

CAN
TWO FAITHS
EMBRACE
ONE FUTURE?



A Foundational Inquiry by
The Presbyterian Lay Committee

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Can Two Faiths Embrace One Future?

By the Presbyterian Lay Committee

“How long will you go limping between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him. But the people answered him not a word.”¹

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is at a crossroads. That reality is no more welcome today than when Elijah voiced it to King Ahab. “Is that you, O troubler of Israel?” asked the king to God’s meddlesome prophet.²

Ahab’s answer to the presence of mutually exclusive faiths was accommodation, making room for both. That policy crippled Israel, proving once more what the ancients had always known: self-contradictions cannot survive.

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) underscores Elijah’s conviction: “... no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man’s opinions are.”³

Ignoring that scriptural and constitutional counsel, policies and programs of the Presbyterian Church (USA) over several decades have touted a principle called “inclusiveness and diversity.” They have sought to accommodate within one institutional structure substantially different convictions regarding what Presbyterians are to believe and how they are to live. The result: a loss of theological and ethical discernment and a prevailing assumption that there can be parity between truth and falsehood.

The language of feeling now dominates Presbyterian parlance. “I’m not comfortable with this,” is employed in lieu of “this is wrong.” Dialogue, a process in which contradictory positions are “shared,” has replaced debate, a process in which contradictory positions engage one another in pursuit of the truth. No longer assessing truth claims vis-à-vis established standards, we have cast our people adrift on a sea of relativity, leaving them in a quandary as to who Presbyterians are and how we are to live.

¹ I Kings 18: 21

² I Kings 18: 17

³ *The Book of Order*, G-1.0304

This forfeiture of our identity has eroded the very foundation of the Presbyterian Church (USA). We believe it is the primary cause of the loss of almost 50,000 members per year and multi-million dollar reductions in the denomination's mission budget. In 1999, the Presbyterian Church (USA) research service calculated that at the then current rate of decline, we will run out of members in the year 2061. Accelerated losses since 1999 have revised that date to 2054.

While some may dispute the causes of the denomination's malady, almost no one questions its trajectory. There is almost universal agreement that lacking a radical (some would say "miraculous") intervention, the rapidly declining Presbyterian Church (USA) will die.

Presbyterian Pluralism

In 2001, the General Assembly created a Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity (PUP) to examine the causes of denominational distress and to prescribe appropriate remedies. Its report is scheduled for release in the fall of 2005.

Most of the task force discussions have been behind closed doors. However, known opinions of its members and early corporate statements, e.g., PUP's published statement on unity,⁴ indicate where the majority of this group is going. We suspect PUP will opt for institutional preservation by proffering itself as a model of the denomination's future. Declaring that it has successfully assimilated persons of differing convictions, the task force will, we believe, suggest that Presbyterian governing bodies can do so as well.

If so, PUP will unfortunately promote - either in its own recommendations or via presbytery overtures emanating from its recommendations - a political solution to a theological problem. Such an attempted solution could take some form of local option (removing denomination-wide standards that some find vexing, and thereby allowing each faction to follow its own course). One variation of such a political solution has been called the "two synod proposal."⁵ The theological term for this approach is pluralism.

⁴Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church Preliminary Report to the 216th General Assembly (2004)

⁵A two-synod proposal has been informally floating around the denomination for several years with tacit support from the Office of the General Assembly and others whose highest priority is

Despite the public relations fanfare with which the Office of the General Assembly and the establishment media have surrounded PUP, we believe, after having tracked its discussions for several years, that it warrants scant notice. We mention it here only to note the small part that it is playing in a much larger drama. The focus of this analysis is not PUP, but pluralism.

Pluralism may be initially appealing to those who place a premium on holding the institution together, but it poses serious problems of theology, polity and practicality that require careful consideration by thoughtful Presbyterians. As a contribution to that reflection, the Presbyterian Lay Committee offers the following analysis of foundational issues that we believe are not being addressed.

Issues of Theology

The causes of discord in the Presbyterian Church (USA) are profoundly theological. They center around three essential questions:

- (1) Who is Jesus Christ?
- (2) In what sense is Scripture authoritative for our beliefs and practices?
- (3) How do we submit to God's call to a holy life, including his requirement that human sexuality be expressed exclusively through the heterosexual marriage relationship that was instituted by God and blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ?

