

## *The Church and Its Unity*

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## INTRODUCTION

The life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is affected by the recent emergence of two prominent organizations. The Presbyterian Coalition is an alliance of “renewal groups” within the church, ranging from those with specific mission aims to those with a broad agenda for change in the PC(USA). These groups joined forces in order to ensure the church’s constitutional prohibition of the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. The Covenant Network of Presbyterians is an alliance of Presbyterians who share a commitment to full inclusion of all persons in the life of the church. The Covenant Network was developed to work for the elimination of constitutional barriers to ordered ministry by openly gay and lesbian church members.

Although it was the issue of ordination for gay and lesbian persons that brought the two groups into being, each has a broader vision for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Their visions differ, of course, which means that both must struggle with questions of the church’s unity and diversity. In this respect they are like all Presbyterians. At this time in the church’s life, it is impossible to avoid difficult questions about limits to diversity and about the cost of unity.

The Presbyterian Coalition and the Covenant Network of Presbyterians held large national meetings in the autumn of 1999. Each gathering was marked by a significant address that both helped and challenged the organizations and their constituencies.

In “True Confession: A Presbyterian Dissenter Thinks about the Church,” Barbara Wheeler speaks honestly about issues that divide the church, yet calls for the maintenance of God-given unity. Mark Achtemeier acknowledges that frustration with continuous controversy sometimes leads to the desire for separation, yet he sets forth “Seven Theses on the Unity of the Church.” These addresses help the whole church move beyond sentimental or institutional arguments for denominational cohesion, insisting that there are theological, christological, and ecclesiological grounds for the commitment to unity.

The Office of Theology and Worship is pleased to publish these two addresses as *The Church and Its Unity*, the inaugural volume in a new Church Issues Series. The Church Issues Series will provide the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) with timely perspectives on matters that are before the church. The series will not seek to resolve issues, much less give definitive answers. Instead, the Theology and Worship Church Issues Series will attempt to enrich the church’s conversation as it works through difficult matters.

*-Joseph D. Small  
Coordinator for Theology and Worship  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

**TRUE CONFESSION:  
A PRESBYTERIAN DISSENTER THINKS ABOUT THE CHURCH**

*Barbara G. Wheeler*

I have a practical problem. I joined the Presbyterian Church as an adult, in significant measure because I admire this denomination's theology of the church and its processes for making decisions. Today I find myself in strong disagreement with the church about an important matter. How shall I conduct myself now that I think that my denomination has taken the wrong side on a serious issue?

The particular matter about which I disagree with the Presbyterian Church is this. The denomination has declared that homosexual acts are invariably sinful. I think that homosexual acts are morally equivalent to heterosexual ones. In some circumstances, both may be deeply sinful. Under other conditions, both may be used in God's service.

Homosexuality is not my assigned topic this afternoon, but before I turn to my subject, which is how those of us who disagree with the church on any serious matter should behave, I want to add four brief qualifications to what I just said, chiefly for the benefit of a few members of this denomination who regularly twist honest statements of conviction into propaganda.

First, my views about homosexuality are not the position of the Covenant Network. The Network is a loose association of persons who would like to see Amendment B removed from the Constitution for a variety of reasons. Some of them—some of you—share my perspective on homosexuality and the firmness with which I hold it. Others hold different views or have not decided what they think about the issue. The Covenant Network welcomes all who, whatever their views about homosexual practices, seek openness and tolerance in the Presbyterian Church.

Second, I want to make clear that I hold my position because of the Bible, not in spite of it. In my best moments, when, as Paul says, I accept the grace to want "what I want" (Rom. 7:14-20), what I truly want is to live my life in alignment with God. Since I like Paul am not naturally inclined to do that, I cannot imagine how it would be possible without scriptures that judge and contradict as well as comfort and affirm. I need scripture to say what it says, not to agree with me or confirm my preferences. In this case, I know that some passages put homosexual practices in a negative light, but these like the many precise biblical injunctions that Presbyterians do *not* observe are overridden by much more blatant testimony. God rules everything. Through the whole history of God's dealings with us, God has exercised God's freedom to demolish categories we invent for our own convenience. I am convinced that God is doing this today, demolishing the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality which we constructed for our peace of mind, not God's glory. I want to testify here that I did not learn about this deconstructive activity of God from some liberal political handbook. I learned it from the scripture that deconstructs me, freeing me, as Paul says, to delight in the law of God.

Third, I want to affirm that, as conservative Presbyterians emphasize, the Christian life *is* a disciplined life. On this matter, I am a conservative too. We follow Jesus Christ, who gave his life for the life of the world. If we want to live in his light and walk in his way, we too will be called to sacrifice, and

among the things we are likely to be required to give up—some of our wealth, some of our power—are immediate sexual gratifications that would cause injury or pain to others. Foregoing something as pleasurable as sex is not easy. We need God’s help, through the church, to find the grace to do that. Far from helping, however, the church’s current teaching on sexuality militates against sacrifice and restraint. Homosexuals get no help at all in making moral decisions about their sexual behavior; all of it is simply dismissed as bad. Heterosexual relationships get off lightly, if they are monogamous, because we think they are God’s favored form. I am convinced that equal treatment of homosexual and heterosexual relationships, including the recognition that marriage is God’s gift for both, would strike a blow, not for sexual license, but for much-needed sexual discipline.

