

A STATEMENT OF IDENTITY

for the

Presbyterian Church in America

PCA Consensus
1994

PCA CONSENSUS: A STATEMENT OF IDENTITY

In December of 1973, the Presbyterian Church in America was born, with solid commitments to the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Scriptures, the Reformed Faith, the Great Commission, the Presbyterian form of government, and the broader Christian Church, with whom we have essential unity. We have enjoyed unusual blessing and growth from the hand of God. Twenty years later, we thank God for His mercy and His faithfulness, for He has given us a very sound heritage from which to minister and grow.

We believe, however, that we have come to a crucial moment in our church's life. We detect a growing cynicism and apathy about the higher courts in the church that can only lead to atrophy of this great work of God. It seems to us that the cynicism stems, at least in part, from a perennial struggle for "control" in our judicatories by various ideological parties. The majorities sometimes use raw political power and close their ears to minority voices, and the minorities sometimes refuse to accept defeat and use parliamentary loopholes to impede procedural progress. These skirmishes bring several damaging consequences: they direct our attention primarily to church politics rather than to church mission; they create an unnecessary adversarial climate; they preempt really serious discussion and debate on profound theological/ pastoral/ cultural issues; they too often make us wish we had not been there, rather than eagerly anticipating our next assembly. As a result, we are discovering that too many of our elders are ill-advisedly opting to absent themselves from active involvement in the higher courts rather than to exercise their gifts for ministry. For the health and vitality of the church, we feel compelled to address this problem.

There have been thoughtful attempts already made by various groups in the church to address some of the issues facing us, but for various reasons, the proposals so far have not been widely accepted by the church. We, the undersigned, would like to propose a solution that we hope will gain acceptance in the Church and allow us to become what we ought to be. (While each of the signatories may not agree with every statement nor the precise wording of every thought, we do believe that this statement represents the general thrust and desired priorities of the Presbyterian Church in America.)

We believe that a good part of our denominational struggle has to do with the following:

- ◆ A lack of clarity and definition about who we are and what our fundamental commitments are (thus producing unnecessary and prolonged conflicts);
- ◆ A lack of vision and a lack of focus in our mission (thus producing unnecessary confusion);
- ◆ A cumbersome structure and process, which have placed our focus on the administrative/programmatic/constitutional/judicial aspects of our life together, rather than the doxological/theological/edificational/relational aspects of our communal life (thus unnecessarily trivializing our assemblies).

Our solution is to propose to the church a consensual statement -- a statement of identity -- which we believe will provide a "center of gravity" for the church, and a basis for future

discussions on our vision and our polity. We believe that a consensus on the key issues regarding our identity will also serve to create an environment where our allowable diversity strengthens us rather than weakens us. We are eager to celebrate our diversity in the Reformed Faith rather than to eliminate it through political means. Our desire is to root our statement in the Sacred Scriptures, in the Reformed Faith, and in our great Presbyterian history, while also innovating in those areas where the Bible and the Westminster Standards allow and our times demand -- *A Reformed Church Always Reforming.*

Our intended method is open, public, deliberate, and consensual. After the original statement is drafted, we want to encourage open discussions in our various presbyteries with feedback given to our editorial committee. We would hope for a growing consensus on our identity statement and for suggestions as to the specific implications of this identity statement, so we can begin to draft specific proposals for change. There is no pride of authorship in this document. If we discover that the church is not interested in this approach, we are resolved to submit ourselves to the will of the broader church while continuing to serve faithfully, God helping us. But if there appears to be support for our proposal, we shall then encourage overtures from as many presbyteries as possible, with open and full debate before and during the 1995 and 1996 General Assemblies.

This identity statement seeks to address issues which are both foundational to the church and, at least in part, frequently debated in the PCA, with the hope that a healthy consensus will promote the peace, purity, and progress of the Church. These issues include our definition of covenant theology, our interpretations of the subscription vows, the need for serious theological reflection in the PCA, our unique approach to presbyterian polity, the need for a biblically-balanced agenda for the church courts, our understanding of the regulative principle of worship, our approach to church discipline, and our theology and philosophy of missions. Please read this prayerfully and thoughtfully and offer your comments to us.

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Statement of Identity

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I. SCRIPTURE AND HERMENEUTICS

Introduction

God has revealed His eternal power and divine nature in creation so that all fallen humanity is without excuse (Rom. 1:20), and He has in the last days spoken to us by His Son, Jesus Christ, Who is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being (Heb. 1:2-3). For the more sure establishment and comfort of His Church and the better preserving and propagating of the truth, He has seen fit to commit the revelation necessary for salvation wholly unto writing in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (WCF, I, 1-2), which principally teach what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of us (WSC, #3). Reformed belief begins with this unique revelation --- of God, of ourselves, and of the way of salvation --- giving priority to the authority of God's written Word over human reason and tradition, even when these latter are derived from the godliest of the saints and thus are to be viewed as helpful for the understanding of the truth.

The Nature and Authority of Scripture

1. We affirm that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God (WCF, I.4), inerrant in their original autographs, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice.

We deny that any writing or speech which is not part of the canon of the Scripture is of binding authority in the Church of God (WCF, I.3).

2. We affirm that the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private impressions are to be examined is the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture (WCF, I,10).

We deny that synods and councils, general assemblies and presbyteries, or godly individuals, all of which may err and many of which have erred, are to be made the rule of faith and practice (WCF, XXXI,4).

3. We affirm that our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of Scripture is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts (WCF, I,5).

We deny that the church is the source of Scripture or of its authority, although we may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture (WCF, I,5).

EXPOSITION

Important as it is for the PCA to be a confessional church whose doctrinal position is clear and forthright in this pluralistic age, the unique authority of the Bible must be emphasized. Scripture alone is the Word of God written. Much as the Westminster Standards contain the system of

doctrine taught in the Scriptures they, nevertheless, are the products of churchmen gathered in council, are subject to amendment, and must not be equated with Scripture.

The Means of Interpreting Scripture

4. We affirm that the infallible rule of Scripture is the Scripture itself; therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture, it must be searched out and known by other places that speak more clearly (WCF, I,9).

We deny that Scripture ever contradicts itself, or that its parts do not perfectly agree (WCF, I,5).

5. We affirm that the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture (WCF, I,6).

We deny that anything is at any time to be added to Scripture, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men (WCF, I,5).

6. We affirm that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word (WCF, I,6).

We deny that the Scriptures can be rightly interpreted and applied merely by unaided, fallen human reason; we also deny that the teachings of Scripture are contrary to reason.

7. We affirm that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed (WCF, I,6).

We deny that the Scriptures give specific instructions on every issue or every aspect of every issue.

