

ARE WE DEATHLY ILL?

GOVERNANCE IN A TIME OF FERMENT

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History and Context

Of course, there is dissent in today's church based upon conflicting interpretations of what the gospel means and what is required of us as followers of the Christ. Every Presbyterian has robustly sung "The Church's One Foundation" acknowledging the reality that the elect from every nation are rent asunder despite Jesus Christ her Lord being the foundation of the church.

Dissent has been among the followers of Jesus from the very beginning. James and John envisioned Jesus ruling over the people as a king; Judas expected a different salvation; Peter and others in Jerusalem accepted that God was calling the gentiles into the church, but it was only Paul who continued to evangelize the Greco-Roman world; European crusaders slaughtered the descendants of Palestinian Christians; the Eastern and Western churches split apart and then there was the Reformation leading to the establishment of denominations; charismatic and Pentecostal renewals brought new expressions to the forefront; and third world Christianity grew exponentially bringing even greater cultural diversity into our midst. Every one of these transformative processes was marked by dissent and, yes, schism. **The church has always been a fragile craft as the gospel's streaming love of God flows through history.**

Nor is disagreement in our denomination new – as the Synods of Philadelphia and New York united in 1758 they included provision for dissent and mutual forbearance in such times¹.

Since then each new presenting, divisive issue – confessional standards, essential tenets, the education of clergy, the dismantling of the vestiges of slavery and segregation, the role of the church in society, civil rights, divorced men as ordained officers, the inclusion of women in ordained offices, and most recently human sexuality – has been bolstered by a rehashing of the same debates regarding biblical authority, Christology, the extent of salvation, the nature of our confessional documents, and what is an essential tenet. Time and time again the General Assemblies of the church have listened patiently, considered overtures and appointed committees to counsel with those holding minority views. Time after time General Assemblies have dismissed particular analyses of the presenting issues, refuted a biblical interpretation, or rejected an interpretation of Reformed theology or polity. Usually a consensus emerges and our corporate life is reaffirmed. More recently, however, rather than submitting to the judgments of the church or continuing to reason and remonstrate, those holding minority views have established parallel para-church systems, diverted their funding and leadership to affinity groups or entities outside the structures of the denomination, and at times fermented schism.

¹ "That when any matter is determined by a majority vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peacefully withdraw from our communion without making any attempt to make any schism. Provided always that this shall be understood to extend only to such determination as the body shall judge indispensable in doctrine or Presbyterian government." (G-6.0108b)

Both predecessor denominations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) experienced **schism**² shortly before their 1983 reunion. *But even after these schisms people holding thought patterns similar to those who left remain in the denomination.* Perhaps they are members who had been taught by the schismatics; perhaps they are people who entered our membership and leadership unaware of the positions the denomination has taken over the centuries; perhaps their seminaries and congregations failed to teach them our Reformed beliefs and polity; perhaps they have never engaged in a deliberative process based upon mutual forbearance during times of discernment, as the way we live in the midst of our diversity as believers; perhaps they seek to control the denomination and impose their beliefs on others; or perhaps their values, beliefs, and attitudes have always been more compatible with other expressions of the Christian faith.

Most recently our differences have manifested themselves in the ongoing debates about **ordination standards and the inclusion of GLBT persons** in the church, with the continuing undercurrents of the church's relationship to society, Christology, sexuality, and of course biblical authority. Every encounter has come down to disagreement regarding biblical interpretation, the nature of our confessional documents, and the very heart of the gospel. The application of the principles enunciated by the *Task Force on the Peace, Purity, and Unity of the Church* are only now gradually working their way through the corporate life of the church.

Within the past several years some of the more strident voices and leaders continuing to carry these agendas from the perspective of the Presbyterian Coalition and the New Wineskins Movement have left for the EPC, which conveniently has allowed the formation of a transitional New Wineskins nongeographical presbytery and declared that the ordination of women does not represent an essential tenet of the faith. Anecdotal word is that the EPC has not been a satisfactory alternative for some of these leaders and congregations. Those that still remain in the denomination seem to have little energy for pursuing dismissal to another church and even less for the creation of a new denomination. They also seem somewhat naïve, or perhaps just disingenuous, about the current structures of the church and the complexity their proposed changes to our corporate life imply for our mission and Reformed polity.