My last qualification is addressed to those on all sides who say that the debate over homosexuality is not important enough to consume as much attention and energy as it does, that this is an academic matter (a phrase people use to minimize an issue) that does not affect the real life and mission of the church. I disagree. This is no small or limited difference. Presbyterian teaching about homosexuality shapes its current policies on ordination and marriage, which in turn shape and, I think, distort the church and the lives of its members. And I believe that this teaching does great harm beyond the Presbyterian Church. Non-Presbyterians are understandably unconvinced when we say that persons who are morally unfit for leadership in our organization should have rights of full participation in every other social undertaking. Because those outside our fellowship think that we judge all practicing homosexuals to be morally defective, we actively contribute to the hatred of homosexuals that is rampant in this society, hatred that leads to crimes of discrimination and violence. The Presbyterian Church’s teaching about homosexuality is not a matter of academic theory. It is a matter of life and death.

I have spelled out my views about homosexuality not to persuade—that is an activity for other settings—but to illustrate that I have a serious disagreement with my church, one on which I feel I must act. But how? Non-Presbyterian friends who know the distance between what I think and what the denomination teaches about homosexuality cannot understand why I continue to associate with a religious group that is wrong—dead wrong and deadly wrong in their view—on an important question. They push me pretty hard. One of them asked me recently whether I would join a club that admitted African American members but would not let them hold office. At the same time, many Presbyterian friends push me just as hard, telling me that the only course for those who really love the church is to abide by its decisions and wait patiently as the whole body discerns where the Spirit is leading.

My guess is that most of you feel this same tension. You are here because you want the church to change, if not its doctrine on sexuality, then its policies on ordination, or its sometimes literalistic ways of reading the Bible, or its ethos, which seems to be increasingly inquisitorial and intolerant. All these are serious matters, and I would venture that you too feel you must do something about them. But what?

This dilemma is not ours alone. Those who don’t fit under the umbrella of the Covenant Network face it too. If the Presbyterian News Service’s reports on the Coalition meeting in Dallas in September are accurate, Presbyterians on the so-called other side are beginning to realize that as long as Amendment B remains in the Constitution, the issues it was designed to settle are not going to go away, because Presbyterians like us won’t let them. For some Coalition members, the prospect of investing major effort, every year, to preserve a law that is, as they see it, patently the will of the Presbyterian people and the will of God, is just as untenable as living in a church governed by Amendment B is for some of us. They long for a church in which this matter is settled, as do we, and they don’t know any better than we how to achieve that. Shall we leave graciously, they are reported as asking, to search for

such a church, or stay and renew the one we've got—an option that means, of course, facing challenges to Amendment B as long as it exists?

When it comes to the topic of the church, the Covenant Network and the Coalition are in the same boat. All of us are steering through dangerous straits, with sirens on both banks luring us toward the rocks and shoals with powerful arguments. The argument from one side goes like this: the Presbyterian Church is, after all, just a denomination, not the whole church. What finally matters is not our Presbyterianism but our Christianity. Therefore, those who have honest and serious disagreements with the denomination may, and perhaps should, find or create another expression of the church that they believe is more faithful in its doctrine and discipleship. From the other shore, the song is equally compelling: the Presbyterian Church is, after all, an expression of the holy, catholic church. As such, it has authority from God. While working to repair any flaws in the church, we must not substitute our authority for God's. Therefore, while we who disagree with the church try to improve it, we should abide by its laws and keep its peace.

So, how shall Presbyterians who disagree with the church about a serious matter (as it turns out, that's a sizeable and very diverse group of us) behave? Ecclesiology—theories of the church—is Douglas Hall's assignment, not mine, but I cannot make headway on my practical problem, how to act in and toward the church, unless I begin with some basic definitions of what the church, as Reformed Protestants understand it, is and does. In the next few minutes, I will review some Reformed ideas about the identity of the church and its purpose, with sidelong glances at other Christians' ideas in order to clarify ours. Doing this quickly will, of course, require a lot of generalizing and simplifying. I apologize for this, but it's necessary, because I want quickly to return to the practical questions that weigh so heavily on our consciences and our hearts.

What is the church? There is remarkable unanimity among Christians of different stripes about the terms that best express the church's fundamental identity. All of us affirm that the church is the community of those who through baptism become, in all their diversity, one body, and in all their human finitude and sinfulness, Christ's body. Different Christian traditions, however, inflect these definitions—community of the baptized, body of Christ—very differently.

