

Theological Reasons for Seeking Dismissal from the PC(USA)

First Presbyterian Church, Florence, S.C.

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Our church, as well as every congregation in the PC(USA), has been thrust into a moment of decision. This was recently evidenced as over 60 congregations in South Carolina were represented at a national gathering of Presbyterians in Orlando where all present (over 2,000 were people) prayed for God's guidance. Each of these congregations is actively deciding/discerning their course of action during these turbulent days in our denomination. In our presbytery, three churches have already decided to seek dismissal from the PCUSA. This as a result of the decades long theological drift that culminated this past May with a change in our ordination standards. As Amendment 10-A passed, it allowed presbyteries to choose to ordain someone actively practicing immoral behavior. This "last straw" is added to the even greater concerns of a 1) compromised understanding of Scripture which creates 2) a compromised understanding of the gospel, which leads to 3) a compromised witness.

Also understand that cultural and theological shifts have slowly (over decades) impacted the PC(USA) so that a decision like the one made this past May will happen more and more often. Our church, over these decades, has actively sought to shore up and positively impact this institution yet we feel that the expenditure of time and energy on this endeavor no longer seems a wise course of action.

Therefore, your Session seeks to outline for you the theological reasons for our recommendation to seek dismissal from PCUSA. This is both a serious and sad recommendation but after much prayer, study and deliberation we believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is the right course of action. Your session recommends this course and so below you will see the theological reasons for this recommendation.

1. Authority of Scripture Compromised. Orthodox Christians believe that God revealed Himself to us through the documents that make up the Canon of Scripture. These 66 documents/books/letters are irreplaceable as they tell the story of God's redemptive work in and through all of time. When we speak of the authority of Scripture it means that we do not stand over scripture deciding what is relevant to us today, but sit under it and seek to live in obedience to it in its entirety.

But the recent change in our Book of Order points to the compromise that pervades our denomination. Last year the Book of Order stated that "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..." Amendment 10-A replaces this language with "Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates [for ordination]." The problem is that we are not merely "guided by" Scripture, but rather we are to live in obedience to Scripture. This type of thinking crystalized in the Confession of 1967 where scriptural authority is determined, not by Scripture, but the person who reads and interprets scripture. This compromise will continue to effect the posture the PCUSA has toward scripture and the result will be less and less conformity to the will of God.

2. Compromise of the Gospel. When we speak of the Gospel we are speaking of the good news of the saving work of God's Son (Jesus) for our sake. Jesus is the only Son of God (fully human, fully divine) and is therefore uniquely able both to demonstrate a life of full devotion to the heavenly Father, and then He alone is qualified to be a perfect sacrifice and pay the price for our human willfulness and sin. Orthodox Christians have humbly yet boldly affirmed that salvation from sin is accomplished through Christ alone by grace alone. No other religion in the world has God dying in the place of fallen humans. In recent years, in our denomination, two theological shifts have surfaced that challenge this understanding, and ultimately compromise the Gospel.

The first theological shift is the continued assault on the unique nature of Jesus Christ as the only Redeemer and Savior of humankind. The General Assembly of 2001 debated the issue of whether our salvation was won **only** by the person of Jesus Christ. The debate ended with a "compromise" that stated that Jesus Christ was unique but not necessarily the only way to salvation. Christianity Today labeled this a "namby pamby" decision and the reaction to this decision was the formation of the "Confessing Church Movement", a grassroots coalition of likeminded churches begun by the session of Summit Presbyterian in Pennsylvania. Summit's pastor, Rev. Paul Roberts said at the time, "The General Assembly may not be able to say who Jesus is, but we can." As theological drift continues as it pertains to the person and work of Jesus Christ many spokespersons for the PC(USA) have denied the necessity of the atoning death of Jesus Christ (National Conference of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians; Nov. 11, 2002), candidates to ministry have openly denied the deity of Jesus and yet are still approved (Presbytery of West Jersey; Nov. 20, 2002).

The second theological shift within the PC(USA), that undermines the orthodox Christian understanding of the gospel, is the move away from the view that human nature is depraved (Jeremiah 17:9) toward a sense that humans are basically good and the human problem is primarily an issue of cultural systems that enslave individuals. This move or shift has been the cause for denominational structures to emphasize liberation from injustice over and above the salvation and transformation of individual souls. This same system of thought has caused many of these same folks to battle for the legitimizing of same-sex behavior. Simply said this is a different gospel that accepts us, but leaves us the same. This false gospel affirms as good what God wants to heal.

The end result of these two shifts is that Jesus is merely a model for living well, rather than the one who saves us from our Sin/rebellion against God Almighty. And then his model for living merely helps point "good people" toward principles of justice and peace that make things better for humankind. Neither of these results takes people to the crux of the gospel.

3. These two compromises lead to a compromise of our witness. Jesus' last words to his disciples were to go into the world and make disciples. He says, "witness/testify to me and help people whole heartedly commit themselves to living with and for me." The PCUSA has no consensus on who Jesus is, what He came to do, the nature of scripture, which leads to confusion about lifestyle choices such as abortion and same sex union. The Theological Task Force on Peace Unity and Purity concluded in 2006 that "we who disagree on some matters can learn much from one another as we mine together the scriptures in love." In other words our hearts dictate our position and the scripture helps us get along with our different opinions. Yet, if there is one Lord one Faith and one baptism there is one way of living faithfully toward Him. Without consensus however we have come to the point where we no longer are clear about this one way of living. God created the world and it was good; but when Sin entered our hearts even our natural inclinations were bent and are in need of reform.

At First Presbyterian we often have to explain that we do not agree with the official position of the denomination, we explain that our monies have been withheld because we believe strongly that the denomination does not represent a life of faithful discipleship to the Lord. Our association with the PCUSA causes many orthodox Christians to steer clear of our fellowship and many have left us saying they cannot in good conscience be associated with a congregation that is connected to a denomination that promotes lifestyles that are contrary to Biblical living. Even whole denominations have broken fellowship with us over our current commitments (e.g. Presbyterian Church of Mexico).

We find ourselves in a moment in time where our heritage as Presbyterians is a liability to our witness. The connectionalism, that is a hallmark of Presbyterianism, instead of being a strength, becomes a severe detriment. Healthy connectionalism (many congregations bond together demonstrating the reality of the body of Christ in the world) is supposed to be an encouragement as well as a means to accomplish a greater good for the sake of God's Kingdom in the world. Now, however, in the PC(USA), congregations have such divergent understandings and commitments that our infighting and disagreements consume the time that should be spent ministering to those lost and without hope in the world. The time has come for this congregation to set aside these battles permanently so as to allow a re-alignment with those who agree on the essentials of the faith making it possible to combine our energies constructively for sake Christ and his Kingdom.

Sadly, we the session of First Presbyterian believe these three theological issues have crippled the PC(USA) beyond repair. Many of those seeking to be faithful to the Gospel are currently trying to differentiate themselves from this institution in the way that best suits their context. Just as an example the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (another denomination) has grown by over 100 congregations in the last three years as PC(USA) churches, with the same concerns over these compromises to the faith, have found this to be the answer to their conflicted situation. Another denomination has formed as a result of the same concerns in recent days called the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. These events are just indicators that many others are at the same juncture as we find ourselves.

We humbly submit this to you as we seek together to move toward a life of faithfulness to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior who has called us to faithfully witness to His Kingdom.