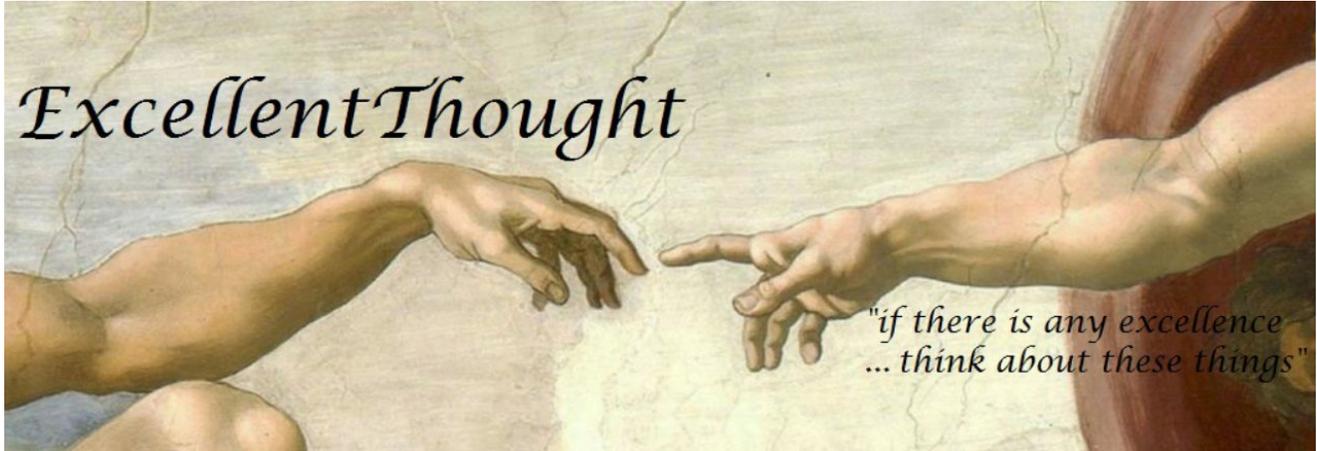


Peace and Purity in the PCA: A Primer for Members

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August 26,
2019



During the eight years that Barack Obama was president, friends and colleagues would often complain about various policies or actions of his administration. While I was usually sympathetic with their angst, I would often respond, "Well, we have no one to blame but ourselves. After all, we (the American people) elected him."

I had a similar response when watching an openly gay PCA pastor [speak at at our recent General Assembly](#)—and receive applause from many elders in attendance. While I didn't personally vote to call him—just as my complaining friends and colleagues didn't vote to elect President Obama, the truth is that Greg Johnson and most of those who support his position on Revoice and his ordination as a teaching elder wouldn't have been at General Assembly as elders in our denomination unless we, members of the PCA, had voted to call them.

Though I have lead with him, this piece isn't about Johnson. It isn't about Revoice. Or even, in some ways, about the challenges facing the PCA. It is really about our call, as lay members in the PCA, to faithfully exercise our God-given, Book of Church Order confirmed responsibilities to assist our denomination in its submission to God's authority as given to us in Holy Scripture. To that end, I offer some questions toward the end of this piece that we as members can discuss with our elders, candidates for elders, and other members so that we can better understand their beliefs about important issues facing the church today.

I offer these questions because whether one supports, opposes, or is lukewarm on Revoice and other issues of debate in our denomination, all of us as PCA members have work to do as part of our church polity. And as a member of a local church, our work is not at the GA or, for the most part, even the denominational level, it is at home in our congregations. Through our God-designed polity, which we believe to be "essential to the perfection of the church," members have the awesome responsibility to call (and select, in the case of the senior pastor) all the elders who rule over us and guide our church.

As a reminder of what this means, here are the vows that we, as "sinners in the sight of God" who "rest upon [Christ] alone for salvation," take when we agree to receive a minister whom we have called:

- Do you, the people of this congregation, continue to profess your readiness to receive _____, whom you have called to be your pastor?
- Do you promise to receive the word of truth from his mouth with meekness and love, and to submit to him in the due exercise of discipline?
- Do you promise to encourage him in his labors, and to assist his endeavors for your instruction and spiritual edification?
- Do you engage to continue to him while he is your pastor that competent worldly maintenance which you have promised, and to furnish him with whatever you may see needful for the honor of religion and for his comfort among you?

And here is our vow when we receive a ruling elder (or deacon):

Do you, the members of this church, acknowledge and receive this brother as a ruling elder (or deacon), and do you promise to yield him all that honor, encouragement and obedience in the Lord to which his office, according to the Word of God and the Constitution of this Church, entitles him?

I'll round this off with the last two vows we take when we become members:

- Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
- Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

The first thing that stands out to me from these vows is that we are to submit to, honor, and encourage the men we call as elders with meekness and love, echoing 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13: "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves."

In addition, as we seek to fulfill these vows, especially the vows to "support the Church in its worship and work," "study its peace and purity," and "encourage him in his labors," I suggest we are also responsible for establishing to the best of our ability that the "word of truth" is being spoken from the mouth of a man before we call him to be an elder—our session serves as guidance on this, but we are to provide the final determination. It would not be encouraging to call a man to something he cannot do well. The BCO (see BCO 24-7) also makes clear our calling to continue to play a role in this, along with the courts of the church, after a man has been called and ordained as an elder. Iron sharpening iron applies to all relationships in the church—though let's be attentive to that log in our eye along the way.

