



## A Troubling Turn: PCA General Assembly 2016

POSTED BY [TERRY L. JOHNSON](#)

By and large I have stayed out of the politics of the General Assembly (GA) for the past 34 years. Because I pastor at an *independent* Presbyterian church, I have not been motivated to educate myself--in a significant way--about the nuances of the BCO (Book of Church Order). If I'm honest, I have to admit that there is much that I do not understand about the RAO (Rules of Assembly Operation). Additionally, I have not followed the implications of the SJC (Standing Judicial Commission) rulings. I have only taken an active part in GA when matters of worship have come to the fore, such as development of the *Trinity Psalter* and the debate over intinction. I *have* understood enough to be annoyed over a-theological, a-historical reasoning so often employed by the progressive wing of the PCA. Yet typically I've not been adequately informed to enter into the debates.

This year we had three conventional, par-for-the- course General Assembly decisions that included problematic elements. I'll describe them briefly. However, we also had one that, in my opinion, included aspects that were nothing less than ominous. I wish to elaborate on that in more detail.

### **Missional theology**

Covenant Seminary changed the name of its Systematic Theology courses, the core of a seminary's curriculum, to "Missional Theology." Missional is a fashionable term of recent coinage. This, of itself, is enough to raise suspicions. Systematic theology is where the entire curriculum is supposed to be integrated: biblical theology, Old Testament, New Testament, church history all lend their insights. I'll never forget Roger Nicole, at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, responding to a proposed revision of the curriculum which would reduce the theological core. Nicole, of even temper; Nicole, who never got angry; Nicole, who never raised his voice; Nicole of cheerful disposition; Nicole turned red with anger and declared that the history of theological education showed that the slide towards liberalism *always* began with a reduction of the theological core in favor of what inevitably we called "practical" courses. Do our seminary administrators, our permanent committee, or our committee of commissioners know this history? The additional tasks assigned to Systematics, implied by the new title "Missional," inevitably will dilute commitment to core dogmatics.

### **Sabbath**

Review of presbytery minutes revealed a man had been ordained who did not believe the *Westminster Confession of Faith's* teaching on the Sabbath. He

promised not to teach his views or contradict the *Confession's*. This was deemed adequate and he was ordained. Is it? A promise not to contradict is not a promise to be an advocate, or to champion the confessional view. He could never "call the Sabbath a delight," as does Isaiah (ch. 58), and urge his congregations' compliance in light of both the command itself and *the benefits*. This I have classified as a mere run-of-the-mill disturbance--even though it shows what we all know, that a substantial percentage of the denomination's ordained officers are in violation of their ordination vows. They may claim "Calvin's view," though Richard Gaffin's *Calvin and the Sabbath* would likely rebut their claim. Or they may plead a "continental view," though Hughes Old insists that what they describe as "the continental view" is merely the continental *Roman Catholic* view. Regardless, what our officers subscribe to is not Calvin's or the "continental" Reformed view, but *Westminster's*, and it is *Westminster's* that apparently they no longer believe.

### **Racial reconciliation**

We acknowledged our sin of racism during the Civil Rights Era, repenting of the sin of the Southern Presbyterian Church, which as an institution defended Jim Crow and racially segregated churches. This, it seems to me, is a good thing--even long overdue by those individuals, institutions, and churches that participated in the dehumanizing practice of including and excluding, accepting and rejecting, condemning and absolving on the basis of race alone. Repentance is good for the souls of transgressors and is healing for the souls of victims and society. However, the approved statement implied that all the same racist policies, attitudes and actions persist in the PCA to this day--as though no progress on race relations has been made. This was said while a dear African-American brother stood at the lectern and presented the proposed statement to the denomination; and, the evening following its approval, another dear African-American brother was the featured speaker. These would be scenes unimaginable in the Southern Presbyterian Church in the 1960's. The "nothing has changed" attitude is the perspective of the racial grievance industry, rather than that of Christian charity. Thankfully, it was rebutted by a commissioner in a multiracial marriage who, as an overseas missionary, regularly travels all through the PCA raising support. He insisted that his family has never encountered any racial bigotry; rather, they have experienced love, kindness, and support. To imply otherwise, as this statement does, is to equate yesterday with today and to trivialize both the sins of the oppressors of a generation ago and the suffering of their victims.

### **Women in Ministry**

While I was bothered by those things mentioned above, what I deemed to be ominous was the approval of a study committee on women's issues that includes, in its scope, a reevaluation of ordination. This is more than disturbing. This threatens the future of the PCA, a denomination born in part in opposition to the ordination of women. The outlook of the progressive wing of the PCA was revealed in debate. One individual said, "The ladies at your church will love you for voting in favor of this." Another said, "I guarantee our women are listening very carefully to what we are saying right now." Are these men assuming that *all* PCA women disagree with the denomination's position on women's ordination? That women are

a monolithic block with uniform opinions and voting patterns? Mind you, this was said by those who present themselves as the *champions* of women. I blush for the lack of self-awareness. Clearly there is ordained leadership that believes that the PCA must bend with the times, beginning with ordaining of women as deaconesses, based, it seems, on the perception that this is what *all* women want.