Our Roman Catholic colleagues, for instance, frequently speak of the body of Christ as mystical. Different strands of Catholic tradition mean somewhat different things by this. Hierarchically minded theologians like Cardinal Ratzinger, as Miroslav Volf explains in his wonderful new book, *After Our Likeness* (on which I'll rely at several points as I sort theories of the church), believe that the institutional church and especially the successors to the apostles who govern it are imbued with Christ's own kind of power. On some readings, this power extends even to salvation: "No salvation outside the church" means not only that the church is the location and mediator of salvation, but even its agent. As the actual body of Christ, mystically empowered to function as Christ in the world, the church does the saving, or at least some of it. Catholic spiritual writers place a different weight on the word *mystical*. For them it signifies a realm above and beyond natural reality where the church is fully and truly itself. It is a mystical realm into which Christians are sealed at their baptism. What these views have in common is their emphasis on the church, as Volf says, "from above," transhuman, Christ's body risen, free from the bonds of earth and death, ruling in power.

Free church traditions define the church as Catholics and other Christians do, as the body of those baptized into Christ, but, in their view, the body is far from mystical. Wherever two or three are

baptized into fellowship in the name of Christ, says the free church, there is the church. The church is not larger than, above and beyond, any actual human gathering, but fully present in each one, in all its earthly reality.

Again, there are multiple strands within this tradition. Baptists emphasize the gathering *in Christ's name*, the profession of faith that precedes sealing in baptism. If there is no profession, there is no baptism and no church. Congregationalists emphasize the gathering itself: the church is constituted as the Spirit brings two or three into community through baptism. What these and other free views have in common is their humanity. "We are the church," exclaims Miroslav Volf, who himself stands in this tradition. God gives faith and the grace to gather in community, and the church can grow very close to God, but the free church is at its core a human reality, from below, not a divine reality from on high.

Where are we on this very rough spectrum? Reformed traditions seem to me remarkable less for their differences from these other Christian views than for their high degree of agreement with both. Calvin's favorite term for what God accomplishes in baptism is *engrafting*. We finite and deeply flawed human beings are joined by grace and the faith it enables to Christ in his goodness and glory, joined to create a single organic whole, the body of Christ. In the event, we remain who and what we are, the grafted part, which produces its own kind of fruit, different from the host's. In this we join the free church: baptism does not set us on a course toward superhuman powers like infallibility or extract us from grubby human community to float above it in a mystical one.

But the grafted branch no longer lives on its own; it draws its very being from the host. The body of Christ for us is no mere metaphor for an organization with different but complementary parts, as it seems to be for some free churches. We, like the Catholics, believe that in baptism we become part of a church that is Christ's living body today. In baptism, says Bonhoeffer, "we are...set down in the midst of the holy history of God on earth." Our engrafting into Jesus Christ means that everything that has happened to him has happened to us. In Reformed traditions, the church is both a fully human community—all churches, says Calvin, are "blemished"—and also Christ's very body. Holding these two dimensions together yields a rich, complex picture of the church's identity, all the more mysterious for not being mystical, all the more compelling for not being fully explainable in human terms. I think this picture of the church is just right, and I became a Presbyterian to affirm it.

Let's turn now to the second basic issue: what is the body of Christ called to do? What is its purpose? Here too there is ecumenical consensus. The purpose of the church is worship, the giving of thanks and praise to God. We modern activist Christians are tempted to say ministry or mission, but the root of ministry is worship: our chief end is to glorify God. At the heart of worship—on this Christians also agree—is Eucharist.

As we all know, worship and Eucharist look very different in different Christian branches. For Catholics and others who emphasize sacraments, the meal is paramount: Christ's delegates, with Christ's own special, more-than-human power to make the bread and wine substantially different, are to feed the faithful. The whole ministry of church, including teaching, governance, and mission, is an extension of this act of feeding: significantly, those who have special power through the apostles to prepare and serve the meal are usually in charge of the other functions as well.

In free church settings, Eucharist is not a transformational event so much as a reenactment. Someone once said that at the lowest end of the church spectrum Eucharist is something like a patriotic play: it portrays an important historical event in order to instill values and foster loyalty. The free churches view the Lord's Supper as edifying for believers. It reminds them that as Jesus Christ has claimed them, they have claims on each other. At the table, they are joined in even closer fellowship: the community of the saints becomes stronger and more accountable, and each of its members truer in faith, holier in living, more righteous in discipleship.

We, the Reformed, again drawing from both sides, take Eucharist literally. The word means "giving thanks." The church is called out of the world for the purpose of giving thanks for what God is doing in the world. We have our own doctrine of real presence, Jesus Christ known surely enough in the breaking of the bread that we are impelled, in Christopher Morse's graceful phrase, to "thank God for loving all the world."