To carry out this calling, we must read and meditate on Scripture, pray to God for wisdom and guidance, follow the theological and cultural debates of our day, fellowship and discuss these issues with our brothers and sisters, and actively seek to apply the wisdom born of this process to the issues, debates, and challenges we encounter in our life in this fallen world.

I noted at the beginning of this email that it isn't really about Revoice. But that doesn't mean the PCA isn't facing significance struggles. In fact, the PCA's battles internally over theology and externally with the culture have been going on since almost the beginning of when we became a denomination. As I've written before, "one needs a scorecard today to keep up with the challenges and controversies within the PCA that are often debated at its annual General Assembly: the Revoice Conference and LGBTQ+ Christians, the roles and relationships of men and women in the church and society, the Federal Vision, race and Christ's ministry of reconciliation, the meaning and historicity of Genesis 1-3, and a mishmash of the role of government, biblical justice, and the gospel often referred to by the terms social justice and social gospel." We can now add to the list the PCA's first openly gay pastor and the "Me Too" movement.

We should remember that these debates are not just going on within our denomination, they are going on in most of our individual congregations. I know that in my church there are members/elders that believe the Bible allows women to read scripture and lead prayers during Sunday worship and there are those who don't. There are members/elders who are generally okay with an openly gay (though celibate) man being a PCA pastor and there are those who are not. There are members/elders who believe when the Bible and the

Westminster Confession say that God created the heavens and earth in six days they actually mean six days and there are those who don't. There are members/elders who agree to some extent with the concept of "white privilege" and there are those who don't.

These are important issues that lead into other even more important issues, and if we don't discuss and debate them among ourselves in our congregations we risk putting the peace of the church over its purity and the Word of truth—until the purity and truth are no more. This was a significant part of the problem with what happened to some of the denominations that came before us, such as the Presbyterian Church U.S., the Episcopalians, the Methodists, etc., during their descent into liberalism.

In the spirit of encouragement and clarity and with an eye toward maintaining the purity and peace of the church, I'd encourage each of us to discuss with our elders (and each other) where they stand on these and other issues, a discussion that should not only inform us but educate us. I've started doing this at my own church and have been blessed by the graciousness of the elders (or elders to be) in interacting with me.

I realize that how we approach this will be quite different for each of us, but I have put together some questions that might serve as a starting place for members to get things started for discussions with current elders, elder candidates, and members:

- A numbers of folks in the conservative biblical community wrote and/or signed the Statement on Social Justice & the Gospel. What are your thoughts about that? If you don't know about it, do you think the terms social gospel and social justice—and the messages of those who generally use them—diminish or deflect from the biblical truths of the gospel and justice?
- Do you believe Scripture allows for women to read Scripture, lead prayers, or serve communion during Sunday worship?
- Do you believe that same sex attraction is sinful?
- Do you believe that identifying as gay or a sexual minority within the church or using terms such as like LGBT Christian to identify people in the church are supported by Scripture?
- Do you believe that it is acceptable for a professed homosexual man—even if he is abstinent—to be an elder in the PCA? Or a minister of God's word in any denomination?
- The Westminster Confession, tracking Genesis 1, states "It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost ... to create or make of nothing the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days." Do you believe that the heavens and earth were created in six 24 hours days?

- The Westminster Confession doesn't put an age restriction on receiving communion (it speaks of "worthy receivers"), but the Larger Catechism does say that communion is to be given "only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves" (1 Corinthians 11:28). At what general age do you think children "are of years and ability to examine themselves," i.e., are able to examine their faith, however "weak or strong" it may be, and thus receive communion as "worthy receivers"?
- A significant number of PCA elders believe in the concept of white privilege. For instance, one writes "White people can easily not see how our backgrounds, cultural circumstances, and the issues of the day shape how we read, interpret, and apply Scripture." Another writes, "You see, I didn't hate Black people, but I was still a racist. I was a racist because I looked down on African Americans. I stereotyped them. I didn't seek to know them or understand them. I may have never called them names or raised a Confederate flag or done anything overtly racist, but I was racist nonetheless—racist in ways that I am only now coming to understand." What are your thoughts on these statements, the concept of white privilege, and racism generally? Do you think racism is a problem in the PCA?
- We are called to love our brothers as ourselves. Can we do that through government? In other words, do government welfare/assistance programs wrongfully assume, or usurp, responsibility that is biblical assigned/delegated to individuals and voluntary associations of individuals like the church?
- Do you believe that Christians have a duty to speak prophetically into and influence the culture, including government, on abortion? On other issues?
- Do you think that as the Church carries out the Great Commission by "mak[ing] disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and as God fulfills His promise to Abraham to "multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore [and in them] shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" that the world will become more Christian and the culture will take on more of the characteristics of Christ?

Let me emphasize that these are my questions—only some of which I have actually asked an elder. And of which some are more important than others. I very much encourage members to develop and ask their own questions.

I pray that our work together as members in the PCA to study and pursue the purity and peace of the church will glorify God and increase our enjoyment of Him through fulfilling His mandate and commission to us to prepare the Earth, in history, as the dwelling place for God and man in eternity.

For more on the role of members in the PCA, see [The Role of the Laity in the PCA's Battle Against the Nations](#).