Particularly insulting was a speaker who kept asking the opposition, "Why are you afraid to study the Bible? Why are you afraid of what we might find?" The more traditional part of the PCA is afraid to open their Bibles? Really? That is the problem? I should have moved that we form a study committee to reexamine "the doctrine of the Trinity" or "the dual nature of Christ." What if we moved to form a study committee to reexamine the pros and cons of racial segregation. I trust that the point is obvious. Some issues are closed. Some issues have been studied, discussed, debated, and settled. This is how many of us in the PCA view the reopening the issue of women in ministry. Women *are* in ministry and always have been. However, they are not to be ordained as officers or given the titles of officers. That particular matter has been studied for 2000 years. It has been discussed repeatedly by the PCA. The case is closed. It is insulting and absurd to suggest that the opposition is "afraid" to open the Bible. Is it desirable to ordain women as deacons or give them titles as deaconesses? The fact that the same men who proposed a study committee on this issue do not propose that we ordain women deacons is because that would be a direct approach to the issue and would most certainly fail. A study committee is proposed not because study is needed, but because, at least for some, it is seen as an intermediate step that is viewed as a vehicle to broaden the denominational stance to ordination or something like ordination.

Why do I regard the approval of this study committee as a "troubling turn?" I believe that this approach poses a threat to the unity of the PCA. If the progressives have their way and ordination is opened to women, *there will most certainly be a split*. Too many of us recognize that there *is* a slippery slope, a hermeneutical slippery slope, an attitudinal slippery slope, repeated over and over again in church history. The ordination of women was a milestone in the decline of the UPCUSA, the PCUS, and the CRC, to name a few (see this [recent Christianity Today article](#)), Does the progressive wing of the PCA, which ridicules the concept of the slippery slope, know this history?

My wife Emily, whom I love more than life itself, taught me an important word in our marriage: Validate. Validate my concerns, she would say. Don't make fun of them. Don't ridicule them. Understand and validate them. Then disagree if you must, but first show me that you understand why I am anxious. So, I say to the progressive wing of the PCA: Don't mock those with whom you disagree. Recognize the validity of the convictions of your brothers in the conservative wing of the PCA. The PCA will be a healthier denomination if the progressive wing will try to understand the perspective of the conservatives, and seek to accommodate--rather than brush aside--these concerns.

[Editorial update: One reader has drawn to our attention the fact that it is

*important to note that there was no "revision" or "reduction" in the curriculum at Covenant Theological Seminary (CTS). Dr. Dalbey clarified before the Assembly that the same number of hours of the same systematic theology courses are still required. Additionally, Covenant Theological Seminary changed a department name, not course names. Finally, there is a separate department at CTS referred to as "practical" theology that was not grouped in with systematic/missional.]*

*[Author update: In light of [recent feedback](#) that suggests that I misrepresented my brothers in Christ, I want to clarify my comments about Covenant Seminary's curriculum. I heard the discussion while present on the floor of the Assembly and was alarmed, not comforted. We were told that the change to "missional" was being made because the scope of Systematics was being broadened to include "missional" themes. Thus I refer to "the additional tasks assigned to Systematics." Since those tasks must be taken up, occupying time and energy otherwise devoted to the traditional Systematics' curriculum, the result will be to "dilute commitment to core dogmatics." Despite claims to the contrary, I think I'm right about this, though I am open to correction. If I have misrepresented the impact of "Missional" themes on the curriculum, I will want to express my deepest apologies.*

*Regarding racial issues, we want to celebrate our progress as a Christian community as well as repent of the past. However, it is impossible for us to celebrate if our "continuing racial sins" include "segregation of worshipers by race, the exclusion of persons from church membership on the basis of race... teaching that the Bible sanctions racial segregation... defense of white supremacist organizations," etc. At one time, all of the above was official policy (except the last). None is today. None. The PCA actively pursues racial inclusivity, and has for decades.*

*Undoubtedly there are cranks who remain convinced racists, just as there are misguided individuals in the PCA who are pro-abortion. The flaw in the resolution, in my view, is that in the transition from the "whereases" (the fourth dealing with the past; the fifth, dealing with the present), to the Resolution, these statements were combined, confusing the present with the past, obscuring our progress in race relations in the process. This final form of the Resolution was not seen until the assembly and so was not subject to the careful review process of the prior 12 months. I fear this failure to distinguish the past with its official, institutional, and attitudinal racism, from present with its remaining attitudinal racism will weaken the impact its authors, and we all, hoped it would have.]*

---

POSTED JUNE 29, 2016 @ 8:17 AM BY [TERRY L. JOHNSON](#)

TOPICS: [PCA GA](#); [Women Deacons](#); [ordination](#)



[reformation21](#) is the online magazine of the Alliance of Confessing

Evangelicals. It is supported only by its readers and gracious Christians like you. Please prayerfully consider supporting [reformation21](#) and the mission of the Alliance. Please [donate here](#).

Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Inc. © 2005-2018 | [alliance@alliancenet.org](mailto:alliance@alliancenet.org) | 800.956.2644  
[Asked Questions](#) | [Login](#)