In order to do this, to give thanks and praise for God's accomplishments, it is necessary to discern the work of God—what God has done, is doing, and will do. Hence the heavy Reformed emphasis on confession, teaching the truth, and preaching, proclaiming the Word. For us, these are eucharist too. Avery Dulles, in his careful catalog of various Christians' models of the church, identifies ours as "herald," because, he says, we "emphasize faith and proclamation over interpersonal relations and mystical communion." The metaphor fits, though Dulles misunderstands, I think, when he concludes that we believe that the chief and maybe only purpose of the church is to talk. Some Presbyterians may have given that impression, but most of us know that *giving* thanks through hearing and proclaiming the Word of God has, as Volf says, a performative as well as declarative aspect. Everything we do in gratitude to God—service and social action, prayer and sacrament, as well as teaching and preaching—is true confession, the living word instantiated in our lives as much as heard from our lips.

Let me quickly extract two themes from this Reformed picture of the church I have sketched that will help us, I think, as we return to the practical problem of how we should behave when we disagree with the church.

The first is very obvious in Reformed thought: God's initiative. God gave the church—Calvin, a one-covenant man, says it was given to Abraham—and God continues to give it to all who enter the covenant. We human beings engrafted into Christ's body make up the church, but we cannot unmake it. "Denials, betrayals and corruptions" of Christ's body, as Christopher Morse puts it, cannot prevent its resurrection. Christ is the head of the church. We can do terrible things in and to it, but we cannot remove its identity as the church.

The second theme is not often recognized in the famously chilly ethos of Presbyterian and Reformed churches: the importance of community. (Garrison Keillor says that Calvinists are people who think that warmth, comfort, and having a good time with others makes you stupid.) Neither covenant nor confession is possible without other people. God's love is more generous than ours, never exclusive. In binding us to God in Christ, God also binds us to others in covenant community. And because Christian truth is a person, writes Thomas Torrance, it is not something we can tell ourselves. It must be communicated to us by other persons. Our confession is social too: if it is not spoken by others to us and us to others, it is no confession at all.

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So, if I really believe these Reformed affirmations, that we are engrafted at God's initiative into the church, an all-too-human body of us and other persons that is nevertheless Christ's own body, not ours; and if I really believe that our duty and privilege, as people called out by God's costly effort, is to testify, in community and as a community, to the mighty and merciful acts of God—if I really believe these things, how then shall I prosecute my disagreement with the Presbyterian Church?

I think these convictions about the nature and purpose of the church require me to observe two principles.

First, *tell the truth*. If the church is, indeed, constituted by grateful confession of true faith, then we have no choice but to say what, by the power of God's word and spirit, we deeply believe to be true. Humility is, of course, advisable. In the case of homosexuality, for instance, someone is wrong, and it could be me. But I'm pretty sure I am not wrong, and an increasing number of Presbyterians hold views similar to mine. Our identity as confessing Christians requires that we say so.

Not enough of us have been doing that. When Joe Small visited the Coalition and Covenant Network conferences last year, he was struck by the apparent unwillingness at the gathering of this group to speak our minds about the issues that divide the church, especially homosexuality—the elephant in the living room, to use his image, that, he thought, we go to special lengths not to mention even though it's sprawled on our ecclesiastical couch and will not go away. There is a historical explanation for what Joe Small accurately observed. The Covenant Network was created to promote Amendment A by people who had among them various reasons for wanting to see it pass. It made sense to focus on the common concerns, such as openness and tolerance, rather than our particular causes, and we have continued in that mode, emphasizing the generalities we share rather than the specifics over which we differ.

But meanwhile circumstances have changed. Immediate and decisive repeal of Amendment B seems less likely now than when Amendment A was before us. In this light, I have come to agree that a sabbatical period in which we refrain from legislative action and judicial confrontation is a good idea, though not for the reason most often given for standing-down: because the church is tired of debating homosexuality and associated issues and needs time out to rest. If the church lives by the truth of its confession, then we its members get no vacation from any issue in which truth and life are at stake. In fact, in my view the only good argument for this sabbatical period is to make time and conserve attention for the searching reflection and honest speaking that political fights often do not permit.

It is time for us, the Presbyterians who have been specializing in tact, to say what we think, civilly and reasonably—diatribes accomplish nothing—but also persuasively. We all do not think the same things. Those of you whose minds are not made up on the pivotal issues must frame your questions sharply. Those who have strong views about ordination and polity must state them with clarity and precision. And those who think, as I do, that homosexuality is the basic issue and that the church is in error when it teaches that God abominates homosexual acts committed in the context of covenant faithfulness while blessing heterosexual ones in the same situation—those of us who think that need to speak up, in clear, reasonable, and inviting terms that stand a chance of changing the church's mind. Unity-and-diversity conferences are an excellent start, but the church must be sure that it gets around to talking about the full range of issues that divide us. It goes without saying, I hope, that there should be no penalty in a teaching church for the candid exchange of theological views.



