

"Choices"

2 Thessalonians 2: 13-15

Heritage Presbyterian Church

November 11, 2007

I think we can all agree that we don't like church politics. Church politics, like other kinds of politics, tends to mean conflict. And conflict leads to messy and sometimes even ugly situations. Trust can quickly fly out the window and people become unsure of others' motives. It's not much fun. We are in the middle of politics at the moment here at Heritage. Back in October our elders called for a congregational meeting on December 9 to vote on whether or not to petition our presbytery to dismiss us into a new denomination – the New Wineskins Presbytery of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. This has been a very troubling process for some of our members and they want more information. Why do we feel like such a drastic step is necessary? The other thing people have been asking is why did the Session talk about these things so long without telling the congregation? Why wasn't the congregation brought into the discussion sooner? I apologize to those of you who don't want a sermon on such things but I ask you to be patient with those who do. We might prefer to hear a sermon on the teachings of the faith. But quite honestly, that's what this is. The Scriptures tell us to "Stand firm and keep a strong grip on the teaching we passed on to you." (2 Thessalonians 2: 15) And sometimes standing firm requires taking a stand. So let's talk about why these things are so important and how we got to this moment.

Back in 2005 I started to hear rumblings about something called The New Wineskins Initiative. It was a group of people in our current denomination, the PCUSA, who were trying to change things. They took their name from Jesus' parable in Mark 2 which he says, "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the wine would burst the wineskins, and the wine and the skins would both be lost. New wine calls for new wineskins." (Mark 2: 22) There were two things they were interested in doing. They were interested in reforming the structures of the PCUSA. Our denomination has been losing 40,000 members a year for some time, which is a sign that change is needed. The number of missionaries is way down.

Many congregations tend to look inward rather than outward and are getting smaller and smaller. We have a large and top heavy bureaucracy. The New Wineskins folk were interested in reforming the structures to be leaner, more outwardly focused, and designed so that congregations could more easily focus on mission.

The other thing they wanted to change was that they wanted to define to change the course of the denomination theologically by defining what the essential tenets of the Reformed faith are. Every officer – elder, deacon, and minister – when they are ordained is asked this question: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what expositions of what the Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God.” (*Book of Order* 14.0405) Those of you who are elders and deacons, you made this vow. You promised to receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith. Do you know what you promised to adopt? It’s a trick question, because in the PCUSA they are not defined. No one can say what the essential things necessary for faith are. Not only are they undefined but the PCUSA has refused to identify what they are. You were asked to receive and adopt something that isn’t defined. I’m always greeted by stares of disbelief when I say this, as if I’ve made it up. Here is how the *Book of Confessions* puts it:

“....Both the former United Presbyterian Church in the USA and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. repeatedly answered in the negative overtures requesting that the church make a precise list of a few fundamental doctrines (once called ‘essential and necessary articles of faith’) that must be accepted by ordained officers.....Ordained persons are free to be ‘instructed,’ ‘led,’ and ‘continually guided’ by the confessions without being forced to subscribe to any precisely worded articles of faith drawn up either by the General Assembly or by a presbytery.”

Page xxvi, *The Book of Confessions*

In other words there is no one set of beliefs which one has to subscribe to in order to be a leader in the PCUSA. The Book of Confessions is a guide but no one has to ascribe to all the things in any one of them. And there are no essentials, things gleaned down to the bear basics, which are defined.

Well, what's the big deal about that? Surely we all know what we believe as Christians. Surely we don't need some sort of checklist of things that we must ascribe to keep people from going off track. I have spent most of my ministry avoiding talking about some of the crazy things that Presbyterians in positions of authority have taught and proclaimed. Perhaps I have done you a disservice. But here are a few of the last few years:

