

Ten Theological Challenges Facing the PCUSA

From First Presbyterian Colorado Springs

At the time of the Reformation, John Calvin said that there was an important question the church had to answer. The question was not, “Are there grievous diseases in the church?” It was assumed by all on both sides that the church was sick. The question, he said, was “Can we wait too long for the cure of these diseases?”¹

For decades, the Presbyterian Church has been theologically unsettled. Two new Presbyterian bodies – The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) – decided that the cure for doctrinal sickness was to depart. Then the northern and southern streams of the church reunited, forming our current denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA “PC(USA)”. But that reunion did not bring theological health or harmony.

The presenting problems of the role of women in the church and sexuality were the cause of intense debates and splits. But whatever the presenting problems were in the debate *du jour*, there were (and continue to be) consistent, underlying fault lines in four major areas of theology that widened the gap between left and right in our denomination. Those four major areas are: (1) the nature and authority of scripture, (2) the person and work of Jesus Christ, (3) the nature and mission of the church and (4) the moral confusion of our

time. Those four major areas give us at least ten serious challenges to traditional orthodoxy. As we think about those ten challenges, we must also ask ourselves, “What is the cure for what ails us?”

The Nature and Authority of Scripture

Challenge 1: Diminishing authority of Scripture. While few progressives will say that scripture is not authoritative, their understanding of authority differs from the traditionally orthodox. On the progressive

side, there is an increasing tendency to look to the sciences, both the hard and social sciences, for authoritative guidance. Often statements from physicists or geneticists are taken at face value as true while scriptural claims are treated with

suspicion. This divide over the authority of scripture is the difference between a community that is shaped by scripture² (orthodox) and a community that shapes scripture³ (progressive).

Challenge 2: Differing Ways of Understanding the Nature of Scripture and Its Interpretation

- a. *The Creation Narratives in Genesis 1-2:* Progressives would say that this is an allegorical or metaphorical poem. This is often a response to the very conservative interpreters who hold for a literal six-day creation. But orthodox

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interpreters in the Reformed tradition say that while this is certainly Hebrew poetry, it also speaks of what truly happened. Therefore, we are not constrained by six literal days, but neither do we treat it simply as metaphor.

- b. *Moses and the Pentateuch:* Progressives assert that four different authors wrote the first five books of the Bible, each with a different view of God. This makes the Pentateuch so complex that a lay reader of scripture cannot understand it properly. That discourages the reading of the text and thus leads to a devaluing of its role in Christian formation. The orthodox position is an acknowledgement that Moses didn't write all five books, but that regardless of authorship, the Pentateuch is our received text that has authority over us.
- c. *Nature of the Law:* Jesus said that he came to fulfill the law, but what does that mean? The Old Testament contains ceremonial, dietary and moral law. Jesus came to fulfill the moral law. We see in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus expands and deepens our understanding of the Ten Commandments – the moral law. But we also see in the gospels that he sits loose to the ceremonial and dietary regulations. By the time of Acts, those regulations no longer apply. Progressives are dubious about all Old Testament law, thinking that if you throw out one part, you must throw it all away. The orthodox side would say, with Paul, that the law is part of God's grace and that we can heed God's law

to our benefit without being legalistic about it.

- d. *Jesus and Paul:* Because the four gospels are so different, progressives often assert that the 'communities' of each gospel writer created their own 'version' of Jesus. Reformed and orthodox believe that while there are four gospels, there is one Jesus. Each writer wrote with a different 'camera angle' but each was looking at the same Jesus. As well, many progressives think that Paul corrupted the message of Jesus and that we would be better off with less Paul and more Jesus. That is problematic – we have to ask "Which Jesus?"

The Person and Work of Jesus Christ

Challenge 3: Different Understandings of the Person and Work of Christ. It isn't enough to say that one is Christ-centered because there is a conflict as to who Christ is. Progressives often talk about the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The Christ of faith may be in the gospels, but the Jesus of history is 'behind' the gospels. This is where the understanding of scripture affects one's view of Jesus Christ. Progressives like to say that Jesus is the authority, not the Bible. But then one must ask, "Where *else* do you learn of him?"

Challenge 4: The Person of Christ. While the orthodox side asserts Jesus' full humanity and full divinity, many (but not all) progressives reject the Virgin Birth, often asserting that Jesus had a unique divine consciousness that resided in his humanity.