Will vigorous conversation about these matters unsettle the church and upset some of its members? Probably it will, but that is no reason to hold back. The peace of Christ is not a sentimental blanket in which we hide and smother our differences. It is genuine reconciliation, obtained for us at a very high price, and we must expect to sacrifice some of our tranquility to discover it among ourselves. A confessing church is a struggling church. Honest expression and careful argument are God's work, and we should do more of both in the days to come.

A second principle for action also stems from Reformed conceptions of the church: *stay put*. Separation from the body in which we have grown into Christ should be almost unthinkable. Calvin was adamant on this point. In one of his finest rhetorical passages he points to the church in Corinth, where "almost the whole body had become tainted. . . , where some hold the resurrection of the dead in derision, though with it the whole gospel must fall. . . , [and] where many things are done neither decently nor in order," and then asks how Paul responded. "Does he seek separation from them. . . , discard them from the kingdom of Christ, strike them with a final anathema?" No, Calvin answers, "He not only does none of these things, but he acknowledges and heralds them as the Church of Christ, and a society of saints."

Calvin had very pragmatic reasons for his position: "By refusing to acknowledge any church, save one that is completely perfect, we leave no church at all." Press reports tell us that some in the Coalition came to a similar conclusion as they surveyed alternative churches they might join if they decide to leave this denomination: they too have concluded that there are no church bodies without serious problems and flaws.

On our side of the aisle, there are additional pragmatic arguments for staying put. The most compelling for me, given my concern about homosexuality, is the fact that this denomination, with its history, social status, and many influential members, has impact far beyond its own organizational boundaries. As I noted earlier, our condemnation of homosexual practices reinforces hatred of homosexuals throughout this society. Former moderator John Fife once said that every time a gay teenager commits suicide, there is a sense in which that goes on the Presbyterian Church's chart. If a small group of dissenters with views like mine decamps to another denomination or starts a new one, that will have limited and temporary effect on the social tragedy we have helped to create. But if the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) changes its official teaching on homosexuality, it will go a significant distance toward changing the message that moderate religion broadcasts to the world. Maybe even homosexual teenagers will hear it and think differently about the meaning and value of their lives. One important reason to stay is that the harm that the PC(USA) has done can only be undone by the PC(USA).

The theological arguments for staying if we possibly can are even stronger than the pragmatic ones. Being engrafted into the church is no ordinary admissions process. Baptism is not a chummy bonding with those with whom we would naturally gather in clubs. It is not an easy process, as our constant use of bland terms like inclusiveness sometimes suggests. I am one who thinks that inclusiveness is a concept with a rather short theological shelf life. We stand in a tradition that has emphasized not automatic inclusion but God's choice. Granted, God chooses more generously and less conventionally than we do, but still, election is a strenuous and painful conjunction. Because of the price God paid to be joined with us, and because we are born into new life with God and each other as we are baptized into Christ's death, baptism accomplishes what other initiations do not. It joins us in Christ to those with whom we have few if any interests, background characteristics, preferences, or opinions in common. It breaks down the barriers that divide, making people who can't stand each other fellow citizens and members of the household of God, because Christ died for all of them—and us.

If I want to testify, then, to what Jesus Christ has done for me, bringing me to him in this unique community that is his body, it follows that my chief reason for staying in this denomination is not my tie to people like you who share my taste for progressive ideas and moderate manners. I would hang out with you anyway, denomination or no denomination. My deepest bond, ironically, is not to you but to two groups with whom I am acutely uncomfortable but to whom, in Christ, I am inextricably joined.

One of these groups is those whom I have injured. My disagreement with one church policy does not change the fact that I have more power in the church because others have less. Homosexuals, minorities, and women not as lucky as I to find an institution that will accept their leadership are what biblical scholar Ellen Davis calls our Ishmaelites, “the great nation less favored” of those to whom the church, by policy or practice, denies full benefits of membership and opportunities for ministry. Sometimes, the less favored lash out in legitimate anger at the unfairness of their situation. Much more often, sustained by the God who has saved their lives in the wilderness, those whom we have mistreated exercise amazing forbearance. They endure the prejudice and unjust laws we impose on them, sticking with us, who exercise power that should have been theirs, and struggling not only for their rights but also for our integrity. As long as they stay, as so many of them do, ministering in love and faith to me their oppressor, how can I walk away?

The other group with whom I am deeply enmeshed, not by my choice but by God’s sometimes puzzling providence, is made up of my opponents, Presbyterians who hold some theological and religious ideas that are antithetical to mine. By “sheer grace,” says Bonhoeffer, we are joined in Christ as firmly to those who do not meet our standards of doctrine and piety as to those who do. I have had the privilege of experiencing this connection firsthand. Over the last decade, I have studied conservative Protestants, including Presbyterians, hanging out in their groups and institutions and getting to know them. I have learned three things about my kinship with them.

