

The Aquila Report

An Open Letter to James Kessler and the leaders of the National Partnership

Written by Andy Webb | Friday, March 22, 2013

Or perhaps the end game really is to have the conservatives leave the PCA. If that is the case I'd caution you to beware of what you wish for. Imagine if you will the PCA as an ideological seesaw. On one end we have the liberals, on the opposite end we have the conservatives and in the middle we have the moderates. Because they are counterbalanced, neither the conservatives nor the liberals can get the seesaw to tip in their direction unless they persuade the moderates to move towards them. By means of organizations like the PPLN and the National Partnership, liberals can get moderates to do exactly that. Eventually, conservatives will tire of sitting on a seesaw that never moves in their direction and get off. At that point, the seesaw will never move in a conservative direction again, even if the moderates move back to the center. This is exactly what happened in the CRC, PCUS, and PCUSA after the conservatives left.

Dear Brothers in Christ,

I read your letter introducing the National Partnership with some concern, not only because I get the feeling that I'm part of a group from which the PCA needs to be "preserved" but also because I believe that the formation of parties within the body of the church is precisely the kind of *schisma* that Paul forbids in 1 Corinthians 1:10.

Because of my concern for our church, what I would like to do therefore is to enter into precisely the kind of "charitable and respectful dialogue" with you that the National Partnership indicates is part of their third goal. In doing so, I promise to be as frank and transparent with you as I possibly can be, probably more than is politically expedient, because I intend to reveal to you the weakness of my own position within the PCA and allow you to "spy out the land" of the confessional conservatives in the PCA, because it seems like that is the group that the National Partnership was designed to offset.

First, I want you to know what the position of the conservatives really is: we have no organizations, no meetings, no leadership, and no agreed upon agenda.

When conservatives do meet, it is usually a casual smoker at an event convened for other

purposes, such as the General Assembly, the GPTS Spring Conference or Twin Lakes. There is no docket, no moderator, no secret handshake and little or no consensus. Usually we sit around, catch up with old friends, discuss theology and politics, and engage in the conservative's favorite past-time: complaining about the direction in which things are going both in the culture and the denomination. Occasionally solutions to perceived problems are offered, but there is hardly ever agreement on them and nothing is implemented.

At present much of the talk centers on whether it is time for confessional conservatives to leave the PCA and which denomination we should affiliate with if we do leave, but even there, we have no consensus. Our problem is that most of us would like to remain in the PCA, all we really want is an orthodox, Bible-believing, law and gospel preaching, Presbyterian church that is solidly committed to the doctrines taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith. If the PCA wasn't constantly in the process of change, we really wouldn't have a problem.

Now you may object at this point that we do have leaders and names like Ligon Duncan, Dominic Aquila, and Joey Pipa are sometimes put forward as our leadership. However, these men actually spend their time with pastoral, seminary, and denominational duties. They may very occasionally write articles advancing a conservative viewpoint or speak at the General Assembly, but they don't create organizations like the National Partnership, issue marching orders, or tell us what and who to vote for or not to vote for. Ironically, the closest thing conservatives had to an organizer was Frank Smith, and he left the denomination some time ago. Sometimes we conservatives lament the lack of leadership on our own side, but to date, no one has stepped forward, and it has become very clear to us that individuals like Ligon Duncan are not interested in picking up the mantle.

Again, it may be objected that conservatives have actually gotten things done in the past. Memorials and overtures have been sent, ecclesiastical tax plans thwarted, men of conservative values occasionally elected to permanent committees, and so on. But all of those were the result of individuals working within the courts of the PCA and usually came as a reaction to changes that have occurred or are occurring within the denomination. As the name conservative implies, our primary goal is to conserve the situation and work against changes to our faith and practice that we do not believe to be Biblical.

For instance, conservatives were concerned about intinction precisely because it is a sacramental practice growing in popularity amongst PCA churches that is not found in the Bible. We believe that all of our sacramental actions should be taken from the

directions found in Scripture. Because even advocates of intinction admitted that it is a practice that post-dates scripture, we do not believe it should be part of our worship. We believe that the prescriptions of Scripture, not popularity or personal preference, should direct our worship practice. Since we find that viewpoint expressed as the common confession of our denomination in Chapter 21 section 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith we cannot understand why churches in a denomination that affirms the Regulative Principle of Worship would allow for worship practices that are clearly the traditions of men.

We also tend to believe that Calvin was right when he described man's nature as a "perpetual factory of idols." Therefore, we tend to believe that once a denomination determines that it is ok for non-Biblical inventions to enter into our faith and practice, our own nature tends to cause them to multiply without end until you finally have a religion that is simply a "farrago of useless observances" as Calvin described Medieval Roman Catholicism, rather than the revealed and redemptive faith God gave to us in His word. As you know, we failed to stop the practice of intinction, and to my knowledge we have failed in all of our other attempts to apply the Regulative Principle to the worship practice of our denomination.