EXPOSITION

The interpretation of Scripture is the great challenge of our age and indeed of any age. The Westminster Divines acknowledged that "all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all" (WCF, I,7). We should, therefore, undertake the interpretation of the Word with prayer, patience, and humble willingness to hear and learn from one another. Scripture is itself sufficient for all things pertaining to our salvation, faith, and life and to the glory of God. The very value of the Westminster Standards as a help to our understanding of Scripture, however, testifies to the benefit of church teaching and sanctified human reflection upon the Scriptures. But the church and human reason must always be subject to the Spirit speaking in the Word. For the fullest understanding, we must approach the Word with prayer for the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

II. SUBSCRIPTION TO DOCTRINAL STANDARDS BY CHURCH OFFICERS

It is a joy and a privilege to belong to a confessional church. The act of subscription is an aid in guarding the Reformed Faith and in uniting the Church in the truth. The act of subscription is also an act of worship, in which we devote ourselves to God, Who has graciously revealed Himself to us.

A Commitment to Subscription

1. We affirm that PCA officers' subscription to the fundamentals of the system of doctrine contained in our confessional standards is of vital importance to the health of the church.

We deny that men who deceive, mislead or dissemble with respect to their adherence to the confession can serve effectively in the church.

2. We affirm that confessional subscription is useful in promoting the church's orthodoxy, in binding the church together in unity, and in providing a foundation for inter-church relations; and, further, that the primary purpose of confessional subscription by officers is to bring honor and glory to God, Who must be known and worshipped on His own terms.

We deny that subscription alone can preserve the orthodoxy or unity of the church, for this cannot be accomplished ultimately by human means.

EXPOSITION

We believe that the accurate interpretation and propagation of God's Word is a solemn duty and that public teachers should be held publicly accountable for what they believe and say. When the truth is known and believed, it sets the captive free (John 8:33). The purpose of subscription however, is not only to guard the faith and promote the unity of the church, but primarily, rather, to bring honor and glory to God on the grounds of His own self-revelation. God has revealed Himself through His Son, this revelation is propositionally recorded by divine act in both testaments of Scripture, and we must know, worship and serve God on His terms.

We also believe there is a subtle danger in depending on the subscription process as the primary means of defending the orthodoxy and unity of the church. The church cannot be ultimately defended by human means, even subscription. The battle is not with flesh and blood, so our primary means must therefore be dependent prayer that calls on the sovereign work of God's Spirit.

The Meaning of Subscription

3. We affirm that the PCA is a subscriptionist church in which men who desire to be ordained must receive and adopt the confession of the church as containing the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scriptures, through the assumption of vows that have objective meaning.

The Relation of the Old and New Testaments

8. We affirm that there is one covenant of grace, binding together the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and that this one covenant of grace is a necessary hermeneutical framework for the proper interpretation of Scripture.

We deny that the two testaments can be properly understood apart from belief in the one covenant of grace.

9. We affirm that there is only one way of salvation in both Testaments: by grace, through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (WCF, VII,6).

We deny that, since the Fall, anyone can, or ever could, be saved by good works or the keeping of the Law.

10. We affirm that the moral law does forever bind all, justified persons as well as others, to obedience to it (WCF, XIX,5). Although all the Old Testament ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament (WCF, XIX,3), Christ in the gospel does not in any way dissolve, but rather strengthens, our obligation to keep the moral law (WCF, XIX,5).

We deny that the Christian is no longer obligated to obey the law of God.

11. We affirm that only the general equity of the various civil laws given by God to Old Testament Israel still carries the force equivalent to moral law, and that the obligation to keep those civil laws which pertain strictly to the political context of Old Testament Israel has expired.

We deny that we are bound indiscriminately to all Old Testament law.

EXPOSITION

We believe most firmly in the unity of the covenant of grace. It is a matter of immense importance that we regard the entire Bible as the living Word of God to be believed and obeyed. We also believe most firmly in the continuing authority of God's law. That law is God's precious gift, making the believer in Christ wise and showing him the path, through faith in Christ, to true happiness. We are greatly concerned about the rampant antinomianism in American evangelicalism. The precise construction of the relationship between the epoch preceding the incarnation and that introduced by Christ and the apostles, however, is a matter of long-standing discussion in the Reformed tradition. Clearly there is both continuity and discontinuity between the epochs in the history of salvation. But, in our view, neither the traditional form of dispensationalism, which tends to deny the full unity between the Old and New Testaments, nor theonomy, as popularly understood, which tends to deny legitimate discontinuities between the testaments, represents the soundest interpretation of the Scriptures, which we believe is found in our confessional standards, and to which we seek to adhere.

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We deny that our vows commit us to a position in which a candidate professes to receive every detailed proposition within the Confession; we further deny that our subscription vows have only subjective meaning.

4. We affirm that the court of immediate jurisdiction has the primary right and responsibility to guard the church from any view that is inimical to the system of doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith.

We deny that the General Assembly should impose a view of subscription that is alien to the PCA and Presbyterian history, and contrary to the interests of a reforming church.

5. We affirm that subscription must be concerned with both the precision of the Reformed Faith and also the diversity of the Reformed Faith. The objective nature of faith demands the former and the *Semper Reformanda* nature of the faith demands the latter.

We deny that presbyters should give the impression that men who are actively examining and trying to reform their faith according to the Scriptures, and hence may have exceptions, which they conscientiously lay before their sessions or presbyteries for examination, should not seek fellowship in the PCA.

EXPOSITION

Some claim that the PCA was founded as a "strict subscription" church. While it is difficult to find a precise definition of "strict subscription," the General Assembly has never formally declared that it is or was begun as such. It appears, in fact, that the question of strict subscription was never addressed in the formation of the PCA. Some also argue that the issue is an argument between Old School and New School presbyterianism. Yet the documents of that debate show little disagreement over the question of subscription. While the question of subscription was in the background in the 1830's, it was not one of the major divisions within the church. The church did not split over subscription. Subscription only became important at the time of the reunion when some on the Old School side argued that the New School proponents were weak on subscription. Yet, they did reunite, and A. A. Hodge states that his father, Charles Hodge, claimed there was no disagreement between the two sides. While Charles Hodge remained a chief opponent of the merger, he stated that he and Henry B. Smith, a leader of the New School, "were perfectly agreed" concerning subscription (First Appendix, *A. A. Hodge's Commentary on the Confession of Faith 1885*). It is also interesting that in the Old Side/New Side debate of a hundred years earlier, it was the Old Side that slid into rationalism and liberalism and had to be rescued by the orthodoxy of the New Side.

The debate surrounding subscription most often revolves around the preciseness of the faith. The subscription process should be every bit as concerned with the breadth of faith. *Semper Reformanda* is part of our reformation heritage and by definition requires that the Reformed Faith be represented by a greater breadth than any one camp can represent. Each presbytery is given the responsibility to examine a man concerning his adherence to the confession of faith. It must be careful to see that his views are not inimical to the Reformed system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures as systematized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Each man being

examined is similarly given the responsibility and encouragement to present his exceptions to this system to the presbytery. The presbytery then decides if a man's exceptions contradict the clear teaching of Scripture. In making its judgment, the presbytery looks carefully at the nature of the exceptions, the heart of the man, the intent of the man, the demeanor of the man, the past ministry of the man, as well as his specific statements of belief. The ability to adjudicate on these matters requires breadth as well as precision in our faith.

