

Whither the Presbyterian Church in America?

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January 17,
2019

As the PCA moves through its 47th year as a denomination we should ask “whither the PCA?”

Written by Dewey Roberts | Thursday, January 17, 2019

Denominations do not last forever or remain evangelical forever. I have seen the futility of those who tried to reform the PCUS from within. It became impossible. The PCA appears to be going down all the same paths that led to the demise of the PCUS as an evangelical denomination. On some issues, such as homosexuality, the PCA is moving at warp speed.

On December 4, 2018, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) celebrated 45 years as an evangelical denomination. Two hundred-sixty churches met at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama on that date to form a new denomination which would be true to the Scriptures, faithful to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and obedient to the Great Commission. Now is a good time to ask the question: Whither the PCA? To what goal or purpose is the PCA going? There are some troubling signs in the PCA that are reminiscent of the problems in the Presbyterian Church in the US (PCUS) before the PCA was formed. Here are a few of them.

The Revoice Conference and Homosexuality in the PCA

The Revoice Conference at Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri on July 26-28, 2018 has received a lot of coverage on The Aquila Report (e.g., [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) and other publications. That conference promoted the idea that Christians and churches can learn from “queer culture” (the words used in the promotional literature about the conference) and that the church should support and affirm gay, lesbian, and same-sex attracted Christians.

The stated purpose of the Revoice Conference was: “Supporting, encouraging, and empowering gay, lesbian, same-sex attracted and other LGBT Christians so they can experience the life-giving character of the historic Christian tradition.” One of the speakers, Nate Collins, even said that a refusal to listen to these gay Christian prophets is akin to refusing to listen to Jeremiah. One PCA Presbytery has a ministerial candidate in seminary who claims to be a homosexual Christian. Another minister in the PCA says he has same-sex attraction but asserts that his desires are not wrong since he does not act on them. Jesus said, “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already

committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Are we to understand that Jesus' words condemn a man who has lust in his heart for a woman, but does not condemn a man from having lust for another man as long as he does not act on it?

The General Assembly or its Standing Judicial Commission will eventually have to address these matters concerning homosexuality, same-sex attraction, and the Revoice Conference with a clear voice if the PCA is to remain a denomination which protects the purity of sexual relationships and maintains biblical holiness. There simply is no way that compromise on this issue will allow the PCA to remain an evangelical denomination. The Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO) was started by former Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) members who had endured all the theological fights over inerrancy, the virgin birth of Christ, the deity of Christ, and others, but who finally had their fill of the denominational slide with the ordination of homosexual ministers. What will it say about the PCA if this matter is accepted and overlooked by the denomination and her ministers and churches? The homosexual issue is a line in the sand that the denomination cannot ignore or avoid.

The Social Justice Gospel

The Revoice Conference and the homosexuality issue are not the only problems in the PCA. Another problem is the increasing emphasis on social justice which is being called a "gospel issue." If they called it a Scriptural issue, I would agree with them. Every Christian should work for "justice" in every sphere of his influence. Yet, the notion of the social justice is not the gospel or a gospel issue. The only gospel issue is the gospel. The gospel is not Christ plus social justice. Biblical justice necessarily involves matters that should concern all believers and Christian churches as one evidence of their faith in Christ. True biblical justice is an expression of obedience to the Ten Commandments. Every good work a Christian does is an expression of obedience to God's law.

The "social" gospel was an issue which led to the decline of the PCUS. When the "Concerned Presbyterians" was started in the PCUS in 1964, their first stated concern was that the true preaching of the gospel had been replaced by an overemphasis on social, economic, and political matters. A joint prayer of confession at an evening worship service at the 2018 General Assembly of the PCA listed several "social" justice issues. Is the PCA falling into the same trap of the social gospel which ruined the PCUS? Moreover, will the proponents of social justice rally around gay, lesbian, and same-sex attracted Christians (an unscriptural classification) and take up their cause in the name of social justice? Will they call such support for LGBTQ+ Christians a gospel issue?

The National Partnership

The National Partnership (NP) is a secret organization within the PCA that was started 5-6 years ago. Most PCA pastors and church members are not even aware of the NP, but it exists, nonetheless. An email was sent out in early 2013 by an organizer of the NP for the

purpose of recruiting ministers and ruling elders from every presbytery in the PCA to work together with the NP for a common purpose. That common purpose has never been explicitly defined except perhaps to those who joined the NP. Some emails from NP leaders have surfaced and have been printed on [TheAquilaReport](#). From the beginning, the NP has sought to bring together both those who are “more conservatives or liberal” in the PCA to work as “a political arm” through the church courts. Of course, that begs the question: What part of the Westminster Confession of Faith permits a minister, elder, or deacon to be a “liberal” however that is defined?

Some people might think the NP represents no real danger to the PCA. Others might think they are probably a small group with little real power. That is not how the NP people think of themselves. An April 15, 2017 email to their membership by one of their leaders stated: “Our fellowship has grown from a test group of sorts, to a place where, if united, we can win every vote.”