First, though there are indeed people in this denomination who are bent on making mischief and doing harm, there are many more who are well-intentioned, and they are found in all parties and factions. I know because I have formed Christian friendships, which mean more to me than I can say, with some conservative Presbyterians.

Second, I have learned that liberal, moderate, and conservative Presbyterians share a deep deposit of faith. In the course of my research, I have listened to dozens of sermons by evangelical Presbyterians, and most of them treat the scripture they proclaim in ways I would have had I been preaching or in ways I wish I had thought of. Our unremitting focus on issues that divide, to the exclusion of large numbers of theological convictions on which God has given us a common mind, is ungrateful. Perhaps God is judging our ingratitude by withholding further mutual understanding until we show some appreciation for the community of faith we’ve got.

Third, at the points we *are* irreducibly divided, and they are very real, my opponents still minister to me because they, unlike my allies, almost always see my faults and offenses and name them. Without this ministry of our opponents, Bonhoeffer reminds us, we can easily become “proud and pretentious,” cutting ourselves off from the work of grace by judging our faith and practice to be so correct that we don’t need grace.

So, because I have opponents who care about me as a Christian, who share with me one faith, one Lord, and one baptism, and who help to save me from self-righteousness, I conclude that I should remain in a church with them for my own good.

*Tell the truth and stay put.* One footnote to these two principles, and one last word. The footnote: I said that separation from the part of the body into which one has been engrafted should be *almost* unthinkable. What would make it thinkable? One condition might be restrictions on the freedom and opportunity to testify to the truth. Some Presbyterians live under such restrictions. Unlike the rest of us, they cannot both lead reasonable lives and be ordained to positions of governing and teaching authority. As I just said, the generosity of those who stick with us even so puts the rest of us in their debt. At the same time, others who make the painful decision to leave because the Presbyterian Church will not permit them to respond to God's call deserve our support and admiration for their courage.

Are there other reasons to leave that might apply to those of us who do have full rights in the church? At those rare and dangerous moments when the church deserts its profession of faith on a wholesale basis—apostasy is the term for such moments—all Christians have to decide whether to separate themselves, either leaving or taking actions that will get them expelled. Without in any way minimizing the seriousness of our mistake about homosexuality—it is a deadly mistake; it must be corrected—I have to say that I do not think the Presbyterian Church is anywhere near that point. This is still God's church. Our denomination presents to the world a true confession that contains some serious error. While working to correct the error, we have ample foundation for worshiping and serving God together, with full and glad and grateful hearts.

One last word. It is a tall order—telling the truth, sticking together even though we disagree. It is easy to get discouraged. How can we sustain our spirits in this difficult time? Let's try leaning on the promises of God. Last spring, I fell under the spell of an obscure passage of scripture on which I have now preached twice. It fits again here. In it, Zephaniah tells a familiar story: the political and religious leaders of God's people in Jerusalem have made the usual mess. A wrathful Lord pronounces judgment on their crimes. Zephaniah quotes the Lord: *[I will] pour out...my indignation...in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed* (Zeph. 3:8). But God's plans and Zephaniah's prophecy do not end there. Speaking again for the Lord, Zephaniah utters this remarkable promise, which seems to apply to the whole city, errant leaders and their victims alike:

I will remove disaster from you. (3:18)

I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech,  
that all of them may call on the name of the LORD  
and serve him with one accord. (3:9)

They shall do no wrong and utter no lies....  
Then they will pasture and lie down,  
And no one shall make them afraid. (3:13)

It's a promise to all of us. *All of us—Covenant Network, Coalition, More Light Presbyterians, and the great non-joining middle—all of us: With God's help, we shall call upon the Lord and serve God with one accord. We shall do no wrong and utter no lies. We shall pasture and lie down, and no one shall make us afraid.*

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**SEVEN THESES  
ON THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH**

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**Text: Isaiah 40:27-31**

Back when I was a new, wet-behind-the-ears seminary graduate, one of the things I just *knew* coming into the parish was that hellfire and damnation sermons couldn't possibly connect with enlightened, modern churchgoers.

One week I was feeling cranky, however, and decided I needed to let my folks have it whether anyone felt connected or not. And so that fateful Sunday I ascended with fear and trembling into the pulpit, sure that I was about to elicit my own martyrdom. Staring down grimly at the assembled crowd of unsuspecting sinners, I proceeded to unleash a fearsome prophetic cannonade against...I don't even remember what the topic was anymore. But it was memorable, I can tell you that much! When the smoke cleared from the battlefield, to my utter surprise and astonishment, this turned out to be one of the most popular sermons I had ever preached. Person after person emerged from the sanctuary beaming, shaking my hand heartily, and saying, "Oh, pastor, *those other people* really needed to hear that!" I confess I succumbed to the temptation to do it again on subsequent occasions when I felt my pastoral popularity needed a boost.