The issue before the PCA is not properly framed in terms of "strict" versus some other form of subscription which would seem to need the label, "loose." The issue is whether a man's subscription to the Westminster Standards as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures is compatible with qualifications he may make with respect to statements in the standards not effecting that system. Historic, authentic presbyterian subscription has always allowed for such qualifications in the interest of a clear conscience.

The second ordination vow as taken in the PCA clearly reflects this tradition. If a minister (or ruling elder), having been ordained in the PCA, at any time finds himself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of the system of doctrine, he is morally obligated to make it known to his presbytery (or session). Notice that this obligation relates to any of the fundamentals of the system, not simply to any of the statements of the standards as such.

Even so strong a subscriptionist as James Henley Thornwell allowed for such a distinction. In the report entitled, "Reasons for Separate Organization," written for the newly-formed Southern Presbyterian Church, he makes this point:

A Protestant Church, with an unchangeable creed, is an anomaly. Its very name is a confession of its liability to err; and that no provision should be made for correcting its errors seems not a little extravagant....The Westminster Confession and Catechisms we cordially receive as the mind of the Spirit. We believe them to be faithful expositions of the Word of God. The great system which they teach never can be altered by those who love the Truth; but there are incidental statements, not affecting the plan of salvation and the doctrines of grace, about which our children may not be as well satisfied as ourselves. (*The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* [1873], IV, 442, emphasis added.)

Bona fide (good faith) subscription to the standards as setting forth the system of doctrine taught in the Bible is compatible with exceptions to what Thornwell called "incidental statements." The proper method of handling these matters not affecting the plan of salvation and the doctrines of grace is to declare them at the time of ordination in order that the presbytery may pass judgment as to whether they are incidental or not.

If a presbytery allows an exception, should the man be allowed to teach his exception? If the presbytery has already allowed the exception as one that is not dangerous to the church, then to allow *Semper Reformanda* to work in our church we need to listen to those who are working within our system and are trying to be faithful to the Word of God.

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III. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

While sound theology is not in itself a guarantee of a sound church, the church cannot be sound without it. Our constitutional documents, the historic Westminster Standards, represent the PCA's confession of faith. These Standards are the result of the serious, godly, theological reflection of the church primarily of the Seventeenth Century. Drawn upon the authority of the Bible, God's inerrant Word, the Standards are summary statements of the nature of God, of His creation and the plan of redemption, and therefore of what He requires Christians to believe and to practice.

Theological reflection for our denomination has not been completed by the work of the authors of the Westminster Standards. While those documents have a peculiar control over our church, the Scriptures mandate continued contemplation and examination of the truths revealed to us, and their application in our life today. Teaching the Word is a central part of the church's responsibility (Matt. 28:19; 1 Tim. 4:6, 11-16). She must know the Scriptures, which are able to make believers wise unto salvation, applying the God-breathed Word, which is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

This means that theological reflection must bear on every aspect of church life. We are concerned that the PCA is sometimes tempted to make decisions without laying down proper theological underpinnings. This may take the form of pragmatism, uncritically utilizing methods that work in secular settings. It may take the form of traditionalism, rejecting sound application of Scripture by arbitrarily imposing conventions from previous eras. Or it may take the form of pietism, which disdains careful theological work in the name of spirituality. As we face a future laden with critical issues for the church, we cannot allow ourselves to consider theology as a luxury.

Theological Reflection as a Foundation for Ministry

1. We affirm that evangelism and missions must be determined by theologically sound principles (Matt. 10:16; Luke 24:44-47; John 2:22; 1 Tim. 3:2) and that each of its church courts, as well as its denominational committees and agencies, must continually engage in proper theological scrutiny of their goals and policies (Jas. 1:5).

We deny that simplistic acceptance or rejection of humanly devised methods advances the cause of the Kingdom (1 Thess. 2:3-6, 13; 5:21-22, 2 Pet. 1:16-18) and that uncritical use of secular managerial techniques is compatible with the church's mission (1 Thess. 2:3-6).

2. We affirm the need to support and encourage confessionally Reformed seminaries and other means of training leadership: (Rom. 12:7; 1 Tim. 3:20, 5:17).

We deny that the church's mission can be adequately carried out without a theologically well-trained leadership (2 Tim. 4:2).

3. We affirm that the local church and the presbytery, as well as the General Assembly, need to sponsor and promote theological reflection according to their calling (Phil. 4:9; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27).

We deny that litigation, careless pragmatism, or simple neglect is the primary way to resolve theological issues in the church court (Gal. 6:1-2).

EXPOSITION

Our denomination is committed to many kinds of ministries. The most prominent are represented by our committees and agencies. They include home and international missions, Christian education, the college and the seminary, financial stewardship, and ministry to the outcast and oppressed. In addition, each church and each presbytery feature various kinds of ministries, from evangelism to disaster relief and other mercy ministries. All of these require theological integrity. To achieve that, constant reflection is required in order to ensure faithfulness to the Scriptures. It is easy to ignore the advantages of living in the modern world. It is also easy to accommodate to methods and techniques without proper theological justification.

Theological Discourse within the Church

4. We affirm the need to distinguish between primary doctrinal issues which are essential to the faith, and secondary issues (Phil. 1:10; 1 Tim. 1:5; 1 Tim 6:3; 2 Pet. 2:1-3).

We deny the propriety of elevating every issue to the same level and causing division in the church over them (Matt. 23:23-24; 1 Tim. 1:4; 1 Cor. 4:6).

5. We affirm that doctrines such as the Trinity, the deity and Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Scriptures, justification by faith, and Christ's Second Coming are essential to the Church's existence and to deny them is to commit schism. (1 Tim. 3:14-16).

We deny that such matters as worship styles (see pp. 16-19), the legitimate ministries of women, specific strategic alliances, inter-church relations, the identity, nature, and use of spiritual gifts, and the organizational structure of church bodies are issues that should be treated as though the very foundation of Christ's church were threatened by them (2 Tim. 3:5).

6. We affirm that the truly theologically wise approach to every issue we are facing, essential or peripheral, must be to promote reflection in a spirit of grace and forbearance (Eph. 5:1-2; Col. 3:12-14; 4:6).

We deny that frequent recourse to process and adjudication is healthy for the life of the local church, the presbytery, or the General Assembly. (Matt. 18:15; Rom. 12:10; Gal. 5:22; 6:1-2; 2 Thess. 3:15).

EXPOSITION

The church of Jesus Christ will inevitably face issues which bring controversy. While that is to be expected when men are zealous to obey their consciences, the process can be painful and dangerous to the church (1 Cor. 11:18-19). The PCA is facing a number of questions today which have the potential for division. These include worship styles, the legitimate ministries of women, strategic alliances in missions, specific grounds for divorce and remarriage, inter-church relations, and the structures of the church courts. The dynamics of approaching controversy must involve patient, careful study of God's Word. Proper discipline indeed begins with the Word of God addressed to the interested parties. It then may have to advance to the stage of litigation. But it is crucial for the church to proceed in a spirit of grace and forbearance, even when the issues are of the utmost significance. It is also imperative that the church learn to distinguish between fundamental matters and peripheral ones. Certain issues indeed threaten the very essence of the gospel, and must be approached with the required gravity. Others, while important, do not have that same essential characteristic, and must not be treated as though they did.