The answers that Presbyterians give to these questions will reveal that our denomination encompasses two distinctly different faiths.

institutional preservation. Although it has taken a variety of forms, the essence of this proposal is that the denomination be divided into two synods, one for "Traditional Christians" who insist on upholding the authority of Holy Scripture and on maintaining and enforcing the denomination's ordination standards, particularly G-6.0106(b), which limits ordination to persons who confine their sexual activity to the covenant of marriage; and the other synod for "progressives," who do not accept the authority of Holy Scripture and therefore would remove this standard from the Constitution. Congregations could select the synod to which they would belong. The denomination's unrestricted assets would be divided between the synods according to membership, and its restricted assets would be divided based upon negotiation and arbitration. Each synod would recognize the other as a legitimate governing body within the Presbyterian Church (USA), and there would be annual or semi-annual General Assembly meetings, primarily for worship and for handling institutions that the two synods jointly support.

Different Christs

(1) Some persons who call themselves Christians affirm a Christ concept. When they affirm “Christ,” they are using the name as an ideological symbol. But they do not affirm the Jesus Christ who is revealed in Scripture, who is God Incarnate, who is the second person of the Trinity, who was born of a virgin, who lived a miraculous and holy life, who atoned for our sins through his death on the cross, who was raised bodily from the grave, and who ascended into heaven from whence he, with the Father and Holy Spirit, rules and empowers the kingdom of God on earth. This Jesus Christ to whom Scripture attests is a stumbling block for many who call themselves Christians, including some ordained leaders of the Presbyterian Church (USA). They find offensive Scripture’s claim that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life,” and its affirmation that “no one comes to the Father” but by him. Persons of such beliefs clearly are not talking about the Christ of Scripture, but are constructing a “christ” of their own imagination.

Different Scriptures

(2) Some persons who call themselves Christians, including ordained leaders of the Presbyterian Church (USA), struggle with claims for the authority of Scripture. They affirm Scripture as a guide and source of wisdom, but regard it as culturally conditioned and of human origin. Thus they place it alongside, and even, at times, under the judgment of other human authorities. They prefer to say, “Listen for the Word of God,” rather than “Listen to the Word of God” when reading the Bible in the context of worship. Persons who hold such beliefs clearly are not talking about the Scriptures that Jesus upheld and fulfilled and that his church has affirmed for more than 2,000 years.

Different Moral Standards

(3) Some persons who call themselves Christians, including ordained leaders of the Presbyterian Church (USA), insist on individual autonomy when making moral judgments. Nowhere is that more obvious than in current discussions of sexual morality. There is a stark difference between the ethic of self affirmation and the ethic of Scripture. Such persons clearly are not talking about the standards of moral behavior delivered once and for all to the saints, and upheld by the church for more than 2,000 years.

Pluralism is the institutionalist's solution to these diametrically opposed views. It argues that all religions and philosophies contain elements of truth, and that no religion can claim final and definitive truth. Underlying the pluralist view is the assumption that religions and philosophies of life are of human origin. They are human attempts to conceive a divine reality that cannot be fully known.

Pluralism's bottom line, therefore, insists that all religious ideas are equally valid and equally defective. Its adherents promote their view as a generous, gracious, respectful and humble way to embrace theological differences. Conversely, they regard those who profess exclusivist convictions as narrow-minded, intolerant, bigoted, and inhospitable toward persons of other faiths, or, as some prefer to describe it, "other faith perspectives."

Gavin D'Costa,⁶ a Trinitarian Catholic and world-renowned philosophical theologian at Bristol University, once held the pluralist view. But in 1994, D'Costa astounded an audience at Kings College when, in the course of a lecture, he renounced his pluralist position. He told his London audience that after careful analysis of numerous religions, he was obliged to recognize that every religion's truth claim necessarily excludes contrary positions.

