

The Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace

The Office of Theology and Worship

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is confronted by critical assessments of its faith, order, and mission. These challenges come from persons and congregations charging the church with a variety of offenses that some contend are so serious they may even warrant separation from the body. The Office of Theology and Worship has prepared a brief resource, “The Church’s One Foundation is Jesus Christ Her Lord,” designed to respond to specific charges.¹ “The Church’s One Foundation” acknowledges that the PC(USA) is imperfect and that critique of the church must be taken seriously, but it also demonstrates that charges of departure from essential tenets of Christian faith misrepresent the confessional and ecclesiastical policies of the church.

“The Church’s One Foundation” also acknowledges that the church’s defined positions cannot guarantee that all PC(USA) members and ordained officers affirm the church’s teaching and observe its polity. There is a gap between any denomination’s (or congregation’s) official positions and the views and practices of some ministers and members. The General Assembly and all its entities are bound by official positions of the church, and all ministers, elders, and deacons make vows concerning Scripture, the confessions, and the church’s polity. Even so, it is inevitable that the beliefs and actions of some persons and congregations will not be in accord with the church’s stated convictions.

The church’s critics recognize that gaps may develop between a church’s policy and individual views and practices. However, they assert that the PC(USA) ’s theological and ecclesiastical norms are meaningless if persons can depart from them with impunity. They contend that a church that permits serious breaches of biblical, confessional, or ecclesiastical standards rather than urge their reception and discipline offenders, is not worthy of full confidence. This charge deserves thoughtful consideration. The issue gets to the heart of what it means to be a denomination.

Who Are We?

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a finite, limited creature of God. Life together in service to God requires frank acknowledgement of the inherent limitation and vulnerability of the church in all its expressions, from the congregation to the church catholic. Our finitude is not bad news, but a reminder that the PC(USA) is like the rest of God’s good creation: creaturely, and therefore limited, yet shaped with the capacity to shine with God’s glory.

Creaturely finitude and limitation imply boundaries. Every healthy living thing has a coherence marked by the presence of boundaries – an ability to recognize what is part of it, and what is not; an ability to fight that which would destroy its life and fragment its coherence; an ability to make use of elements that feed it; an ability to adapt to changing conditions and incorporate new learning.

At its best, the PC(USA) has understood this reality. For example, our Full Communion Agreement with the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recognizes that we are not identical to the other churches, and that we have not become an entirely new thing by our communion with them. The four denominations continue to function as distinct denominational bodies – each a finite, limited creature of God. At the same time, the Full Communion Agreement creates a way to deal with the boundaries that mark off each denomination, fashioning means by which the boundaries will no longer be impregnable walls between us. It sets out ways in which walls can become porous without dissolving the boundaries that distinguish the four denominations.

But we are not always at our best. At times we make boundaries into barriers, and we sometimes blur or even erase boundaries. The PC(USA) is now in the midst of grappling with questions about what makes it distinct as a creaturely thing. What is the evident coherence that will provide us healthier life as a denomination? What is the vibrant core that will enable us to recognize boundary zones and to discern what lies beyond the boundaries of our denomination? What will serve the health of this organism, and what will destroy its coherence and thus its life? What is adaptation and what is deformation?

The issue is identity. What makes us who we are? Is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a single, coherent denomination? Or have we become multiple denominations under a single label? How do we name what makes us a robust living thing? The answers are not simple. Just as each human being is composed of a complex mix of identifiers, so it is with a denomination. Yet we all recognize that mature, healthy people – and churches – integrate complexities within a coherent whole.

Help From Our Tradition?

At this time in the life of the PC(USA), questions of core identity and boundaries are especially complex. Our life together is characterized by contention among numerous antagonistic elements within the church. For this reason, it may be that theological exploration of central issues can be aided by attention to a voice that speaks from outside our present ecclesial disputes. John Calvin lived in sixteenth century Europe, not twenty-first century North America. While he understood factionalism within the church, he did not envision (and would have been appalled by) the plethora of denominations in America and the ease with which people move among them. Yet he grappled with ways of understanding the church's identity, wrestled with issues of the church's unity and purity, and struggled against the prospect of the church's fragmentation. Calvin is not a privileged authority, whose words are to be accepted unquestioningly. However, we can listen to his words as the wise counsel of our forbear in the Reformed tradition, whose thinking about Christian faith and life has shaped our church.

It is well known that Calvin set forth two marks by which the faithful church can be discerned: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the

sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists" (*Institutes*, 4.1.9.). So central were these marks to Calvin that he refused to reject any church that retains them, "even if it otherwise swarms with many faults" (4.1.12.). Since Calvin was a realist, he understood that "some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments." He then went on to say that "this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all." What are these necessary doctrines? Calvin is both specific and vague: "Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like" (4.1.12). Are three affirmations followed by an *et cetera* sufficient to define the church's cohesive core?