Theological Dialogue with the World

7. We affirm the need to recognize the benefits of common grace in our immediate culture and in other cultures (1 Cor. 7:17; 15:25).

We deny that all modern developments are evil or that all wisdom comes from Christians (John 2:1-11; Rev. 21:24).

8. We affirm the need to recognize the evils of our culture so that the church may know how to resist and speak against the temptations of our enemy (1 John 4:1; 5:21).

We deny that the church should be captive to contemporary cultural and political movements rather than to arrive at the truth by proper reflection on the Scriptures (1 Cor. 5:10; 10:23-26).

9. We affirm the need to scrutinize and engage the times we live in, so that the church may function prophetically in the world (1 Chr. 12:32; Matt. 16:3).

We deny that the Church should withdraw from its surrounding culture and ignore the urgent, public moral issues of the day.

EXPOSITION

The world is the place where God's kingdom purposes are being carried out. The world's culture provides the arena for the church to accomplish her tasks. There are two sides to culture which must be observed simultaneously. The first is positive. The cultural mandate given to our

forefathers (Gen. 1:28-30) is a creation ordinance still operative. In this sense, the world is good, and its fullness belongs to the Lord. It is to be subdued and enjoyed by human beings in general and by Christians in particular. The second is negative. Culture has become fallen, a system which is hostile to God's purposes. In this sense, the world is evil, and must be resisted. Faithful theological reflection helps us distinguish between these two aspects of the world, and is crucial if we are to "test everything, hold on to the good, avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thess 5:21-22).

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IV. CHURCH POLITY

The Presbyterian Church in America affirms the presbyterian form of government as "the scriptural form of church government" (BCO, 1-1). By this we mean that Jesus Christ, as King of the Church, has given us offices through which He governs His Church, according to His Word. It is revealed that these same officers -- elders and deacons -- should be elected by the people whom they serve and that the extent of their powers, although considerable, is only ministerial and declarative (BCO Preface, II,7). God has also demonstrated in the Scriptures how the various churches are to be formally connected (BCO 11-4) in broader courts for the purpose of unified praise and fellowship, mutual edification, theological reflection, church discipline, ministries of compassion, and world evangelization.

While these things are generally accepted among us as a *jus divinum*, a divine law, there are many points of polity that are clearly left to the application of general biblical principles and Christian prudence. These include, among other things, the precise division of powers among the various courts of the church, the details of organizational structure, the procedures for conducting the business of the church, the exact measure of authority vested in particular offices, the methods for resolving differences, and the agenda for our meetings and assemblies.

The PCA is a particular Reformed Church, living and serving in a particular culture and moment in history. There are aspects of our polity that are unique in Reformation Church history (e.g., BCO 25-10,11). This is due, partially, to the fact that the American church/state relationship and the pluralistic nature of the American culture present unique demands and opportunities for the Reformed Church. As a Reformed Church, we are absolutely committed to the idea that if we are true to our profession, we shall remain faithful to the unchanging truths of God's Word, that we shall honor our historic presbyterian principles of church government, and that we shall always remain open and eager to change those aspects of our polity that should be influenced by our ecclesiastical and cultural contexts. The structure and organization of a Reformed Church, by the church's very nature, must have flexibility and adaptability built into its polity.

What follows embodies biblical truth, historic presbyterianism, and the PCA's specific expression of our heritage.

Moral Authority and Voluntary Submission

1. We affirm that under normal circumstances it is incumbent upon every Christian to partake in the life of the Church and to submit himself to the government and discipline of the church (Acts 20:28; I Tim. 5:17; Heb. 10:24,25; 13:17; I Peter 5:2-4).

We deny that it is possible to be fully obedient to Christ without active membership in His Church.

2. We affirm that the church is of divine origin and that when the courts of the church rule in accord with God's Word, the courts speak truly in the name of Jesus Christ and must be obeyed by those under their authority, just as they would obey Christ (BCO Preface, I; II, 2,3).

We deny that any Christian has the biblical right to ignore or refuse to obey any biblical ruling of a court of elders to whom he has promised subjection.

3. We affirm that all church, presbytery, and denominational membership, although morally and spiritually imperative, is physically voluntary, and, further, that all means of persuasion or correction by the church must always be only ministerial and declarative, even in the exercise of church discipline (BCO, Preface, II, 1).

We deny that the church in any of her courts can ever rightfully employ physical coercion or civil litigation among her members to accomplish her ends, other than to protect the church's basic civil rights which she holds in common with the rest of society.

EXPOSITION

It is a very dangerous thing for any Christian to neglect or to hold in contempt the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom has been given the keys of the Kingdom and the ordinances of God. When we speak of her ministry being only ministerial and declarative, we do not mean to imply that she has less power than the State, but rather more power, but it is in a different realm and is not to be vitiated by using means not suited to the church's lofty ends. We clearly affirm the divine authority given to the church by God's Word for our good, and we fervently resist all attempts to "democratize" the church or to create "autonomy" in local churches or presbyteries.

We also carefully and biblically circumscribe church authority and resist all forms of prelacy. We believe that the presbyterian form of government most conforms to the New Testament Church. Nevertheless, we realize that the seeds of episcopacy were sown in the post-apostolic Church by the mid-second century. As time progressed, the influence of the senior ministers of the Churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople increased as means of maintaining orthodoxy and increasing efficiency. With the legalization of Christianity by Constantine by the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313, the Church took on more of the structure of the civil government.

One of the reforms effected by Calvin in the Reformation was the restoration of presbyterian government to the Church. But even within presbyterianism there were differing perspectives as to the details of the outworking of the principles of presbyterian church government. Presbyterianism in America began with a more "populist" model of governance than did our European forbearers. It was well-suited to the American experience with a disestablished Church, but over the years it evolved into a more typically Scottish "patrician" model. The PCA at its founding in 1973 clearly reintroduced the "populist," or "egalitarian," model. This was reaffirmed by the Fourteenth General Assembly (1986) in its adoption of the proposals in the paper, "The Philosophical and Theological Basis for our PCA Structure." We have in the past chosen to be a "grassroots church" (BCO 14-2; RAO 1-5; 2-1(2); 3-1; 4-11; 4-12; 11-1) with much power delegated to the presbyteries and particular churches, rather than amassing all decision-making at the General Assembly level. We realize there may be noble intentions --- i.e. efforts to preserve the orthodoxy of the church's theology and discipline or to improve the efficiency of its operations --- behind wanting to evolve into a patrician model of presbyterianism. Nevertheless, we believe we should consciously strive to maintain our egalitarian model of presbyterianism on which our denomination was founded. It is a thoroughly biblical model and it continues to suit well our ecclesiastical and cultural contexts.