Their choices seem limited, unless they can find some way of symbolically separating themselves from the denomination as a whole. Consequently, a contingent of “evangelical” leaders still in the denomination proposed the creation of a non-geographical synod and new presbyteries to the 2010 General Assembly. It was not approved. Their vision was one whereby they would be free to disavow or exempt themselves from *Constitutional* provisions, judicial processes and denominational positions with which they disagree. Yet they also sought the right to vote on those provisions and positions in the more inclusive governing bodies and to use the judicial system to seek to impose their interpretations on others.

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In 1973 what became the *Presbyterian Church in America* (PCA) separated from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) based upon assertions that the PCUS had denied the deity of Jesus and the inerrancy and authority of scripture. In response the schismatics declared their intention to uphold the “traditional role of women in the church and the Westminster standards” in the face of liberal trends favoring the inclusion of women in leadership and the emerging Declaration of Faith and the creation of a Book of Confessions. In 1981 the *Evangelical Presbyterian Church* (EPC) was formed as a more moderate alternative to the PCA. Their issues were the liberalization of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA), the perceived need to define the essential tenets of the faith (in the face of mandatory inclusion of women and ongoing debate about the place of GLBT persons in the church), upholding the Westminster standards and the optional ordination of women.

The desire to be separate yet remain in the denomination continues as evidenced by the release in early February, 2011 by several unhappy Presbyterian pastors of large “evangelical” congregations of what has come to be known as the “Deathly Ill Letter” seeking a parallel governance system based on theological affinity. The intent seems to be able to say: “We are Presbyterian, but not like the ones you read about in the press.” Numerous other models are being developed and floated in various arenas. Some are variations of the proposal that was defeated by the last GA. Some propose the formation of ecumenical congregations belonging to the PC (USA) and another more favorable communion such as the EPC – ignoring the requirement that such congregations are obligated to follow the polity of both denominations and to adhere to the most mandatory provision when there is a conflict between the polities. Others go so far as to propose two separate Synods (progressive and evangelical) that would share the services of the various General Assembly agencies but presumably would run parallel governance systems³ with diverging Constitutional documents. **These proposals border upon asking the denomination to grant a scruple to several of the vows members and ordained officers of the church are required to affirm.** That is not possible.

There is no reason to acquiesce to or support any of these proposals.

Their implications for the governance of the church are profound, and it would be missionally destructive to subject the denomination to another round of imposed structural change. We should not underestimate the disruption that would be caused by allowing the formation of a parallel governance system – every congregation would be faced with the potential of divisive debate and internal schism, congregations remaining in a presbytery where a significant number of congregations joined an alternative structure would have to reconfigure themselves and redefine relationships with neighboring presbyteries and within their, or another, synod. In some areas where evangelicals are in the majority it would be the progressive congregations that would have to find new ecclesial homes. Every minister on the roles would have to choose where to place their allegiance. No governing body of the church would be unaffected and once again much of the creative energy of our leaders and the financial resources of the church would be diverted to organizational and legal issues and away from the mission of the church.

It is hard to believe that the “evangelicals” would wish this disruption on other congregations and the denomination in which they claim they want to remain, but then perhaps

- the reality of the vast majority of Presbyterian congregations is not of concern to them. (The “Deathly Ill Letter” dismisses the life and mission of more than half the denomination’s churches as being too small to matter); or
- they are organizationally naïve and the implications of their proposals have not been considered; or
- their intent *is* chaos and the further deconstruction of the denomination; or
- they simply do not want to be Presbyterian and yet want to retain their current positions.

The “Letter” also refers to being “trapped” by the **property clause** in the church’s *Constitution* (G-8.000ff). G-11.0103i provides a clear way for the presbytery to “divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members.” Furthermore, many of the signers of

³ When the Old School and New School exhibited the existence of two entities both claiming to be the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America there were no national structures.

the Letter are within the bounds of the former PCUS: did their congregation not exercise the exemption provided for in G-8.0700 within the prescribed period of eight years following reunion? Certainly the trends and issues so distressing to them were present in that period (1983 – 1991). If so, there are no issues – they can be dismissed to another communion with their property. And if not, what gives the current leadership the right to reject the historic commitment of their congregations to the denomination and their decision to reject the trump card of exemption?