Leslie Newbigin, who served for nearly 40 years as a missionary in India and was long active in international ecumenical organizations, clearly understood the exclusivist nature of every religion and ideology: "It is understandable that anyone faced with the clashing diversity of religious commitments should seek some basis for unity among them, or at least some agreed common framework. The difficulty is that we are dealing here with ultimate commitments, and the basis that I accept can only be my commitment. There have been many attempts to find a basis that all could accept, but none of them escapes this necessity."⁷

Disciples of Jesus Christ attest to the fact that he is God Incarnate. Islam says that he is not. Both positions cannot be true. To affirm, as the pluralists do, a position that encompasses these contradictory religious claims is to legitimize a self-contradiction. The same impasse is evident in Presbyterian clashes over the authority of Scripture and Christian ethics.

⁶ *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986 (BR127.D4)

⁷ *The Open Secret*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, p. 162.

As the prophet Elijah saw centuries ago, pluralism's attempt to encompass mutually exclusive faiths represents a self-inflicted injury, thus Elijah's reference to "limping." Based on a self-contradiction that defies the most elementary principles of rational thought, the pluralist position self-destructs. This observation led Friedhelm Hardy, a comparative religions scholar at Kings College, to declare, "religious pluralism is demonstrable nonsense."⁸ This, of course, does not preclude some people from affirming it, for one can always find persons who embrace the absurd.

Contrary to their claim of graciousness, hospitality and humility, pluralists host an arrogance of their own, for, like other religions whose exclusiveness they criticize, their scheme rejects every truth claim except their own. Pluralism simply creates another, separate religion that is as exclusive as those it seeks to combine. D'Costa observes, "All pluralists are committed to holding some form of truth criteria and by virtue of this, anything that falls foul of such criteria is excluded from counting as truth."⁹

To suggest that the ailing Presbyterian Church (USA) legitimize a system that encompasses theological opposites (Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life *vs.* Jesus is a way, a truth, and a life) is to endorse pluralism. It would legitimize and institutionalize a competing religion that lacks both intellectual and theological integrity. It has been thoroughly discredited by scholars like Leslie Newbigin,¹⁰ Gavin D'Costa, Thomas F. Torrance,¹¹ Friedhelm Hardy, Alvin Plantinga,¹² Nicolas Wolterstorff,¹³ and others who have devoted their lives to the engagement of the gospel with world religions. The false faith of pluralism finds followers within the Presbyterian Church (USA) who cling to the dogmas of postmodernism. That this pluralism, which has contributed so substantially to the denomination's theological crisis, could now be proffered *as a solution to that crisis* strikes rational observers as a brutish irony.

⁸ Cf. *The Religious Culture of India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

⁹ Cf. "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32, 1996, pp.223-232

¹⁰Cf. *Foolishness to the Greeks*, London: SPCK, 1986 (BR115.C8)

¹¹Cf. *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark ltd, 1996, p. 22 ff.

¹²Professor of the Philosophy of Religion, Notre Dame University. Cf. Alvin Plantinga: The Analytic Theist (www.homestead.com/philofreligion/plantingapage.html)

¹³Professor of Philosophical Theology, Yale University. Cf. *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.

Any variation of local option, including the two-synod scheme, is theologically oxymoronic. Allowing a denomination to balkanize itself into mutually exclusive faith groups may offer the political appearance of peace, but it cannot produce the power and peace that Christ alone promises. Institutionalizing mutually exclusive faith claims as two parts of one whole establishes a denomination that will accept a belief in everything. A denomination that believes everything in reality believes nothing, and a denomination that believes nothing has nothing to offer an unredeemed world. Thus, from the standpoint of theology, politically inclusivist schemes constitute a prescription for denominational self-annihilation. Jesus Christ warned church leaders of his day: “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”¹⁴

Issues of Polity

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is a constitutional church, whose *Book of Confessions* defines Presbyterian belief and whose *Book of Order* defines Presbyterian polity. *The Book of Order's* primary principle of denominational governance states: “The governing bodies are separate and independent, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate governing body.”¹⁵

When the Presbytery of the Pacific ordains a person to service in the church, this is not simply an act of the Presbytery of the Pacific. It is an act of the whole church, performed by the whole church through the Presbytery of the Pacific. Thus, the credentials of a minister who is ordained in Los Angeles are honored by Presbyterians in New York.