The PCA's presbyterianism ensures that no church court can usurp the powers reserved in our constitution for other church courts (BCO, 11-4). No PCA higher court can "act for" a lower court in a "civil" function nor can it resort to the civil court to enforce its decision against a lower

church court. We further guarantee this model by insisting that only the local church has rights of ownership over its own local church property (BCO, 25).

It must also be acknowledged that the church's power, as great as it is, deals only with issues regarding theology, worship, and discipline, for the church's power is ministerial and declarative, moral and spiritual (BCO Preface 11-7, 8; 3-2; 3-4; 11-2).

The Necessity of Godly Leadership

4. We affirm, at every level of the church's life, the continual need for godly leadership that is strong and tender, decisive and consensual, truthful and loving; we further affirm the need for the church to accept, affirm, and deploy leaders for God's work of evangelism, revival, and reform, which work has always involved the raising up of godly and able leaders (I Tim. 5:17).

We deny that the church can effectively serve Christ if she continually opposes and criticizes her leaders privately and publicly; we further deny that the church can effectively serve Christ if she seeks to function like a democracy, with no recognized and empowered leadership.

5. We affirm that the power of Christ is vested in the entire Body and that ecclesiastical jurisdiction is exercised through the plurality of elders (Acts 8:17; 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; BCO 3-1; 27-1; RAO 4-11).

We deny that the authority of Christ is vested in one individual or informal group of individuals; we further deny that anyone should lead, or continue to lead, if he does not seek to function at the pleasure of those he serves.

6. We affirm that individual presbyters who hold "minority opinions" should be careful to raise their opinions or objections in a respectful manner that maintains the peace and dignity of the church court and, further, that those individuals should humbly submit to the majority view of the church court after closure on the issue (at least until a considerable time has elapsed or until new circumstances or a new consensus warrant revisiting the issue), unless it involves issues of moral conscience, in which case the formal procedures of protest, complaint, appeal, or disfellowshipping should be peaceably pursued (BCO 21-6; 24-6).

We deny that individual presbyters with a minority opinion should harass the church court by raising the same issue several times in different ways at the same meeting after the real issue has been heard and decided by the court; we further deny that it is godly to abuse the parliamentary process for the purpose of impeding the procedural progress of a court.

7. We affirm that individual presbyters who hold "majority opinions" should be careful that "minority opinions" are clearly heard and considered in the church court.

We deny that parliamentary procedures should be used to stifle or cut off legitimate debate in church courts on substantive issues.

8. We affirm that opinions and decisions in the church ought always to be fashioned through prayer and reasoned, biblically-based persuasion (WCF 1, 2, 6, 10; WLC 157, 182, 184, 185).

We deny that opinions of the court should be developed or propagated through political maneuvering.

EXPOSITION

Part of the genius of presbyterianism is accountability to our brethren in the Lord. There is an unfortunate tendency of fallen human nature to seek power and to avoid accountability. The General Assembly must continue to guard and revise our system of accountability so that our committees and agencies do not become *de facto* para-church agencies. At the same time, however, with proper means of accountability in operation, we need to allow our leaders to lead. The coordinators and presidents and the permanent committee members whom the General Assembly elects should be able to exercise the leadership roles for which they have been chosen without unwarranted suspicion and criticism. The PCA will be held together, and will be effective, in all her courts, by mutual love and trust, not by the rule of law.

There is never unanimity on all issues that come before a given General Assembly. We use our BCO, RAO, and Robert's Rules of Order to ensure that the will of the majority is enacted while the rights of the minority are protected. Admittedly, the process can be frustrating to both the majority and minority. The majority on a given issue may be tempted to use its sheer strength of numbers to deny a fair debate of an issue that is of consequence to the minority. On the other hand, the minority may be tempted to use parliamentary procedure to prevent, stall, or reverse the will of the majority. Our present procedures give opportunities for the minority on an issue to make its position known, to seek to persuade the majority otherwise, and, in the event of losing a vote, to enter a respectful protest into the record. It is necessary for the purity and peace of the Church that there be open, fair, and reasonable debate of issues before the General Assembly and, after a deciding vote has been taken, that there be closure to the matter at hand.

Church Courts or Church Councils

9. We affirm that our session and presbytery meetings, as well as our general assemblies, should be viewed primarily as family gatherings in church councils (1 Cor. 12:14-26; Eph. 1:22; 2:19-20; Heb. 3:6, 13; WCF XXV,1).

We deny that our session meetings, presbytery meetings, and general assemblies should be adequately and fully described by the term "church courts."

10. We affirm that when the church councils meet, we should engage ourselves in worship, the study of God's Word, prayer, mutual encouragement and love, and deliberation upon our vision and mission, as well as the fulfillment of our constitutional, administrative,

judicial, and programmatic duties. Our engagement must be in biblical proportions at every level of our existence (Acts 2:42; 6:4; Heb. 10:24,25; 13:1-2).

We deny that the purpose of church councils should be limited to the fulfillment of duties listed in BCO 12-5, 13-9, and 14-6.

11. We affirm that the church should be seeking God through the preaching of His Word and sustained prayer that He might grant us vision for the future mission and direction of the church. We further affirm that as gathered leaders, elders should spend time deliberating on the church's future with informed, biblical optimism (the gates of hell cannot prevail against us) with every intent of facing the changing demands of the church and the world with the gospel of Christ (Mt. 6:10; 10:5-15; Acts. 15:36-41; 17:16ff; 18:18-23; WCF, V,3,7; WLC 191).

We deny that it is necessarily presumptuous or untrusting of God's Providence to ask God for vision or to make plans for the future; we further deny that our task is only to deal with past and present problems confronting us.

EXPOSITION

Our description of sessions, presbyteries, and the General Assembly as "church courts" tends to place the emphasis on judicial matters and rules of procedure rather than on worship, fellowship, and ministry. The one dynamic that keeps the church alive and vital is the Holy Spirit Himself. He alone will keep us spiritually minded, tender hearted, and vision oriented. He alone will grant us wisdom to glean the lessons of history while also innovating for today and tomorrow. We believe, therefore, that the time has come to emphasize the most profound ministries of the Spirit --- worship, fellowship, instruction, and encouragement --- without neglecting the administrative work that also must be done under the Spirit's guidance. We believe that this will also result in reducing the adversarial atmosphere that is too frequently evident at many church courts and will thus increase our zeal to attend our sessions, presbyteries, and general assemblies.

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V. WORSHIP

As Presbyterians, we are the grateful heirs of the Reformed tradition, which has clearly based its faith and practice on the Word of God alone. In particular, the Protestant reformers modified and sanctified the worship of God in their day to conform to the pattern of biblical, apostolic practice. In this respect, we believe our tradition still provides a model for true, spiritual worship. As we affirm our past, we are eager to live out these same principles in today's world. In order to do this carefully and fruitfully, especially when there are differences of opinion in the Church, we would always return to the first principle of our Reformation forefathers: *Sola Scriptura*, the Word of God alone.

Worship: The First Priority

1. We affirm that Christian worship is the priestly service (abodah, latreia) of the church in which we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, out of gratitude to Almighty God as He is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, humble ourselves before Him, (shacha, proskuneo) by declaring His worth, confessing His lordship over us, and rendering to Him due honor and glory, according to His Word.