In 1992, \$66,000 from Presbyterian mission money was used to fund a church conference called the Re-Imagining God Conference. At this conference God was given a new name: the Goddess Sofia. Sofia was worshiped with various rituals. Jesus' atonement on the cross was rejected. One of the conference speakers said, "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.....we just need to listen to the God within." ("Atonement", Delores S. Williams, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Ed. Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson - Westminster John Knox Press (An Imprint of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, an entity of the General Assembly of the PC(USA)), 1996). A Presbyterian affinity group called the Voices of Sophia was formed after the conference to perpetuate these teachings. Their website is at <http://www.voicesofsophia.org/>. At the 2006 General Assembly the Voices of Sofia breakfast the keynote speaker said, "One of the great controversies to emerge from Re-Imagining was our rejection of the atonement, the idea that the torture and execution of Jesus Christ saved the world. My theological career has been spent dismantling that doctrine. I want to tell you today that I am convinced that atonement theology is the deepest betrayal of Christianity ever perpetrated. It is not just one way to understand salvation, but a betrayal of salvation, a doctrine that abandoned the life and ministry of Jesus Christ for loyalty to Caesar and his legions." (Re-imagining Paradise, Rita Nakashima Brock, June 19, 2006 available online at <http://www.voicesofsophia.org/Resources.html>) Are these folks listened to? Well the highest elected office in our denomination is the Moderator of the

General Assembly and several moderators have attended and addressed Voices of Sofia events, encouraging them in their work.

It is not just at conferences or at General Assembly breakfasts that these sorts of things are said. Presbyterian ministers in pulpits just like this one also teach many strange things. In the next presbytery over the pastor of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas admitted an atheist to his church. The reason we know about this is that the atheist wrote a newspaper article that was picked up and reprinted in the Houston Chronicle, "I don't believe in God. I don't believe Jesus was the son of a God that I don't believe in, nor do I believe Jesus rose from the dead to ascend to a heaven that I don't believe exists." ("Why I am a Christian (Sort Of)", Robert Jensen, *The Palestine Chronicle*, March 10, 2006 Available online at <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/story-03100631503.htm>) He wrote that joining the church was more of a political than a theological act. This action was questioned by many people. If we as members don't have faith in God, then are we really a church? The pastor of the church, Jim Rigby, defended his decision in *Counterpunch*, writing, "God is a symbol of the truth that stands outside our widest context. 'God' is a symbol of the reality deeper than our ultimate concern. 'God' is a symbol of the mystery that lies between the poles of our clearest rational dichotomy. The point is not to affirm the reality of the symbol itself, but to affirm the reality to which it points." ("The Teachings of Christ are Spiritual and Political: Why We Let an Atheist Join Our Church", Rev. Jim Rigby, *Counterpunch*, March 27, 2006 Available online at <http://www.counterpunch.org/rigby03272006.html>)

At First Presbyterian Church in Elizabethton, Tennessee John Shuck preaches his version of the faith. Here are some quotes taken from his own writings which you can find for yourself online:

"Conceiving of God as a personal being has become increasingly problematic. We may imagine God in personal terms in prayer, worship, or poetry, but even there the language we use does not fit the reality we see." ("God as Creativity", John Shuck, May 9, 2007 Available online at <http://shuckandjive.blogspot.com/2007/05/god-as-creativity.html>)

“The preacher can no longer assume that just because a text is in the Bible that it is from God or is even valuable.” (“The Bible: Word of God?”, John Shuck, February 17, 2007 on Shuck and Jive, available online at <http://shuckandjive.blogspot.com/2007/02/bible-word-of-god.html>)

On Jesus’ resurrection of the dead he writes, “The resurrection of Christ to me is not about heaven in the sky when you die. It is not about believing in a resuscitated corpse. It is also not merely a metaphor, symbol, or subjective vision. To see the resurrected Jesus or the cosmic Christ is to glimpse in a person the summit of consciousness to which we are ascending.” In other words the resurrection is not something that happened to Jesus’ body. What does Pastor Shuck say happened to Jesus’ body? “I believe the remains of the historical Jesus decayed alike all human remains decay” (“What If We Found the Body of Jesus”, John Shuck, April 8, 2007 Available online at <http://www.1stpres-eliz.org/whatifwefoundbody.pdf>)

So we have a pastor who denies that God is a person, denies the trustworthiness of the Scriptures, denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus. (There are plenty of other things in his writings that are problematic but we’ve only got so much time and you can go online and read them for yourselves.) Why are ministers like this allowed to remain leaders and teachers of churches? Someone wrote to the Executive Presbyter in John Shuck’s presbytery to express concern and this was the email response:

“John has appropriately and Constitutionally been examined by the Committee on Ministry, approved for membership in Holston Presbytery, and John has affirmed the Constitutional Questions required of ordination. I am not aware that John has acted contrary to Scripture or the Constitution of the PCUSA.” (Richard L Fifield, email available online at

<http://grkndeacon.blogspot.com/2007/05/correspondence-on-discipline-and.html>)