Challenge 5: The Work of Jesus on the Cross. Influenced by feminist theology,

which asserts that the traditional view of the cross seems like a form of child abuse by an oppressive father, progressives have distanced themselves from the vicarious atonement of Christ on the cross, often to the point of dismissing it entirely. The orthodox and evangelical view is that the salvation effected on the cross was a Trinitarian work of the Father, Son and the Spirit. It was the outworking of the love of the Triune God.

Challenge 6: The Extent of the Work of Jesus. For whom is the salvation of Jesus? For the evangelical orthodox, the offer of salvation stretches through the whole earth. The gospel is to be offered to all. Progressives, committed to pluralism, think that the Christian gospel is for Christians, just as Hinduism is for Hindus. In their thinking, all will be saved – the doctrine of universalism. Sincerity more than truth is the key to salvation. When the question is asked, “what about those who have never heard?” the two sides answer differently. Progressives answer that since God is a loving God, all will be saved. The orthodox side would say that we can’t say for sure, but that we know that God is a merciful God and that however God saves, it will always and finally be through Jesus Christ.

Challenge 7: The Resurrection of Jesus. There are some on the progressive side who think that the resurrection is a metaphor for new life and they will speak of ‘resurrection faith’ rather than of the resurrection as a real event in history. This is an outcome based on the authority they give science over the biblical accounts. The orthodox side asserts the historic, bodily resurrection and agrees with St. Paul that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, our faith is useless. (1 Corinthians 15:4) The

resurrection is the defeat of death and if it did not occur, death is the end. God is not bound by a broken creation – he can enter it and by his power bring new life.

The Nature and Mission of the Church

Challenge 8: The Doctrine of the Church (Ecclesiology). There is a big debate in the church about the essentials of the Reformed faith. Progressives desire a big theological tent, thinking that theological tolerance will preserve the unity of the church. Expressing this view, James McCord, a past president of Princeton Seminary once said, “If you ever have to choose between heresy and schism, choose heresy.” The orthodox in the Reformed tradition also value the unity of the church, which is the gift of Christ to us. It is not something we make ourselves. The unity of the church is important because Christ prayed for it just before he went to the cross. The orthodox believe that the church’s unity is expressed in its life together, its preaching and its worship, all of which must conform to the word of God.

Challenge 9: Christendom versus Missional Models of the Church. In the Christendom model, the church seeks to maintain itself using old forms for church government and the calling and training of pastors. It is often programmatic as it seeks to draw people in with attractational events and activities. A missional model seeks to move into the community and the world, going to people where they are with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Missional churches believe that God is a missionary God who sends his church into the world in the same way that the Triune God sent Jesus into the world. (John 20:21). The church does not exist for itself but for the purposes for

which God called, gathered and sent it. This means that the church must be adaptive and nimble, just as the first apostles were in proclaiming the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The goal is not building the church as an end in itself. Rather, the church is built in order to be sent so that we may be witnesses to God's redeeming work in Christ. A truly missional church cannot exist apart from its biblical understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done. Thus the theological challenges we face are of extreme importance as we think about who we are as Christ's church.

The Moral Confusion of Our Times

Challenge 10: Moral Confusion. *The Confession of 1967* says, "Anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of man's alienation from God, his neighbor, and himself."⁴ When there is confusion about the authority of scripture, about who Jesus

is and what salvation is, then there will be confusion about who we as human beings are and how we are supposed to live. This extends beyond our sexual behavior – heterosexual and homosexual, married or single. It includes our work and business ethic, our relationship toward our possessions and our care of the earth.

These challenges are real and deep and our decisions about how to move forward must be made with great thought and fervent prayer. The words of John Calvin help guide in this turbulent time: *[Let us exhort] men to expect the good which they desire from none but God, to confide in His power, rest in His goodness, depend on Him with the whole heart – to recline upon Him with full hope, and recur to Him in necessity, that is, at every moment to ascribe to Him every good thing which we enjoy...we proclaim that a complete fountain of blessings is opened up to us in Christ, and that out of it we may draw for every need.*⁵

¹ John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Tracts and Letters*, Volume 1, page 125

² Richard Hays in *Moral Vision of the New Testament*

³ Dale B. Martin in *Sex and the Single Savior*

⁴ *The Confession of 1967*, 9.67

⁵ John Calvin, *op. cit.* page 147