We deny that the ultimate purpose of worship is the satisfaction of human desires; we also deny that worship is to be conducted according merely to the dictates of human reason.

2. We affirm that worship is the very goal of salvation and therefore of all history (John 4:23; Rom. 15:8-11; 1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 5:13, 7:12), and that, as priestly service, it deserves our full attention, energy and participation.

We deny that worship is a peripheral or dispensable element of the Christian life or that a worshipper may take a merely passive role, as we often do with entertainment media. We further deny that corporate worship should be understood as a mere preamble to preaching or evangelism.

EXPOSITION

Worship is not just one activity among others, but it is the very heart of the believer's existence and of the body life of the church. Worship is the purpose for which God has saved us from sin (John 4:23; 1 Pet. 2:9), and the praises of God in Christ will fill the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 5:12-13).

Worship: Vertical and Horizontal

3. We affirm that worship which honors God will also edify believers (1 Cor. 14:1-17, 26) and challenge unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:22-25).

We deny that seeking the glory of God in worship requires us to ignore therein the true

spiritual needs of worshippers, or that it allows us to ignore our obligation to show the love of Christ to fellow worshippers (1 Cor. 11:17-34; John 13:35; James 2:1-4).

4. We affirm that worship includes particular meetings of God's people (1 Cor. 14:1-39; Heb. 10:25) as well as times of private and family devotions (Job 1:5; Dan. 6:10; Matt. 6:5-6).

We deny that it honors God to avoid worship at any of these levels.

5. We affirm also a broader sense of worship, which includes the whole of the Christian life offered as a living sacrifice to God (Rom. 12:1 & 2; James 1:27).

We deny that either "broad" or "narrow" worship without the other pleases God (Matt. 23:23-24; Heb. 10:25).

EXPOSITION

In worship, we humble ourselves before God and serve Him, honoring Him as Lord and Savior. This is true both in the "narrow sense" of worship, in which we set aside certain times to meet with God (Heb. 10:25), and in the "broad sense" in which all of life is a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1, 2). Worship is therefore "vertical" in focus: God-centered and Christ-centered, in and through the Holy Spirit. However, there is also a "horizontal" aspect of worship, for glorifying God does not forbid, but requires us, in worship to edify one another (1 Cor. 14:26).

Worship: The Regulative Principle

6. We affirm that the "elements" of worship, the basic acts we perform to honor God, are limited to those which God approves in Scripture, by every way that God reveals His will: precept, illustration, commendation, and commandment, in both the Old and New Testaments (Ex. 20:4-6; Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:8-9; Col. 2:23; cf. also WCF I.6, XXI.1; LC, 108, 109). This is our "regulative principle of worship."

We deny that human beings have liberty to devise elements of worship that God has not prescribed or to disallow others to perform elements He has clearly approved.

7. We affirm that there are also varying "circumstances" of worship that affect specific ways in which we express the elements of worship. Among the circumstances of worship are the time and place of worship as well as the culture within which the worship takes place. We also affirm that there are varying "expressions" of worship, which include the order of the elements, the specific words of sermons, the musical style, the forms of prayer, and the use of historical rubrics.

We deny that circumstances and expressions are treated in the Scriptures in the same way as elements, and, further, we deny that this list of circumstances and expressions is exhaustive.

8. We affirm that there are elements and expressions of worship which are not universally employed in the PCA and that remain somewhat controversial, such as the use of drama, dance, musical instruments and vocalists, the lifting or clapping of hands, the use of women in liturgical leadership, and the use of various forms of art; and, further, we affirm that the use of these elements and expressions, although not specifically prohibited by the Scriptures or the Directory of Worship, ought always to be decided with full reverence to God alone, under the guidance of biblical principles, and with humble respect for the unity of the Church.

We deny that the Reformed tradition of worship should never change or that it should change without careful reflection in the Church.

9. We affirm that Scripture regulates these circumstances and expressions in general, and sometimes in specific ways; but in many cases, the specific decisions in these matters must be determined by "the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed" (WCF I, vi).

We deny either that we may make decisions regarding the circumstances or expressions of worship without consulting Scripture, or that we need specific Scripture warrant for every circumstance or expression.

10. We affirm that churches and other worshipping groups may arrange the elements and select the expressions of worship elements in different ways, within scriptural bounds. Thus there is a significant area of freedom within the biblical structure of worship.

We deny that there is only one legitimate way to arrange or express any particular element of worship, as if all worship services should be identical to one another.

11. We affirm that the regulative principle sets us free from the "traditions of men" (Isa. 29:13; BCO 47-6).

We deny that the regulative principle should be used to promote an uncritical acceptance of tradition in worship, whether that tradition be Presbyterian or from some other branch of the church.

12. We affirm that although the regulative principle has a specific meaning in the formal and public worship of God, the regulative principle also governs all worship, whether formal or informal, official or unofficial, public or private.

We deny that in any form of worship (even worship as the whole of life) we are free to do other than God's expressed will or to seek any other ultimate goal than His glory (1 Cor. 10:31; Rom 14:23; Col. 3:17, 23). We also deny that "informal" worship is subject to a different regulative principle from that of the church's formal, official worship (although there may be some practices legitimate for informal or private worship that must be restricted in or for public worship; cf. I Cor. 14:1-5; 13-19, 26-33).

13. We affirm that the freedom that the New Testament gives in arranging the elements and circumstances of worship and in expressing cultural diversity should be balanced with concerns for the unity of the worldwide church (Rom. 14:5, 6; Col. 2:16; 3:12-17). This unity extends horizontally across the current generation of Christians throughout the world and also vertically across every age (and therefore back into biblical times). Sensitivity towards unity of form and styles will also lessen the difficulty that believers experience when visiting other congregations or in relocating and transferring membership.

We deny that churches are so free in developing their own styles that they should ignore the practice of other churches, losing sight of the unity of the church at worship.

EXPOSITION

In worship we seek to honor God; and how will we know what pleases Him apart from His Word? Therefore our worship is limited to those "elements" that God's Word prescribes. We may not invent or devise new elements of worship beyond what God has revealed (Isa. 29:13). However, that does not mean that we must find a scripture verse to tell us when we should meet, whether to use pews or chairs, whether to use a piano or guitar. The detailed ways in which we carry out the biblical commands of worship are often varied by the dictates of "circumstances." Sometimes Scripture speaks concerning these variations, but in many cases we have no specific scriptural guidance and have to make decisions by our own God-given wisdom, in light of the broader principles of the Word.

Different churches may arrange the "circumstances" differently and may use varying expressions of the elements of worship, because of differences in location, culture, historical background, evangelistic opportunities, etc. Some congregations believe that a regular, formal liturgy enables them better to concentrate on the worship of God. Others find a more informal, frequently varied style is more conducive to the goals of edification and evangelism. We do have freedom in such matters. But that freedom should be exercised according to scriptural values. Even regarding our circumstantial decisions, we must ask what best glorifies God, what is most conducive to the edification of believers and unbelievers alike (1 Cor. 14:1-25).