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You see? The *Book of Confessions* is only a guide. No one has to subscribe to all of it. We handed out the resource a few weeks ago, the little blue sheet called the “Basics of Belief” that gave you a summary of differences between the

PCUSA and the New Wineskins. Under the question "Who Is Jesus?" it says that the PCUSA answer is unclear. It also says that the PCUSA's position on the authority of Scripture is unclear. And the presbytery sent a letter to you saying, "But our creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions* are clear about these issues." Yes, the *Book of Confessions* is clear, but no one has to subscribe to all the creeds and confessions. But there are plenty of people preaching in our pulpits, teaching in our seminaries, and administering on the staff of upper judicatories who don't. There is no simple list of beliefs, no essential tenets of faith that we must subscribe to in order to serve as leaders. So it is quite fair to say that the PCUSA is unclear.

Why can't the PCUSA have some essentials of the faith that are necessary in order to teach and lead in our denomination? The New Wineskins folks thought that a big part of our problem is that we needed some. Their version is included in your bulletin. You can see that they are fairly basic. Why hasn't the PCUSA done the same thing? I suppose it's because there would be ministers and leaders that would not be able to affirm them. And we want to be inclusive, even when it means trying to hold together radically different and even contradictory ideas.

So in 2005 when I started to hear the New Wineskins ideas I was interested. They sounded good. If the PCUSA could adopt a list of essential tenets and make some structural changes we might be able to turn this around. But at the 2006 General Assembly none of the New Wineskins ideas were accepted and instead the General Assembly passed what's called an Authoritative Interpretation of the Constitution concerning ordination standards. Four years previously, which would have been 2002, a task force was created to find some way to end the battles over the ordination standards. Several times the General Assembly had voted to remove from the *Book of Order* the standard that says that in order for one to serve as a pastor or an elder one must live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. The presbyteries kept voting the amendment down and leaving it in the Book of Order. The fighting was constant and debilitating and distracting. So a task force was appointed to figure out how to create some sort of third option. Their solution was to propose to the General Assembly that they pass an Authoritative Interpretation on the Constitution. An Authoritative Interpretation is a bit like when the Supreme Court of the United

States interprets the Constitution and says, "Here's what the Constitution really means." When the Assembly passes an Authoritative Interpretation, it's binding on all of us. And the Interpretation they passed says that it's permissible for each ordaining bodies to determine if a candidate for ordination's refusal to abide by the ordination standard constitutes "a failure to adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith." What do you know about the essentials of the Reformed faith in the PCUSA? They are undefined. So how can we tell if refusing to abide by the ordination standard constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials? What this was designed to do was reassure the conservatives that the standards had not been taken out of the Book of Order while creating a loophole for liberals to get around the Book of Order. When the presbytery sent you that letter saying, "But the ordination standards are still in place" they are doing exactly what this was designed to do. Yes they're in place. Just like the creeds and the confessions are still in place. Nothing has changed. And yet everything has changed.

So in the summer of 2006 this Authoritative Interpretation got passed and here at Heritage the elders had to figure out what to do. We are now under the authority of a denomination that has officially enacted to overturn the authority of the Scriptures. Up to this point we had worked for change but there will be no vote in the presbyteries over the new move. Presbyteries can't vote on Authoritative Interpretations. It's done. The battle is over. We've lost. A line had been crossed. And, if we submit to this decision, then we are complicit in it. The Presbyterian system is a connectional one. A minister in one congregation is a minister for the whole church. An elder in one congregation is recognized as an elder in all congregations. If we go along with this then we are saying this ok with us. The Session had to wrestle with whether we put these things in front of the congregation or not. About this time something called the Louisville Papers were leaked out of the office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly.

(<http://www.layman.org/layman/news/2006-news/analysis-repudiates-louisville-papers.htm> gets to a page where the Louisville papers are linked) These were documents prepared by lawyers in the Clerk's office and sent to presbytery and synod executives. They give instructions in how to deal with churches that are contemplating seeking to leave the PCUSA. They include tactics like removing the

pastors, removing the session, changing the locks on the doors of the church, freezing the assets of the church. I believe our presbytery sent you a document with their process for what to do when a church is seeking to leave and the third section of that process includes all of these things. If you haven't seen it, it's on the resource table.