Enshrining pluralism within church governance through any variation of local option will fracture Presbyterian polity. In the two-synod scheme, congregations would be allowed to select the synod to which they would belong, and each synod would ordain leaders to serve the churches in its territory.¹⁶ But if both synods are mutually recognized as parts of the one Presbyterian Church (USA), ordination by one

¹⁴ Mark 3:24-25

¹⁵ *The Book Of Order*, G-9.0103

¹⁶ “Territory” in this instance does not have geographical connotations, since the two synods are divided primarily along theological/ethical lines.

synod would necessarily be recognized as ordination by the other, even though the two synods would claim two radically different standards.

In Presbyterian polity, the interrelationship of governing bodies is delicately balanced among the principles of original jurisdiction, governing body oversight, and the appellate process. Ordinarily, the *Book of Order* grants the powers of governance to the most local elected body, the session. But the power of the session is not absolute, for session decisions are reviewed by the presbytery for their conformity to the Constitution. Further, a decision by one governing body may be appealed to the courts of higher governing bodies.

Rather than solve the problem of encompassing two different faiths and morals by jurisdictionally separating them, a local option or two-synod solution would simply push the adjudication of these difficulties further up the line. At some point, namely, at the level of the General Assembly, these issues would have to be faced.

Just as a local option or two-synod solution creates unacceptable theological problems, i.e., the beliefs of one synod (although not shared) must be recognized by the other, they also would create intractable polity problems. If the divergent practices of one synod or multiple presbyteries are still part of one denomination, such practices would have to be recognized by the non-concurring other synod or presbyteries for the same reasons.

Members of some presbyteries or one synod might wish to say that Reverend Smith is not a legitimate Presbyterian minister because he was ordained according to lesser standards. But from a polity perspective such convictions would be meaningless if ordination in one synod or presbytery means ordination in the whole denomination.

Similarly, the mission activities of one synod, e.g., a lobbying effort to legalize same-sex marriage, may be funded only by that one synod but it would nevertheless be regarded as an act of the whole church if the two synods are constituent parts of the one Presbyterian Church (USA).

From a polity perspective, as long as two distinctly different faiths and morals are institutionally yoked – whether or not they have been accorded some programmatic subdivision within the denomination – the two remain one. Such solutions institutionalize the self-contradiction that is currently tearing the denomination apart.

Practical Issues

Practically speaking, no pluralist solution can bring peace to the Presbyterian Church (USA). Those who seek the church's blessing of homoerotic relationships could long ago have left the Presbyterian Church for denominations that welcome such relationships. The Metropolitan Community Church, for example, makes the endorsement of same-sex relations a central part of its ideology. But homoerotic activists in the Presbyterian Church (USA) have, in large measure, elected to stay in the denomination on grounds that their intention is not to go where their behavior is welcomed but to change the ethos of institutions where it is not.

Pluralist or inclusivist political arrangements presumably would be acceptable to such activists since they would imply by recognition, a legitimization of their position. This satisfaction would only be temporary, however, for proponents of homoerotic behavior seek the church's blessing on what they do. A partial blessing, endorsement by only one part of the denomination, will not satisfy that need. Thus, their present efforts will undoubtedly continue as long as the blessing is only partial.

Those who propose the two-synod model often suggest that it would avoid the congregational schism that might occur if the congregation were forced to choose between staying in or leaving the denomination. But there is no conflict avoidance in the two-synod proposal, for a choice between two faith groups must still be made, albeit within an encompassing denominational structure. Thus, in terms of its practical consequences, this plan contains the worst possible outcome. Congregations would experience the trauma of choosing which synod to join and, in its aftermath, continue to be institutionally yoked to an alien faith.

A Matter of Integrity

The fact of the matter is that institutionalizing pluralism is not merely a *de jure* threat to our future. It represents the *de facto* state of the Presbyterian Church (USA) today. We profess to be a constitutional church only in the sense that we still possess a *Book of Confessions* and a *Book of Order*, but our actions do not accord with our professed beliefs. Candidates for ordination continue to be asked to affirm "essential tenets of Reformed faith," but since 1925, no General Assembly has been willing to state what

those essentials are. Depending on the presbytery wherein one is examined, candidates for ordination may fill in the blanks and/or affirm their ordination vows with fingers crossed.