So why can't they be comfortable in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as it is evolving?

Denominational life:

- Are they really unable to live within their current presbytery, or is it the denomination that is offensive to them? If it's the denomination, they need to leave.
- Is anyone making it difficult for them to find new calls?
- Is there nothing in the life of their presbytery, synod or the General Assembly that they can support, or do they simply believe that only their self-defined mission is worthy?
- Do they even support the work of their presbytery and the broader denomination and honor any per capita expectations, or do they divert their resources and leadership to para-church organizations and affinity groups?
- Do they not understand that one of the primary roles of larger congregations in the Reformed tradition is to help provide the supportive services and resources that only a more inclusive governing body can provide?
- Is any presbytery excluding them from participation?
- Has anyone tried to stop them from forming partnerships among themselves for mission or rejected any initiatives to partner with denominational efforts? Have they even talked with our mission and ministry personnel regarding areas where partnerships might be possible?

Addressing the Issue of the Place and Inclusion of GLBT Members in the Church:

- Is anyone bringing judicial cases against them for their biblical or theological positions and pastoral responses to their members?
- Is their presbytery forcing them to participate in the ordination of a GLBT Minister of Word and Sacrament? (There is nothing in the Constitution that forces anyone to serve on a presbytery commission.)
- Are their congregations electing GLBT people to leadership or wondering why they can't? (If so, maybe they should think about whether they belong in that congregation.)
- Are they afraid that some of their members will ask them to perform same sex unions/weddings? Are they afraid that the changes in state laws will force them to do so? (Sessions determine the usage of congregational property, and no minister is required to perform any marriage ceremony.)
- Are they reluctant to make their opposition to GLBT leadership or same-sex unions/marriage known in their congregation? Or maybe they are not opposed and can't say that?

- Are they afraid that if they and their congregations remain identified with the PC (U.S.A.) when homosexual practice is no longer a barrier to ordination and same sex unions/weddings are permitted, they will lose members and financial resources? (Yes, they probably will even if they try to mitigate the transition by reminding members that a Foundational principle of Presbyterian governance is the right to elect their own leaders. If they respond with God's grace, they will also attract new members and resources.)
- Are they ill prepared to lead their congregations into a future where neither society nor the church condones the exclusion of GLBT people from the responsibilities inherent in citizenship or membership respectively?
- Are they personally afraid to face the issue themselves or because of what their colleagues and members might do to them if they do? (Many evangelical leaders who have changed their opinions on this issue have paid dearly for doing so.)

What is really going on? I believe they are wrong in their characterization of the nature of human sexuality, and they are on the wrong side of history and on the wrong side of the gospel - and conversion is very, very difficult.

Just like the reactionary forces of the past who argued from a faulty biblical exegesis that Blacks should remain slaves, and when that battle was lost, that segregation was the only moral way to relate across racial lines, or those who fought against the inclusion of women in ordained leadership based on clear biblical injunctions against women's leadership, or excluded divorced men because the biblical model of marriage and the Westminster standards said that marriage was between one man and one woman, so too is the argument waged against the full inclusion of GLBT. Do those proposing separation from their current governing bodies disagree with the resolution of those former church dividing issues? Are they unaware of how much they sound like the losing sides in our history, how familiar their arguments are and how the church has repeatedly found them wanting?

Once again the inclusive love of God is winning the hearts and minds of those who profess faith in Jesus as the Christ who overcomes all barriers that divide humankind and calls everyone who loves him to lives of grace and faithful discipleship.

How should progressive Presbyterians respond? Rather than helping these forces find a way to cling to their positions by enabling a church within the church, progressive Presbyterians should affirm their understanding of the gospel and reassure them that the church has room for them as fellow travelers in the continuing story of God's redemption. We might even offer to help them prepare their own hearts and their congregations for the changes that are coming.