Unfortunately, the regulative principle is sometimes used as a club to force believers to worship according to older traditions, even traditions which for many are no longer understandable. This is ironic, for the regulative principle, both in Scripture itself (Matt. 15:8-9) and during the Reformation, was used against religious traditionalism, to oppose it with the claims of Scripture. Tradition is not to be despised, certainly. There are many values in it. We gratefully acknowledge what may be the Reformed tradition's greatest value: that our ultimate standard is Scripture and Scripture alone. Regulation of worship by Scripture alone puts all other tradition in its proper place: as a valuable resource, but not as a rule for faith.

VI. BIBLICAL DISCIPLINE

Ecclesiastical discipline practiced in accord with biblical principles and priorities is necessary for: the vindication of God's glory, rule, and honor; the purity, witness, and influence of Christ's Church; and, the warning, correction, and restoration of offending members. Discipline practiced by Christ's Church must conform to our God's own redemptive purposes. This means that the purposes of proper discipline are never vindictive, vengeful, nor merely punitive. As its end biblical discipline seeks repentance, reconciliation, remedy, and restoration (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; Gal. 6:1). Such discipline requires courage and compassion since it expresses the church's concern faithfully to promote and to defend righteousness, love, justice, and mercy (Micah 6:8).

1. We affirm that the Church of Jesus Christ must exercise courageous and compassionate discipline and that a church that (as a matter of policy) never practices formal discipline dishonors God.

We deny that church discipline, when performed according to the Word of God and in the Spirit of Christ, is harsh or unloving.

2. We affirm the need for consistent and orderly procedures for formal discipline.

We deny that the church should exercise discipline apart from the specific guidance of the Scriptures and proper regard for our published standards, "The Rules of Discipline."

3. We affirm that God designed the church's discipline in such a way to give elders great discretion and flexibility in applying Scripture's wisdom to the personal complexities and situational specifics of fallen creatures.

We deny that formulaic or mechanical judgments can wisely be used to apply biblical principles of discipline.

4. We affirm that the healthy church will prefer, when possible, informal over formal discipline, and encouragement over correction.

We deny that church courts who prefer, when possible, to avoid formal judicial process are lacking in discipline; we further deny that true biblical discipline is undermined by an occasional, biblically-based decision not to pursue a prosecutable matter in ecclesiastical courts.

5. We affirm the need for a graded system of courts in Presbyterian polity and, further, that the same standards of justice and mercy are incumbent upon each court.

We deny that the presence and practices of sessions, presbyteries, and general assemblies in any way lessen the church's obligation at every level of authority to perceive and conduct itself lovingly and discreetly as the family of God.

6. We affirm the use of commissions, when appropriate, for the exercise of church discipline.

We deny that every member of a given court must hear and adjudicate every case in order for justice and mercy to be administered, given the nature of a commission and our representative form of government.

EXPOSITION

In order to ensure the fairness, order, and propriety of their disciplinary processes, Presbyterian churches organize their formal discipline procedures in accord with a judicial court model (1 Cor. 14:40; 1 Tim. 5:19). However, as necessary as these processes are to protect individual rights and ecclesiastical integrity, any church errs when it begins to characterize or distinguish its identity primarily in juridical terms. When a church begins to think of itself as a "court system," then it will inevitably become too open to securing organizational orthodoxy and member conformity by coercive means. Biblical concerns about the health of the church's focus, the spirit of its assemblies, the priorities of its mission, and the dissipation of its energies may serve as legitimate reasons for the delegation of discipline to committees and commissions (Ex. 18:17-26; Acts 15:2, 22; 2 Cor. 1:23-2:10).

Biblical "discipline" is properly exercised when the church recognizes that in Scripture the process (as well as the term itself) is most commonly affiliated with the analogy of parenting (e.g. Deut. 21:8-18; Prov. 13:18, 24; Mt. 18:14-19; Heb. 12:5-11). Just as a child needs parental discipline to mature in character, so the children of God require discipline to mature in faithfulness. The parental model first reminds the church that discipline is to be administered prudently, consistently, and compassionately (Eph. 6:4). In addition, the parental model cautions Christian leaders never to practice ecclesiastical discipline impatiently, imprudently, or mechanically.

No responsible parent (concerned for the well-being of a child) fails to exercise consistent discipline, but neither does a wise parent engage in a formal discipline process for every offense. Similarly, the church should exercise parental prudence in the administration of discipline. The nature of the offense, the maturity of the offender, and the effects upon the larger church family must all be considered in determining whether to discipline formally, when to discipline, and the degree of discipline (John 16:12; Acts 16:3; 1 Cor. 3:2; 2 Cor. 1:23-2:4; Philemon 8, 9). Were it not critical to weigh these matters, then Scripture would not require church rule through elders required to manage their own homes well (1 Tim. 3:4).

The dominant images of Scripture used to describe the church (e.g. family, body, flock, temple) should remind believers that informal discipline (which includes faithful preaching of the Word, proper administration of the sacraments, the modeling of mature Christians, relational nurturing, conversational correction, collective scrutiny of Scripture, electoral processes, and many other forms of daily admonishment that are part of the body-life of a Christian community) is the primary community corrective by which the Holy Spirit maintains the purity of the church (cf. Col. 3:16). Although a member's unrepentant perseverance in sin normally compels the church to formal judicial action, Christian brothers and sisters should also understand that judicial procedure (analogous to a parent taking a child to court) is not the primary means by which God intends for the church to exercise its obligation for familial correction. Attitudes, actions, and instruction that drive local churches or our assemblies too swiftly and too frequently to ecclesiastical trials damage the harmony, work, witness and advancement of Christ's Kingdom as well as its purity (John 21:15; Phil. 4:5; 2 Tim. 2:23-26, 4:2). A church zealous for purity glorifies God; churches lusting for court cases dishonor God (Rom. 12:17-21; Col. 3:12-15; Titus 3:9-11).

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VII. MISSION

Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. He purchased His people with His blood and has bound them together in His Church under His Lordship. He determines and defines the Church's purpose as well as the general principles for accomplishing it. Our responsibility, as one branch of the Church, is to follow Christ faithfully and to build His Church in obedience to the Great Commission.

Theological Foundations for Mission

1. We affirm that the mission of the church, summarized, for example, in Matthew 28:18-20, is the mission of the triune God calling His elect people unto Himself to redeem, rule, and protect them and, through them, to accomplish His purpose on earth.

We deny that the church's mission is of human origin or design or primarily man's accomplishment through human effort.

2. We affirm that the Reformed Faith compels us to engage in evangelism and discipleship in obedience to the Great Commission.

We deny that the Reformed Faith ever gives us the right to withhold, disregard or disobey the Great Commission, or that the Great Commission gives us the right to disregard the Reformed Faith.

3. We affirm that since man by nature is sinful, condemned, and totally helpless to save himself, the church must proclaim the redemptive message of Jesus Christ as the sinner's only hope of salvation (Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:1-3; Acts 4:12).