Such preaching is not without its hazards, of course. Most disconcerting was the time when, mounting the pulpit armed with my load of thunderbolts, I was preparing to hurl the initial salvo down upon the hapless victims in the pews. Now the Holy Spirit has a nasty habit of showing up unexpected and uninvited at times when we are wholly occupied with other more important business. And on this occasion the Spirit conspired, at the very moment of my opening fusillade, to whisper in my ear a fresh insight into the text that promptly caused that thunderbolt in my hand to curl around and zap me squarely between the eyes. I hate it when that happens! Why can't we preachers be like rattlesnakes who are immune to their own poison?

I am here to confess to you this morning a similar experience with our "Union in Christ" statement. Perhaps the subtitle of this talk ought to be "Getting Snakebit by the Declaration." I got bit as I was reading the reports from the latest General Assembly, bemoaning the prospects of another year of interminable discussions and a year after that of renewed struggle over the same tiresome issues we have been hashing around for these many years.

You know how the argument goes: "Isn't it a tragedy that our church keeps pouring all this time and energy into ceaseless wrangling when it could be devoted to mission and building up the body of

Christ? It would be one thing if we could settle things, but this struggle seems to have no end in sight. Wouldn't Christ be better served if we could all just agree to disagree and go our separate ways? Wouldn't it make more sense to have two separate churches that could peaceably pursue their different understandings of mission rather than one large pseudo-church that wastes all its time and energy on endless, internal quarrels?" It all makes such logical good sense.

That was when I glanced up in the direction of the Declaration and saw a set of fangs coming straight for my throat. The bite was potent and well-aimed, revealing connections between the theology of the Declaration and the situation we face as a church in ways that were disconcerting, to say the least. Misery loves company, of course, and so this morning I'm going to propose for our joint consideration seven theses on the unity of the church that I think grow inevitably out of the confession we have made with this Declaration. Perhaps some of you will prove more adept at finding ways to dodge their collective bite than I have been.

At the very heart of the *Union in Christ* declaration is its confession that the life of the Christian believer is life *in Christ*. We are, in the words of 2 Pet. 1:4, "participants of the divine nature." We share in the Trinitarian life of God, for the Holy Spirit unites us with Jesus and thereby makes us participants by grace in Christ's own communion with the Father that he enjoys by nature.

This joining of believers with Christ is the only way Christ's benefits actually make their way from his cross and obedience into our lives. As Calvin put it, "As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us." So our knowledge of God in faith comes to us as the Spirit brings about this union and communion with the triune God, making us sharers in the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16); our sanctification takes place as we are united with Christ and his life and holiness start to bubble up in the midst of our own lives (Phil. 2:13); even the forgiveness of sins, our justification, comes to us *in Christ* as our union with him causes him to be the bearer of our sin and causes us to become sharers in the righteous obedience that he carried through for our sake on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21). Our union with Christ, our life *in him* by the power of the Spirit, is the source of all the blessings and benefits of the Christian life.

Now here's the rub. Our union and communion with God in Christ by the power of the Spirit brings with it...union and communion with all other believers who are themselves *in Christ*! We are one with each other because all of us together are one with Christ.

Now let me stress at the outset that we ought have nothing to do with a Christianity of abstract concepts that wrests from the scriptures principles or concepts that then take on an independent life of their own. This substitution of abstract concepts for Jesus at the heart of the faith was the essential impulse behind Gnosticism—that bewildering array of hugely popular heresies with which the church engaged in life-and-death struggle over the first few centuries of its existence. We still have our Gnosticisms of today, versions of the faith centered around abstract concepts that have essentially broken free of their moorings in scripture, and reduced Jesus' role to that of teacher or exemplar. We see this in the use of certain concepts like "diversity," "inclusiveness," even "love." "Unity" can also function as this sort of arbitrary abstraction, lifted up as an end in itself, an idol. Over against every such impulse of our contemporary Gnosticisms we must boldly insist and confess that a Christianity with abstract concepts rather than Jesus at the center is no Christianity at all. Jesus himself *is* the love of God and the outreach of God. Jesus *himself* is the justice of God. Jesus *himself* is the power of God and the wisdom of

God, the righteousness of God and the salvation of God. As Christians we have pledged our lives and entrusted our souls not to conceptual abstractions but to him!

So it is with unity. As an abstract concept, we owe it nothing. Unity for its own sake is an idol. But Jesus...Jesus is one. Christ is not divided. And that means all who are one with him are one with each other. And it means further that if we are not one with each other we cannot be united with him (1 John 2:9). And if we are not united with him, then we have lost the source not just of our unity, but of our forgiveness, our sanctification, our knowledge, and our mission. Gathering this up into our first thesis:

**Thesis 1: To break fellowship with other persons who show any signs at all of being in Christ is to deny our own oneness with Christ and our own hope of salvation in him.**

Schism—understood as willful separation from brothers and sisters who are in possession of the means of grace, the Word and Sacraments by which we are engrafted into Christ—is a denial of Christ and a sin against his own body. Listen to what John Chrysostom, a church father of the fourth century, had to say about it:

Nothing angers God so much as the division of the church; even if we have done ten thousand good deeds, those of us who cut up the fullness of the church will be punished no less than those who cut his body.