In 1986, the General Assembly adopted the following interpretation of its confessional statements that was later inserted into the preface of the *Book of Confessions*: “The ordination question that asks for commitment to the ‘essential tenets’ of the confessions brings freedom in the church at several levels. 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 whether by the General Assembly or by a presbytery.”¹⁷

Because of this fluid approach to the content of the confessions, persons holding a broad spectrum of beliefs have been ordained in recent years. Some of those ordained have stated that they cannot affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, or the doctrine of the atonement, or a belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, yet their presbyteries have found their faith acceptable. Thus, while we say we are a constitutional church, and we cite the *Book of Confessions* as evidence that we subscribe to a particular corpus of belief, in practice we have eviscerated that corpus of any authoritative significance.

Similarly, the *Book of Order* contains standards for the governance of Presbyterian churches. But in recent years, there have been widespread and widely publicized violations of those standards with little or no disciplinary consequence. The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, the denomination’s chief constitutional officer, has declared that it is not his job to enforce the Constitution. Baltimore Presbytery has declared that it does not recognize the *Book of Order*’s ordination standards as authoritative, and it has urged its permanent judicial commission not to accept for trial any alleged violation of that section of the Constitution.

So while the Presbyterian Church (USA) has *de jure* standards of faith and morals, the refusal of its leaders to exercise discipline constitutes a *de facto* abandonment of those standards and an abandonment

¹⁷ The Confessional Nature of the Church Report, *The Book of Confessions*, p. XXVI.

of its Constitution.¹⁸ Declaring oneself to be one thing while being something else is deceitful. That very practice has led the denomination into a massive integrity problem.

Making the denomination's implicit pluralism explicit, by whatever inclusivist scheme, would admit but not solve our current disorder. Elijah's counsel to Israel is precisely the word that the Presbyterian Church (USA) must hear. We must cease limping between two opinions. We must answer Christ's compelling question: "Who do you say that I am?"¹⁹ We must make a choice.

Continuing the pluralism in which we are currently engaged, either implicitly (the current practice) or explicitly (through yet to be unveiled inclusivist approaches), will produce predictable results. Unlike popular stock market disclaimers, past history does in fact guarantee future performance. The decay and death of the Presbyterian Church (USA) will surely come to pass.

Discipline or Separation

There are only two viable options for Presbyterians of integrity: We can reaffirm our scriptural and constitutional standards, explicitly requiring subscription to essential tenets of Reformed faith and morals and initiating an orderly process of discipline to defend them; or we can honestly recognize that the Presbyterian Church (USA) encompasses irreconcilable faiths, and that integrity requires us to divide them into separate denominations.

The first option, sometimes referred to as "stay, fight and win," is losing traction. Faithful Presbyterians have fought the battle for Biblical integrity numerous times over many years. There have been victories, but they continue to be undermined by a recalcitrant denominational infrastructure. Many Presbyterians who are committed to Reformed faith and polity have grown weary of fighting. Many are leaving, and many more have decided to leave and are seeking an acceptable alternative. Some have simply left "in place." Their names remain officially on the rolls, but they have cut off all support for

¹⁸Centrists often defend the denomination against charges of apostasy by pointing to the fact that its constitutional standards have not been removed, failing to see that an unenforced constitution is no constitution at all.

¹⁹Matthew 16:15

the denomination and, for all practical purposes, they are no longer members of the denomination.²⁰ The result is a state of lethargy among once renewal-minded Presbyterians.

The second option has been considered in various forms, and most recently surfaced as a “gracious separation” proposal to the Presbyterian Coalition on March 12, 2002. This option was then described as an orderly process for “demerging the Presbyterian Church (USA).” It was argued that the denomination is not the church, but merely a non-profit corporation, a legally recognized institution that was created by the mergers of earlier corporations; that separating corporations (“demerging”) when they no longer function as originally intended is a common practice in the business world; and that if Presbyterians of good will conclude that their different faiths will not allow them to live together with integrity, similar procedures could enable them to take leave of one another decently and in order.