We deny that PCA congregations, presbyteries or the General Assembly can be obedient to God without faithfully proclaiming the gospel locally and to the ends of the earth.

4. We affirm that while the Church may delegate certain mission functions to other agencies, it remains God's primary agent for the accomplishment of the Great Commission.

We deny that the church is at liberty to abdicate or to delegate to other agencies its ultimate responsibility for fulfilling the Great Commission.

EXPOSITION

The Church's mission is grounded in an objective, supernatural revelation. God has spoken authoritatively through the Scripture, which is His written Word. Jesus Christ is the final Word from God and reveals the fullness of God's redemptive plan (Lk. 24:27, 44-45; Heb. 1:1-2). Christianity, as a revealed religion, came into being by God's design, not man's.

One way the Church glorifies God is by knowing and obeying His command to disciple the nations. God's promise to Abraham that the nations would be blessed through him is fulfilled as the gospel is proclaimed to all peoples (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:8).

The Scripture clearly teaches that all people are separated from God because of sin. God's one and only plan to redeem sinners is through His Son, Jesus Christ. Through Christ's substitutionary atonement and victorious resurrection, salvation is secured for the elect of all the nations. God's plan includes the proclamation of this gospel through the agency of His Church.

Principles of Mission Strategy

5. We affirm that the ultimate goal of the Church's mission is the glory of God, and, further, that He is glorified when local churches, presbyteries and the General Assembly fulfill the Great Commission through the multiplication of churches locally, nationally, and worldwide.

We deny that the ultimate mission of God is accomplished when only evangelism or only social ministries are carried out without resulting in the establishing of churches, locally, nationally and worldwide.

6. We affirm that the Church's task of evangelism is to confront the lost with the gospel and further to build the Church through the conversion of unbelievers and their families.

We deny that the Church's task of evangelism is merely to provide a gathering place for already Reformed Christians.

7. We affirm that the gospel must be communicated in the language and culture of the hearer, using a multiplicity of methods, and that the church must constantly reform its methods, in light of the Scriptures, to suit the context.

We deny that the ministry of the gospel is permanently encapsulated in any period of history, any one culture, or any set of methods.

8. We affirm that the Reformed Faith should be made intelligible and applicable to all cultures and socio-economic classes, which entails cultural and linguistic sensitivities and adaptations.

We deny that the Reformed Faith is only understandable and relevant to "thinking" classes, or to the more educated people; we further deny that the Reformed Faith should be cast today only in the language and culture of its great historical moments in previous centuries.

9. We affirm that biblical mission is most effective when done indigenously, and we further affirm that the training and empowering of indigenous leadership must be a central part of our mission strategy.

We deny that biblical mission can be done solely by expatriate missionaries.

EXPOSITION

In order to be effective, we must learn to apply biblical revelation and redemption in the Church's context of ministry, i.e., in its geographical and cultural setting. Each generation of the Church needs to assess the way in which it will minister the Word of life to its own generation. The form or shape of a ministry of a particular era may or may not be appropriate for another era.

An important distinction must be maintained: biblical truth is eternal and abiding; it does not change because its Author never changes. Yet its form of delivery, i.e., the manner and strategy used to present this truth, may change depending on the context of a particular ministry. The Church is to speak clearly to the culture in which it exists. If, for example, we compare Paul's sermons delivered in Antioch and in Athens (Acts 13:16-41 and 17:22-33), we see that in Antioch the audience addressed was predominantly Jewish, and there were numerous references to Old Testament Scriptures. That audience was familiar with the Scriptures and could relate to the flow of Paul's message. The audience in Athens, however, was unfamiliar with the Old Testament's teachings and history. To these people Paul presented Christ without quoting Scripture, although he based what he said on special revelation. He preached Christ in both sermons. But each sermon was "packaged" differently, appropriate to the context of his audience.

A local church's strategy also depends on its ministry location. If it is in an urban setting, its ministry, where possible, should reflect the peculiarities of that urban setting. If it is in a rural setting, its ministry should reflect the needs of that rural setting. The PCA has churches in a variety of settings. We should expect a wide diversity of ministry styles. The differences of style should not be interpreted to mean that one style of ministry is more biblical or credible than another. This is also true of the PCA's ministry on foreign mission fields, as each mission field is different culturally and linguistically.

The Unique Strategy of the PCA

10. We affirm that the PCA is only one branch of Christ's worldwide Church and, as such, is spiritually connected to the larger Church; and we, therefore, must cooperate and share responsibility with all true churches in fulfilling the Great Commission. We further affirm that the Reformed Faith flourishes and spreads when we cooperate with and influence other evangelical Christians.

We deny that, simply on the basis of our distinctive theology, we should refuse to cooperate with other evangelical bodies who do not share all of our distinctives. We also deny that our connection to the broader church obliges us to cooperate irrespective of our convictions, purpose and goals.

11. We affirm that the PCA's unique role and strategy in any setting is conditioned by our theological perspective, the specific needs of the culture, the stage of the churches' development in a given culture, and the specialized gifts that the PCA can offer at any given moment.

We deny that our role should be uniform in every situation or limited to a single focus or specialty.

12. We affirm that, due to modern technology, changing political structures and global needs, and God's providence in giving expertise to persons outside the PCA, we should be open to creative alliances with ministries that have similar biblical values.

We deny that the PCA has, on its own, all the resources of ideas, expertise, gifts, and finances to accomplish God's mission most effectively in any given place.

13. We affirm that biblical stewardship, wise planning and potential impact strongly suggest that we focus most of our missional energies on the great urban population centers of the world. At the same time we affirm our commitment to start and strengthen churches of all sizes in all kinds of communities, locally, nationally, and worldwide.

We deny that decisions regarding the deployment of resources should have nothing to do with our best estimate of comparative potential impact for the Kingdom of God.

14. We affirm that biblical wisdom demands an openness and response to unexpected doors of opportunity, recognizing that God is the one who opens and closes doors of opportunity (politically and culturally), as well as individual hearts (Acts. 14:27; 16:6-10; Col. 4:3).

We deny that plans and strategies should not be dynamic (open to immediate change) or that our plans are the determining factors of God's provisions and blessings.

EXPOSITION

In the PCA's brief history, we have enjoyed remarkable growth in our MNA and MTW programs. We believe that one reason for this has been the unusual flexibility and cooperative spirit with which this Reformed ministry has been undertaken. We have distinctive theological commitments which we believe are gifts to the larger church and which we are eager to propagate around the world. We have distinctive abilities which we believe God would have us develop and deploy in missions. We also celebrate our membership in the world-wide, multi-faceted Church, and when we can cooperate without theological or strategic compromise, we believe we should join hands and work together, without consideration for who gets the credit. We believe that this strategic cooperation has been effective not only in our evangelistic efforts, but also in our desire to influence the broader Church theologically.

The PCA continues to commit itself uncompromisingly to the system of doctrine contained in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and also to exploit all of the permissible means of our modern world to propagate the gospel. We want to stand ready to go any where, at any time, at any personal cost to advance the Kingdom of God.

2/14/94