g., the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the bodily resurrection and the atonement. Mirroring the culture, there was increasing focus on social justice – which was helpful in many ways. The causes of women’s and civil rights were advanced within the church community but often at the expense of historical orthodoxy.

One casualty of this theological swing was evangelism. Evangelism was perceived as “imperialistic.” It was considered cultural chauvinism to tell someone with black or yellow skin “they need Jesus.” Mission became more about justice and compassion: drilling wells, building schools and hospitals, etc. And it was increasingly LESS about evangelism. And here at home, “evangelism” became an embarrassment, especially in upper leadership circles.

During this time, General Assemblies often took actions that were out of step with the broader church.

One infamous example was the decision to provide money for the defense fund of Angela Davis, a communist activist accused of conspiracy in the kidnap and murder of a judge in the early '70s. For years, “Angela Davis” was a watchword among conservative Presbyterians for radical social activism within the denomination.

This was the beginning of 40 years of leftward political involvement such as:

- Support of Marxist rebels in Latin America;
- Support for Castro in Cuba;
- Calls for various boycotts against corporations such as Nestle, Taco Bell, (in opposition to their use of non-union farm-workers for harvesting tomatoes) and Caterpillar (in protest of their presence in Israel);
- Uncritical support of Palestinian causes and unilateral opposition to Israel;

--An unwavering pro-choice position regarding abortion – including, in 2002, even support for partial-birth abortion. (Thankfully, this extreme position was reversed in 2006.)

In short, the PC (USA) became heavily involved in social and political issues in a way that usually represented only one end of the church's broad political spectrum.

What was even more disturbing, however, was the theological shift during that same period. The adoption of the **Confession of '67** was viewed as triumph for those seeking to move the church away from its orthodox roots. It was, at the time, a controversial and divisive document. It was viewed by many to be weak in its Christology and in its views of Scripture. Interestingly, 1967 was the last year our denomination grew. Since then, it has lost half of its membership.

And the theological shift continued. Here are a few examples:

--In 1981, our highest church court, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, upheld the ordination of Mansfield Kaseman. When Kaseman was asked, "Was Jesus God?" he responded, "No, God is God." Later he explained, "Saying Jesus is one with God is a better way of saying it ... but I, too, am one with God."

-In 1993, a conference entitled "**Reimagining God**" was held, largely funded and planned by PC (USA) personnel at denominational expense. Conference leaders denied the existence of a transcendent God (i.e., who exists outside of our material world) and ridiculed the crucifixion of Jesus: "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff." Worship leaders offered prayers to the goddess Sophia and replaced communion with a honey and milk ceremony.

-The 2001 General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky, spent a great deal of time considering controversial proposals regarding interfaith relations and worship. Finally, one commissioner offered a motion that the Assembly declare "**the singular, saving lordship of Jesus Christ.**" It was defeated, being characterized by its opponents as "disrespectful to other religions." One speaker said: "Religions are like a basket of fruit. Apples and oranges are different, but they are all fruit. Religions are different varieties of the same thing, so they're all equal."

These are a few examples drawn from many others over the last decades. They indicate a significant and persistent shift in views on Christology, soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), scriptural authority and a growth of universalism (the belief that all people will be saved) and syncretism (the melding of many faiths into one.)

Even ordination vows which officers are required to take reveal these theological struggles.

For instance, we take one vow regarding the Bible: "Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you." Note the last four words of the vow: "God's Word to you." This reflects an unwillingness to declare that the Bible is "God's Word." It might be God's Word to me, but it is not God's Word, *per se*.

Or consider this vow: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith?" The problem is that the "essential tenets" of the Reformed faith have never been enumerated. The denomination has never been willing to declare that ANY theological tenet, such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, for example, is non-negotiable and that those who cannot affirm such a tenet are thereby excluded from ordination to the offices of our church.

But the most prominent and recurrent example of the drift away from scriptural authority has been in ordination standards.

In 1978 the GA declared that "unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with requirements for ordination." The 1993 GA reaffirmed this position. In 1996, explicit language was added to section G.60106.b in the Book of Order to clarify this matter.

"Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. (G-6.0106.b).

"G-6," as it came to be called, was ratified by the presbyteries. (This is the way that we make changes in the constitution. A General Assembly proposes

changes, but those amendments must then be ratified by a majority of the presbyteries in the subsequent year in order to become church law.)

Almost immediately, G-6 came under attack. In 1997, the GA reversed course, changing the language to 'fidelity and integrity.'" These proposed revisions, however, were defeated by the presbyteries.

In 2001, the GA voted to delete G-6 entirely. That, too, was defeated at the presbytery level.

In 2006, after five years of work, a team called the "Peace, Unity and Purity" task force brought a proposal to the General Assembly. It said that G-6 should remain but that it could, essentially, be ignored by individual presbyteries, effectively introducing what came to be known as "local option." This idea that each presbytery could decide on ordination standards struck a grievous blow to the connectional nature of Presbyterian polity.

In 2008, yet another GA voted to delete G-6. Again, it was defeated by the presbyteries. But by other actions of that same GA, all preceding judicial rulings on the matter were declared null and void. In other words, the action of one General Assembly undid thirty years of church judicial process and rulings.

In 2010, the opponents of G-6 convinced the GA to replace G-6 with new language and, after four attempts, the presbyteries finally ratified this action. The "fidelity-chastity" language was removed from our Constitution. Incidentally, there was also an attempt in the 2010 GA to re-define marriage as being between two "persons," but that was rejected.

Millions of dollars and thousands of hours have been spent on this issue over the last 30 years. It is about sex ... yes ... but beneath that, it is about the authority of Scripture. What does it say? How is it to be interpreted? It is worth noting that, although most attention has been focused on gay and lesbian relationships, G-6 dealt with ALL sexual behavior outside of marriage between one man and one woman, including adultery and pre-marital sex. Conceivably, then, an unrepentant adulterer or a person living with a girlfriend or boyfriend could apply to be considered by a presbytery, and that behavior would not necessarily disqualify them from ordination.

It is also worth noting that the Olympia Presbytery, our presbytery, our regional body that includes 50 churches, has always voted to uphold G-6 by a consistent

two-thirds to one-third ratio. We have been blessed to be a part of a supportive and gracious presbytery. In many ways, it has shielded us from much of what is happening in our larger denomination.

So, in many essential ways, the PC (USA) has drifted from its historical theology and biblical moorings over last 40 years. But all of this may come as a surprise to you. You might say that you were unaware of all of this. Uninformed, perhaps. Why? Well, actually, we **have** spoken about these matters periodically over the years of my ministry here to keep the congregation aware of what was going on. But your Session felt that this was largely a distraction to our mission. It was not the most important thing, and we didn't want it to dominate our life, our thoughts, our efforts as a congregation. (By the way, this is STILL not the most important thing. It IS important ... but won't define us.)

BUT – your session and pastors have been VERY involved in these matters for at least 17 years, working for the reform and transformation of our denomination.

--In 1994, we offered an overture condemning the "Reimagining God" conference as heretical and calling upon our denominational leaders to discipline those who were responsible. This overture was passed by our presbytery. We also withheld our per capita payments to the denomination in protest (along with hundreds of other churches across the country), and I was sent to testify before a committee at GA on our overture. Subsequently, all of the staff members responsible for "Reimagining" were fired.

--In 1998, your Session approved your pastor to serve on a team sponsored by the renewal group, the Presbyterian Coalition, which was tasked with writing a church-wide strategy for renewal and a brand new, orthodox statement of faith. This confession, called "Union in Christ," was adopted by the Coalition, but it was essentially ignored by denomination. I was also invited to serve as a board member of the Presbyterian Coalition. (In fact, if you look carefully at the Coalition's website, you will notice that their cross is actually the Chapel Hill cross!)

--In 2001, your Session signed on to the Confessing Church Movement within the PC (USA) and sent representatives to the national conference of that movement. All "Confessing Churches" affirmed the Lordship of Christ, the authority of scripture and a call to a life of holiness, including our sexual behavior.