The “gracious separation” proposal was a broad-brush stroke plan by which the creation of two new denominations could be peaceably accomplished. A reorganization task force could meet over a period of four years with a commitment by the General Assembly that no constitutional changes would be considered during that period. Two new corporate entities could be formed, neither claiming the name Presbyterian Church (USA). By congregational vote, each church would choose which one of the two new denominations it would join. The trustees of colleges, seminaries and other denominational institutions would choose the denomination with which they wished to affiliate. Pension funds would be divided in proportion to minister selections as to denominational affiliation. Assets held by the Presbyterian Church (USA) Foundation would be divided by two criteria: (1) donor intent, and (2) if donor intent is not discernable, then in proportion to the membership of the two entities.

The board of the Coalition declined formally to adopt the “gracious separation” proposal in 2002. Since then, however, the conviction that the Presbyterian Church (USA) cannot continue in its current composition is growing rapidly among church members, including many who have historically identified with various renewal groups. Many faithful Presbyterians are convinced that separation – gracious

²⁰ A version of this approach, heard among some evangelicals, holds the view that the “progressive” leadership of the denomination will one day disappear (some predict this will happen in 10 years) and that Presbyterians of orthodox faith should keep the faith locally and avoid precipitating a crisis that could result in denominational division while waiting for the inevitable “progressive” demise.

or otherwise – is virtually inevitable. The only remaining questions are: when, how, and who will lead?

The New Wineskins Initiative

A new way of “being the Church” has emerged recently among Presbyterians who seek to bridge the gap between “stay, fight and win” and “gracious separation” proponents. It is called the New Wineskins Initiative.

“The New Wineskins Initiative is an effort to articulate a vision for the future to which we believe God is calling the Presbyterian Church (USA),” declares its sponsors.²¹ That vision includes a denomination whose ordained leaders subscribe to specified “essential tenets of Reformed faith” and a “declaration of ethical imperatives.” It focuses the body on the church’s “primary calling,” to reach the lost with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And it envisions an organizational structure that returns primary governance to the local congregation. The resulting configuration appears to be more like a network than a denomination. Its members experience their unity, not by fiat from a hierarchical, denominational infrastructure, but by their common faith and ethics.

Some New Wineskins leaders say they are hopeful that “stay, fight, and win” forces might regain control of the current denominational structure and then, by a chain of constitutional amendments, configure it into conformity with the New Wineskins vision. But they have not ruled out the possibility that congregations that are committed to theological integrity will choose to leave the Presbyterian Church (USA) and could find in the New Wineskins vision a community of faith that they could call home.

New Wineskins leaders believe that their calling is not to provoke an institutional breakup. Rather, they seek to put in place an entity that is committed to the New Wineskins vision, including its theological and ethical imperatives. Their intention is that this can become a community of faith, currently existing inside the Presbyterian Church (USA) denominational structure. Should denominational governing bodies move more deeply and explicitly into pluralism, or should a precipitating

²¹Following Christ into the 21st Century – Vision Statement – Wichita, Kansas: New Wineskins Initiative, 2005.

event and/or General Assembly decision commit the denomination to policies that faithful Presbyterians find intolerable, then the New Wineskins community could become a functional alternative.

Can two faiths embrace one future?

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has institutionalized a culture of unbelief over a period of many decades, commencing in the 1920s, when its General Assembly ceased specifying “fundamentals of the faith” to which all ordained leaders were required to subscribe. The resulting adaptation to cultural mores has been gradual, and, for many persons in the pews, it has been virtually imperceptible. Evidence that it is occurring has periodically erupted in crises, each of which has numbed the membership’s theological and ethical discernment and set the stage for further erosion of what were once its distinctive beliefs and practices.²²

This erosion of faith and life has not come without cost. Since 1965, our denomination has lost almost two million members, nearly half its membership. In recent years, the decline has accelerated, forcing the General Assembly Council into making spending cuts, choosing drastically to slash mission spending (from \$144 million in 2001 to \$114.4 million in 2005).