How is it possible for the NP to win every vote? They are organized through social media to communicate with their members in real time on the floor of the General Assembly and alert them how to vote on any matter. If they all vote in unison, the NP can ostensibly win every vote. We do not know who their leaders are; or who makes the decision on how the NP “members” vote on an issue; or the NP position on same-sex attraction, the Federal Vision, women officers, the Revoice Conference, and a whole host of other issues.

A similar secret organization was started in the PCUS in the 1950s by Dr. Ernest Trice Thompson, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, which was called “The Fellowship of St. James.” It was a political arm of the liberals/progressives dedicated to shaping the future of the PCUS. When L. Nelson Bell learned about The Fellowship of St. James, it was still a small group within the PCUS, but it did not remain small. Over a few years, they grew large enough to take control of the denomination. That secret organization, as much as anything else, contributed in good part to the demise of the PCUS as an evangelical denomination—a denomination in which James Henley Thornwell, Robert Lewis Dabney, John L. Girardeau, and Benjamin Palmer had once labored.

The evangelical theology of those Southern Presbyterian ministers was replaced by unscriptural systems of Karl Barth’s neo-orthodoxy and other liberal systems that were contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Secret organizations in the church are not biblical. The actions of the church are to be transparent—not secretive. II Timothy 2:2 states: “The things which you have heard from me **in the presence of many witnesses**, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others.” The power of the church is spiritual and moral in its work.

It matters little that there may indeed be many areas where the members of the NP agree with the WCF and the other standards of the PCA. Indeed, we might find that we have much in common with them on many matters. Such areas of agreement are irrelevant in one sense. That only proves that the cancer that has caused their secrecy has not spread throughout their whole body just yet. J. Gresham Machen once wrote words that deserve to be remembered concerning such agreements:

In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.[1]

The Nullification of the Office of Ruling Elder

Another disturbing movement within the PCA is the nullification of the office of ruling elder among large and medium size congregations. Many churches have adopted a business model/CEO model for the government of the church wherein the day-to-day decisions are made by executive committees which include few, if any, ruling elders. The sessions of these congregations generally only rubber stamp what has already been decided or done. That is not Presbyterianism. That is Episcopalianism. The CEO model of the church will transform the PCA more and more into a hierarchical denomination.

The problem with the executive committee approach to making decisions in a PCA congregation is that it violates BCO 1-5, "Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is not a several, but a joint power, to be exercised by presbyters in courts." The executive committee model makes ecclesiastical jurisdiction a several, not a joint, power. It allows several presbyters to rule outside the court setting rather than restricting rule to the court.

Church Property Issues

In 2017 and 2018, there were overtures approved by the General Assembly to make it more difficult for churches to withdraw from the denomination. The overture presented in 2017 proposed changing BCO 25-3 to require a quorum of 50% of the total communicant membership for congregational meetings if the church was considering withdrawing from the PCA. That matter was defeated at the presbytery level.

The overture presented in 2018 is before presbyteries now and proposes amending BCO 25-11 to require a 30-day notice be given when a congregation is considering voting to withdraw from the PCA. These overtures do not amount to much in themselves. Both of these amendments appear to be contrary to BCO 25-10 which says:

The provisions of BCO 25 are to be construed as a solemn covenant whereby the Church as a whole promises never to attempt to secure the possession of the property of any congregation against its will, whether or not such congregation remains within or chooses to withdraw from this body.

No matter how many changes are made to BCO 25, they will be in essence meaningless unless the wording in BCO 25-10 is changed. Since a congregation owns its own property, they can withdraw from the denomination anytime they choose to do so. If a congregation does not follow the BCO in voting to leave, the presbytery will not have any authority to act on a complaint on the matter.

Yet, that is the danger of making such changes to BCO 25. Eventually, and probably sooner than later, there will be an overture to change BCO 25-10 to something like the following:

*The provisions of BCO 25 are to be construed as a solemn covenant whereby the Church as a whole promises never to attempt to secure the possession of the property of any congregation against its will, **as long as all the other provisions of the BCO are followed in leaving.***

Then, the BCO will likely be changed to something like the following:

*The provisions of BCO 25 are to be construed as a solemn covenant whereby the Church as a whole **respects the property rights of the local congregation but maintains the option to take control of such property if the congregation violates any of the provisions of the BCO in attempting to leave this denomination.***

In other words, these changes to BCO 25 will most likely continue to place greater restrictions on congregations leaving the PCA until the property rights of local congregations are taken away from them. If the property rights of PCA congregations are ever jeopardized by BCO overtures, then evangelical congregations will probably have an incentive to leave the PCA before such changes takes place. PCA presbyteries should vote down the amendment to BCO 25-11 and any other overtures that would chip away to BCO 25.

Conclusion

With these various issues facing the PCA, it is unclear how much longer the church can hold together as an evangelical denomination. In the meantime, there are a few things that concerned PCA teaching elders, ruling elders and church members can do. First, members and officers can ask their pastors if they are a part of the National Partnership. Ask them to give a definitive answer to that question without equivocation. Second, they can ask their pastor where he stands on the great issues facing our denomination concerning homosexuality, the "social" justice gospel, the Federal Vision, women officers (including the office of deacon/deaconess), the CEO model of church government, etc. Third, they can be prepared to withdraw from the PCA as a congregation or as individuals if it becomes necessary.

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[1] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U. K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 1-2.