And please note that as they were suggested by the denominational headquarters these were instructions for what to do if a congregation was discussing leaving. In the Presbytery of Eastern Oklahoma the presbytery went about filing liens against the property of all the congregations in its jurisdiction without notifying them (<http://www.layman.org/layman/news/2006-news/eastern-okla-presbytery-files.htm>). Back in 2002 the presbytery from which I came, Maumee Valley Presbytery in northwestern Ohio, the congregation of Norcrest Presbyterian Church in Findley, Ohio wished to be dismissed from the PCUSA. The Presbytery's council met and then went to the church, told the pastor he was fired and to get off the property, boxed up his things and removed them. They then went to the presbytery and asked for the authority to do what they had already done. (<http://www.layman.org/layman/news/news-from-pcusa/presbytery-fires-ohio-pastor.htm> and <http://www.thecourier.com/issues/2002/Jan/012302.htm#story3>)

So how does the session bring this to congregation for discussion? As soon as the congregation is presented with the idea, the presbytery is going to be informed by people who don't like the idea. And what is going to happen when the presbytery finds out? At that point no one knew. We might find ourselves locked out for even discussing it. I will point out at this point that our presbytery has allowed us to talk about these things and has responded very well. But we had no idea what would happen at the time. That hampers the ability to talk about it.

Plus, we didn't yet have anywhere to go. Some people have asked why do we have to vote to separate from the PCUSA and vote to join The New Wineskins Presbytery at the same time? Why can't we vote to leave and then later determine where to go? The simple answer to that is because the PCUSA will not dismiss a congregation to be independent. They will only release us into another

Presbyterian denomination. There were inklings that some within the New Wineskins Association might try to form something new. There might be a way for us to leave together with others. But it hadn't happened yet. We had no where to go. The session felt it was best to sit tight and wait until things were clearer.

But the session also felt like we needed to communicate our dissension with the General Assembly in some fashion. At our October meeting we voted to cut off per capita to the Assembly. We also voted to endorse the New Wineskins, which didn't necessarily mean we were leaving the denomination. It just meant that we supported their ideas and would be able to vote at their convocations. In a series of sermons in October and November, I told the congregation what had happened at the Assembly, that we had cut off per capita, and that we had joined the New Wineskins. We put the New Wineskins information on our website for a few months. We told the congregation that the session was continuing to wrestle with these issues. Officials from presbytery met with the session at our November meeting and we told them that we were not upset with the presbytery but gravely concerned about the actions of the General Assembly.

At the spring meeting of the New Wineskins they voted to petition the Evangelical Presbyterian Church for something a bit unique. We asked them to create a non-geographic presbytery just for New Wineskins Churches who wanted to leave the PCUSA. This non-geographic presbytery will exist for five years. During that time leaders from the two organizations will meet to see if we have a common destiny together. If so, we will create something new. If not we will go our separate ways. They make no claims on the property. They are basically creating a port in the storm for us which is a gracious thing to do. So then we had to wait for their General Assembly to meet and decide if they would create the non-geographic presbytery. They met in June and voted yes. Now we had a place to go. But it was summer. I was on vacation. Lots of people are on vacation. The session decided to put these issues in front of both the congregation and the presbytery as early in the fall as possible. We had to make sure that we were ready. We had to gather our resources, think about the process, and make contingency plans. What if the presbytery heard our call for a congregational meeting and bounced us out on our ear? It seemed irresponsible not to think

through such things. And so we prepared as best we could and then we set these things in front of you in mid October. And we will talk about them until the congregational vote on December 9. Now these things are up to you. We have several more informational meetings where you may ask questions. We have a representative from the New Wineskins coming on November 17 which is this Saturday to sit with you and hear your questions. I hope you will come.

No one likes church politics. I, for one, do not enjoy this at all and will be quite happy when this is over. I don't like conflict and would have been happy to avoid it altogether. But we are told to "stand firm and keep a strong grip on the teaching passed down to us." (2 Thessalonians 2: 15) And sometimes standing firm means doing things one doesn't like to do. If it was always pleasant, if it was always easy then everyone would do it.

Amen

(1) These resources on the theological problems and conflicts within the PCUSA are widely available on the internet but all of the ones listed were gleaned from a former Presbyterian minister's research available at <http://expresbyterian.blogspot.com/2007/09/because-it-is-my-name.html> Look at supplement A at <http://users.zoominternet.net/%7Ewspotts/Supplement%20A.htm> to see exactly where I took this information from. There are many other ways to find this information but this is an excellent summary that links you right to the primary sources.