Current disputes within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) center on the contention that the church has abandoned "essential tenets" of Christian faith and practice. Critics interpret actions of the General Assembly on one recommendation of the "Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church"² and sections on language in "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing"³ as evidence that the PC(USA) has departed from Christian orthodoxy in theology and morality. This critique fails to acknowledge the General Assembly's amendments to the PUP report, its refusal to approve the Trinity report, and Theology and Worship's acknowledgement of imprecise formulations in "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing," as well as the maintenance of orthodox Christian positions in *The Book of Confessions* and the recent theological statement on Christology, "Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ."⁴ However, critics' blanket charges of "apostasy" are dependent less on specific flaws than on a sense that the PC(USA) fails to encourage theological consistency in its members and expect it in its officers.

While Calvin is clear that "we should agree on all points," he goes on to say that, "since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation" (4.1.12.). The question, then, is how the PC(USA) can encourage and expect what is often called "generous orthodoxy." It is necessary to preserve the truth of the gospel; it is also necessary to speak the truth in love so that we may grow into Christ (Eph. 4:15-16). John Calvin was committed to theological precision, but because building up the body is central to Christian faith and life, Calvin had little patience with those, who, "imbued with a false conviction of their own perfect sanctity, as if they had already become a sort of airy spirits, spurned association with all men in whom they discern any remnant of human nature" (4.1.13.).

There is no doubt that some Presbyterian ministers, elders, deacons, and members depart from the church's considered positions, embedded in *The Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*. There is also no doubt that the church's exercise of theological and moral discipline has been eroded by the diminution of sessions, presbyteries, and general assemblies as loci of ecclesial theological discourse. Nevertheless, cavalier charges of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) apostasy are unwarranted, and lacking in Christian charity.

Presbyterians may differ on significant issues of faith and practice, but most are well within the generous orthodoxy that has always characterized the church.

Again, Calvin may be helpful. He was acutely aware of the limitations of human judgment. Although he was convinced that the Lord has given us marks of the faithful church, he was also convinced that God has accommodated himself to our limited capacity. Since assessment of the faith of others is not possible, God “substituted for it a certain charitable judgment whereby we recognize as members of the church those who, by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us” (4.1.8.). Are there some persons within the PC(USA) who, even with this generous assessment, do not profess the same God and Christ? Undoubtedly. But to acknowledge this is not to condemn an entire church of 2.3 million members. Calvin, as realistic as he is orthodox, reminds us that, “if we are not willing to admit a church unless it be perfect in every respect, we leave no church at all” (4.1.17.).

Church Discipline?

The Scots Confession adds a third mark of the church to Calvin’s marks of word and sacrament: “ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nurtured” (*Book of Confessions*, 3.18). “Discipline” is not necessarily a positive word in our culture, and “church discipline” conjures images of heresy trials and moral inquisitions. When we think of church discipline within the PC(USA) we imagine dramatic, nationally known cases that correct offenses and set definitive precedent. But while such extraordinary cases have always been a part of church discipline, Reformed Christians begin at the other end of the spectrum: ordinary discipline in congregations and presbyteries.⁵ Ordinary discipline is not simple, however. The reformer Martin Bucer noted that discipline is best exercised among friends, but personal discipline is far more difficult than judgment at a distance.

Discipline begins in worship. Confident in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we have the courage to confess our own sins and the grace to extend to each other the forgiveness that Christ extends to us. This baptismal rhythm is the heart of church discipline: we are forgiven sinners who need a community of faithful people to help us be faithful. Worshiping communities, rather than legislative bodies or courts of law, are the foundation of Christian discipline (note Mt. 5:21-24).

Church discipline, rightly exercised, is more about mundane issues than dramatic ones. Furthermore, it is only as church discipline in congregations and presbyteries concerns “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness and carousing,” that it can address “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery,” (Gal. 5:19-21). As appropriate discipline in congregations and presbyteries concerns itself with those who are “lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, and abusive” (2 Tim 3:2-3) it will then become competent to concern itself with “people who will not put up with sound doctrine . . . and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths” (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

The scarcity of consistent church discipline at all levels of the church's life is not an excuse for the absence of discipline at any one level of the church's life. But the recovery of appropriate church discipline at one level of the church's life depends upon its recovery at all levels of the church's life.

It is a sad irony of the church's present difficulty that the recovery of a noticeable form of discipline is one intention of the General Assembly's action on the report of the Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. Among the situations in which discipline is notably lax is examination for ordination and/or installation as elder, deacon, or minister of the Word and Sacrament. The Assembly's action seeks to recover the responsibility of sessions and presbyteries to ensure that persons meet the standards of Scripture and our church's constitution (*The Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*). Focusing on the neglected provisions of G-6.0108, the Assembly made it clear that ordaining bodies have an affirmative obligation to determine whether a candidate has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards. Lest the point be missed, the Assembly amended the Task Force recommendation to make explicit that both examinations and ordination/installation decisions must comply with the church's constitution.

The church's critics contend that the action of the General Assembly creates the possibility that self-professed, practicing gay and lesbian persons might be ordained by some sessions and presbyteries. Others contend that the Assembly's amendments make this less likely. The issue will probably be determined by the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission, but lost in the furor is the Assembly's intention to recover ecclesial discipline in the ordered ministries of the church.