²²Some crisis examples are:

- (a) The human sexuality report of 1991, expounding the principle that all sexual activity among adults – whether marital or extramarital, heterosexual or homosexual – is good if it expresses “justice love” by un-coerced, mutual consent and is motivated by a sincere desire to please the partner. This report was rejected by the General Assembly, but its agencies and staff have continued to promulgate policies, programs, and publications that reflect this view of human sexuality as if it had been adopted by the General Assembly.
- (b) The denominationally-supported Re-Imagining god conference of 1993, whose themes were rejected by the 1994 General Assembly, but repeatedly resurfaced in materials published by the denominational infrastructure as if they had been adopted by the General Assembly.
- (c) Persistent attacks upon and failure to enforce the denomination’s ordination standards, often with the complicity of staff of the General Assembly and of intermediate governing bodies.
- (d) “Building Community Among Strangers,” a paper by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy suggesting that all faiths are equal, was rejected by the 1998 General Assembly, but its themes have repeatedly resurfaced in materials published by the denominational infrastructure as if they had been adopted by the General Assembly.
- (e) In a keynote speech at the denominationally sponsored peacemaking conference in 2000, Rev. Dirk Ficca asked “What’s the big deal about Jesus?” promoting the theme that exclusive claims about Jesus undermine world peace. The General Assembly Council and subsequent General Assembly refused to denounce this theme and declined to adopt a statement declaring that salvation may only be found in Jesus Christ. Under intense political pressure, the subsequent General Assembly adopted an improved statement, but its implementation has been continuously undermined by the denominational infrastructure as if it had never been adopted by the General Assembly.

As the Presbyterian Church (USA) braces itself for various pluralistic proposals that can be expected to surface in advance of the 2006 General Assembly, the directors and staff of the Presbyterian Lay Committee believe God is calling us to remind Presbyterians of the price that we have already paid for pluralism. Continuing down that road by promoting further celebrations of inclusiveness and diversity, whether by “local option,” “two-synod,” “authoritative interpretation,”²³ other related proposals yet to surface, or by removing Biblical ordination standards from the Constitution altogether, will exacerbate division and accelerate the day of denominational demise.

Scripture is replete with challenges that call the faithful to make critical choices. Joshua said: “Choose you this day whom you will serve, whether the gods that your fathers served that were on the other side of the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”²⁴

Jesus Christ said: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”²⁵

There is no way to avoid choosing, for choosing not to choose is itself a choice. Institutionalists argue that pluralism can save the denomination. But we believe God is calling us to turn aside such thinking as nonsensical and unfaithful.

The issue before us is clear: Two faiths cannot embrace one future.

²³ A proposal to change the denomination’s “authoritative interpretation of the Constitution” was narrowly defeated at the 2004 General Assembly. Had this change been adopted, the denomination would have left the text of its ordination standards in the Constitution but it would have given presbyteries wide latitude in their interpretation of those standards. Opponents of this scheme warned that the Constitution would no longer mean what it says, but only what its interpreters want it to mean.

²⁴ Joshua 24: 15

²⁵ Matthew 6:24

THE PRESBYTERIAN LAY COMMITTEE

The mission of the Presbyterian Lay Committee since 1965 is to inform and equip God's people by proclaiming Jesus Christ alone as:

- The Way of salvation.
- The Truth of God's Word.
- The Life of discipleship.

Its objectives are:

1. To put greater emphasis on the teaching of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God in our seminaries and churches.
2. To emphasize the need for presenting Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior through preaching, teaching and witnessing, with evangelical zeal, as the primary mission of the Church, and to stress the need for regular Bible study and prayer.
3. To encourage individual Presbyterians to take their place in society and, as led by the Holy Spirit, become involved in social, economic and political affairs as Christian citizens.
4. To encourage official church bodies to seek and express the mind of God as revealed in Scripture on individual and corporate moral and spiritual matters. We urge that official church bodies refrain from issuing pronouncements or taking actions unless the authority to speak and act is Biblical, the competence of the church body has been established and all viewpoints have been considered.
5. To provide an adequate and reliable source of information on significant issues confronting the church, including those being proposed for consideration at General Assembly or other governing bodies, in order to enable Presbyterians and others in the Reformed family of faith to express informed positions.

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