In terms of our influence over the denomination itself, it is marginal at best. We don't control the seminary, the college, or any of the permanent committees. As PPLN ably demonstrated, we are only a small fraction of the presbyters on the floor of the General Assembly, and any concerted attempt to organize to defeat us and remove our influence from the denomination is sure to succeed. Simply put, there is no conservative bogeyman. Our influence has primarily been to try to put the brakes on changes in the faith and practice of denomination that we do not feel are consistent with Scripture. We have not been all that successful in doing that. At best we are only slowing down changes. We've been forced to concede defeat at many levels and have given up on many battles that are frankly unwinnable.

Let me give you just one example of that; the debate over creation. Most confessional conservatives are literal 6-day creationists and believe that should be the position held by the denomination. And yet, in 2000 the PCA General Assembly adopted a statement that allows for a "diversity of opinions" on creation to be accepted as long as they affirm the "historicity" of the creation account. The four views of creation that were to be considered acceptable were Literal six day, Framework, Day/Age, and Analogical.

At the time, everyone on the liberal/moderate side of the denomination arguing for diversity affirmed that theistic evolution would never be considered acceptable within

the PCA, but 13 years later, Biologos, an organization that confesses they “believe that the diversity and interrelation of all life on earth are best explained by the God-ordained process of evolution with common descent” regularly meets at the offices of Redeemer PCA in Manhattan. PCA pastor Tim Keller is being quoted in Christianity Today as saying that it is “the job of pastors” to create a Biologos (Theistic Evolution) narrative.

Conservatives lost the battle over creation and stopped fighting at the denominational level, and yet exactly the progression everyone on the liberal/moderate side of the aisle said wouldn't happen, namely the progression from non-literal views to theistic evolution, is in fact taking place.

Despite the manifest failure of conservatives to move the PCA in a conservative direction in matters of critical importance like creation, the National Partnership represents the second major group formed by PCA liberals and moderates to attempt to overcome our supposed influence. If your objective is to force conservatives out of the PCA, you will probably succeed. Many of us are already teetering on the brink of leaving, and making it clear that we will never be allowed to influence the PCA to cause it to remain on what we believe to be a Biblical and confessional path or hold positions in the denominational leadership would probably be all that it takes to force us out.

You may object at this point that you don't want us to leave the denomination and that you want us to work with you in the PCA. But you also want to form an organization that is devoted to making sure confessional conservatives don't occupy any positions of authority or influence in the denomination and that our viewpoint is not represented. This is rather like saying to a black person, “Of course I want to work with you and consider you an equal partner in the American experiment. I just happen to belong to organization devoted to making sure that your viewpoint is always defeated and that you don't hold any elected offices.”

Or perhaps the end game really is to have the conservatives leave the PCA. If that is the case I'd caution you to beware of what you wish for. Imagine if you will the PCA as an ideological seesaw. On one end we have the liberals, on the opposite end we have the conservatives, and in the middle we have the moderates. Because they are counterbalanced, neither the conservatives nor the liberals can get the seesaw to tip in their direction unless they persuade the moderates to move towards them. By means of organizations like the PPLN and the National Partnership, liberals can get moderates to do exactly that.

Eventually, conservatives will tire of sitting on a seesaw that never moves in their

direction and get off. At that point, the seesaw will never move in a conservative direction again, even if the moderates move back to the center. This is exactly what happened in the CRC, PCUS, and PCUSA after the conservatives left. Those denominations became fixed on an accelerating path towards theological liberalism and adopted position after position that the moderates never thought they could possibly even thinking of adopting.

Also, I can't imagine that you've failed to notice that the culture is moving inexorably towards the persecution of Biblical Christians. Evangelical Christians in the United States are already being labeled as "hateful" and homophobic for not endorsing homosexuality and supporting same-sex marriage. Soon the Supreme Court will legalize same-sex marriage nationwide. When that happens, if you hope to be part of a denomination willing to stand for Biblical truth despite persecution, then you'll need conservatives.

Moderates and Liberals by definition don't get sent to the Coliseum for refusing to burn a pinch of incense and say "Caesar is Lord", or make "Here I stand" speeches at the Diet of Worms, or go to the scaffold over the issue of whether the king is the head of the church. Liberals and Moderates always look for ways to compromise with the culture to avoid marginalization and persecution, and that is exactly what the PCA will do if the conservatives who won't compromise over issues of Biblical truth have been driven out.

In any event, I am eager to hear back from you. I have tried to be as transparent and open about my beliefs as I can be, and I would encourage you to do the same. For that reason I hope we can discuss actual issues rather than general principles. For instance, what doctrinal directions does the PCA need to be saved from? What actual changes do you believe need to occur? And is the ultimate objective that confessional conservatives be removed, or can we stay as long as we aren't allowed to influence anything at the denominational level?

I am also ready to answer any questions you might have without reservation.

Your Servant in Christ,

Pastor Andrew Webb
Senior Pastor
Providence PCA, Fayetteville, NC

Andy Webb is a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church America and serves as Pastor of Providence Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville, NC.

Related Posts:

A Big Moment for the PCA

There Are Conservative Professors. Just Not in These States

Evening of Confessional Concern and Prayer at PCA...

A Plea to My Fellow PCA Pastors

Quo Vadis: PCA?

Did You Like This Article? Get the Top 10 Aquila Report Stories In Your Inbox Every Tuesday.



Enter your email to
get a weekly email
with the top ten
articles from the past
week.