It is worth noting that "The Rules of Discipline" in the PC(USA) *Book of Order* declares that, "The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing. It should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath so that the Great Ends of the Church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ" (D-1.0102).

Church discipline "rightly ministered" is a sensitive combination of teaching, standards, accountability, pastoral care, and prayer, all for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. The PC(USA) must recover the practice of church discipline by sessions, presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies so that the whole church will be better able to join in the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind, the shelter nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God, the maintenance of divine worship, the preservation of the truth, the promotion of social righteousness, and the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

Leaving the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

Individuals switch from one congregation to another for a variety of reasons – relocation, desire for better children’s and youth programming, unhappiness with worship style, personality conflicts, new friendships, theological differences, a change in ministers, and numerous other motives, both significant and minor. Many of these switches entail a change in denomination as well as congregation. Individual moves from congregation to congregation are frequently difficult, sometimes necessary, and occasionally painful. We do not think of these individual decisions as “church splits,” however, and we would certainly not refer to them as “schism.”

The issue is different when congregations move from one denomination to another. Although we live in an ecclesial culture marked by an excess of denominations and associations, Presbyterians have always understood that our denomination is not simply an organizational convenience with which congregations voluntarily associate. In agreement with the genius of the Reformed tradition, we believe that Presbyterian congregations are bound to one another in deep patterns of mutual responsibility and accountability. Congregations are linked by a covenant that is decades, sometimes centuries old, embracing prior generations of faithful men and women.

A congregation that leaves the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) leaves more than an ecclesiastical abstraction. It departs from a web of relationships that have been part of its life and the life of its forbears. It leaves partners in ministry within the presbytery, mission workers throughout the United States and around the world, sisters and brothers in Presbyterian and Reformed partner churches on every continent. It leaves friends with whom it has deep harmony in matters of Christian faith and life as well as those with whom it disagrees. It leaves those who may need its witness as well as those who live out a nearly identical witness. Congregational departure from a denomination is less like resigning membership in an organization, more like a divorce.

There are times when divorce, however tragic, is unavoidable. Similarly, there are times when church splits are inevitable. Neither is a routine matter, however, and neither should be undertaken out of simple preference or choice. The possibility of leaving a denomination, even one that is perceived to be deeply flawed in crucial matters of faith and life, is a profoundly theological matter that requires sustained theological thinking both by those who may leave and those who stay. Appeals to pragmatic considerations – either for departing or remaining – are not worthy of our common calling within the body of Christ.

Once again, John Calvin may inform our theological consideration of the current state of the PC(USA) and the possibility of withdrawing from the denomination. In a striking section of the Institutes, Calvin looks to the example of the Old Testament prophets, noting their harsh judgment of Israel’s infidelities. “Still,” Calvin says, “the prophets did not because of this establish new churches for themselves, or erect new altars on which to perform separate sacrifices.” From the example of the prophets’ continuing witness, Calvin concludes that, “if the holy prophets had scruples against separating themselves from the church because of many great misdeeds, not of one man or another but of almost all the people, we claim too much for ourselves if we dare

withdraw at once from the communion of the church just because the morals of all do not meet our standard or even square with the profession of Christian faith” (4.1.18.).

Every Effort to Maintain the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace

Ephesians 4:1-16 is a remarkable passage, setting forth the gospel’s call for the unity of the body of Christ. The apostle begs the community to lead a life worthy of the calling to which it has been called. This worthy life is characterized by “bearing with one another in love” and “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”⁶ This plea for the unity of the Christian community is addressed to a real body of believers; it is not an idealistic discourse about an invisible church. The real unity of the real church is a necessity born of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Like a solemn drumbeat, the apostle makes clear the establishment of the church’s unity: “There is *one* body and *one* Spirit, just as you were called to the *one* hope of your calling, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of *all*, who is above *all* and through *all* and in *all*.” The unity of the gospel embraces the whole community of faith, and the *one* church is called to *maintain* its unity. Ecumenical discussions often refer to church unity as both gift and calling. While this is an appropriate expression in the context of already divided churches, Ephesians proclaims that within an existing body of believers – congregation or denomination – unity in faith, unity in hope, and unity in love is God’s gift to be *preserved*.

Unity is not uniformity, of course, but the apostle states clearly that diverse gifts are given to build up the one body of Christ, equipping the Christian community for its work of ministry. We are to receive Christ’s gifts and fulfill our ministries “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the full stature of Christ.” Unity in faith and life protects the finite, limited church as it grows “in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”

May it be so among us.

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¹ www.pcusa.org/mgbconnect/pubs/wineskins-letter-brief.pdf

² www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/finalreport.htm

³ www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/issues/trinityfinal.pdf

⁴ www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/christology/hopeinlord

⁵ www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/issues/discipline.pdf

⁶ www.pcusa.org/oga/perspectives/feb07/bearing.htm