--In 2006, after the PUP report came back, the Olympia Presbytery declared that it would apply G-6 standards to ALL ordination candidates, regardless of the intent of PUP. Charges were brought against the presbytery questioning the constitutionality of our action. I was selected by the Presbytery as the clergy member of a three-person defense team to argue this case. We won the matter at the Synod level but, after a year-long legal battle, we were ultimately defeated at the GA Permanent Judicial Commission level.

--Also, following PUP, your Session entered into study of our denomination. It expressed significant concern about the likely direction of the PC (USA) and voted to withhold the GA portion of per capita in protest over the non-biblical direction of the national assembly. Although we chose to remain in the denomination, we also declared that we would watch carefully for a "trigger point" that might indicate it was time for us to disaffiliate.

--In 2011, the overturn of G-6 was identified as that trigger point. The Session appointed the Denominational Concerns Task Force and entered into dialogue with approximately 18 other concerned churches and presbytery leadership.

In short, over the last two decades, Chapel Hill has devoted thousands of hours and tens of thousands of dollars working for the renewal and transformation of the PC (USA). We did not just throw up our hands and quit.

But after hearing all this, some here might say: **Why DIDN'T we leave before now?** There are several reasons:

--Many good things were happening in spite of the drama. Many great churches, great ministries, lots of faithful mission work, disaster relief, Whitworth ... many wonderful relationships and a shared heritage;

--As I stated earlier, we are in a good presbytery;

--Although it was frustrating, reform seemed possible. We considered that it was still worth working for.

But we now believe we have reached a tipping point. And speaking personally, I have lost hope that we can bring about the renewal we have worked and prayed so hard for. Why? What is different now?

--Up until now, despite the actions of General Assemblies, we could still point to our Constitution and say, "Look at G-6. This is what we believe." Now, for the first time, our Constitution has been changed. Fidelity-chastity language has been deleted, and not only is it unlikely to be restored, the decline is likely to continue.

--Also, hundreds of evangelical churches have left or are considering leaving. This might be one reason why G-6 was defeated for the first time. We are losing our voice, and it will likely worsen.

So, this is not a sudden, knee-jerk reaction. It is actually the final straw following nearly 20 years of intentional, hard work by your church's leadership for reform and renewal within the PC (USA).

What are our options?

--Remain, continue to work for reform through the political processes. Perhaps as a prophetic, minority voice as the denomination continues to change. We can continue the political battle: submitting more overtures and continuing the work for reform, which will become increasingly challenging as more and more congregations depart. The consequences of this choice? It will not be peace. For many, we have already gone too far. Some are withholding their contributions in protest, and many faithful supporters have declared their unwillingness to support any debt reduction campaign.

--One proposal is something called geographical presbyteries. Essentially, this would mean dividing the denomination into two groups: those who uphold biblical standards and those who do not. But this would require years to accomplish, and only IF approved by the General Assembly. That is too long for us.

--Defect in place. Remain in the PC (USA) but ignore the issues and politics; becoming functional Congregationalists.

--Or we could request to be dismissed to another Reformed body. (Incidentally, that is the only option available if we choose disaffiliation. Constitutionally, no church can be dismissed to independence).

As you can see, there is easy choice. But we did not choose this battle. It has been forced upon us by the actions of our General Assembly. And we don't have

the luxury of ignoring it. Unfortunately, whatever action we take ... or if we choose to do nothing ... there will be people who are unhappy with our decision.

Ultimately, the Session will make a decision. NO decision has been made at this time. Just to be clear: We have not even requested to officially enter into a process of discernment. And we are not asking anyone to make decisions tonight. The DCT is studying this matter carefully and will make recommendations to the Session. We are also continuing in conversations with 18 other churches in our presbytery. And we are exploring our options of where we might go if we were dismissed. We will also host further Town Hall meetings as well as conversations with interested individuals and smaller groups. And we will develop a library of resources so that the entire congregation may be fully informed.

Whatever we do going forward, we will be governed by the principles of grace, truth and transparency. Our prayer is that this entire process will bring honor to Christ.