To carve up the church is to carve up the body of Christ, because the church is one with Christ.

This puts the lie to the line of reasoning that pits the unity of the church against its purity. Unity is a good thing, so the argument goes, but sometimes it compromises the purity of the church, which is also a good thing. The goal then becomes finding a way to strike a practical balance between the two. Can you hear the Gnostic ways of thinking creeping in here, turning unity and purity into abstract concepts that have to be “balanced”?

But, if our thesis is correct, it means the unity of the church *is* the purity of the church! Both spring from the same source, namely our union with Christ in the Holy Spirit. And so to deny the one is to deny the other: to say the church is not one in Christ means also that the church is not justified and forgiven in Christ, that the church is not holy in Christ, the church does not have its life and mission in Christ. It all goes together. This leads us to our second thesis:

**Thesis 2: The only circumstance in which a breach of fellowship within a unified church body could be consistent with our confession of Jesus would be if such break were accompanied by formal anathema solemnly declaring the other party’s fellowship to be utterly lacking in the means of grace and thus wholly and completely outside of Christ.**

Such anathemas have in fact accompanied the great schisms in the history of the church. Those preparing to issue such would do well to ponder deeply and repeatedly Jesus’ many warnings about hypocrisy in exercising judgment over our neighbors.

How does one, how could one, arrive at such a judgment about another fellowship of persons who claim to be believers? The means of grace that engraft us into Christ have been traditionally identified in Protestant circles as the Word of God rightly preached and heard, and the Sacraments rightly administered. The theory is, when we’re thinking about a church split we look for these essential

ministries of Word and Sacrament, and if they are lacking we conclude a true church is not present and a separation may be justified.

Now these criteria sound fairly straightforward until we begin asking detailed questions about their nuts and bolts application. We look for the Word rightly preached and heard. How often? How many sermons preached in the PC(USA) on any given Sunday have to be heretical or incompetent in order for our denomination to fail this test of the Word rightly preached? What percentage of a congregation has to be hearing rightly? If one administration of the Sacrament is botched, does that bring down the whole denomination? What about a dozen in one week? What if most of them in the course of a year fail some objective, theological test, but there are a few solid ones? And who formulates the test? How can these criteria possibly be applied?

To illustrate how the Reformers *did* apply them, I want to look at Question 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism. This is one of those very embarrassing and usually skipped-over portions of the *Book of Confessions*, but it is exceedingly helpful for our purposes. Question 80 is comparing the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper to the papal Mass. And of the Mass it says,

But the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the sufferings of Christ unless Christ is again offered for them daily by the priest. ...Therefore the Mass is fundamentally a complete denial of the once for all sacrifice and passion of Jesus Christ (and as such an idolatry to be condemned).

We should point out immediately that this statement is not an accurate depiction of contemporary Roman Catholic teachings about the Mass—the point here is not to bash the Catholics. The point is, when the Reformers arrived at a judgment that the Roman Church of their day failed the test of “sacraments rightly administered,” that was *not* a judgment based on lots of incompetent local priests botching the celebration or on folk superstitions creeping into congregational piety, or groups within the church turning the Mass into some sort of pagan or magic ritual.

No, in the Reformers' view the *official theology of the Mass*, proclaimed and taught by highest teaching authorities in the church, made the Mass into an explicit denial of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world. The Reformers found themselves in a position where *every* celebration of the Roman Mass was an explicit denial of Christ's saving work. Thus to participate in the Mass—any Mass—was to deny Christ. Their judgment that the Roman Church lacked the “sacraments rightly administered” had nothing to do with local aberrations in practice or teaching or competent administration. It had everything to do with the official doctrinal teachings of the highest authorities in the church's teaching office. Luther is characteristically blunt in explaining that the focus is on official teachings rather than practical abuses:

Doctrine and life are to be distinguished. Life is as bad among us as among the papists. Hence, we do not fight and damn them because of their bad lives. ...I do not consider myself to be pious. But when it comes to whether one teaches correctly about the Word of God, there I take my stand and fight.

Keeping doctrine and life prudently distinguished, lest we overlook the log in our own eye while severing fellowship because of the neighbor's speck, we can gather this discussion up into our third thesis:



**Thesis 3: A statement of anathema that declares a particular fellowship lacking the means of grace and thus outside the body of Christ needs to have its basis not in aberrations of local practice, but in the official statements, confessions, and teachings of the fellowship in question.**

If the church or a group within the church were to officially and formally renounce the Nicene Creed, or require that baptisms be in the name of Sophia, or forbid mention of Christ in the ordination vows, then our course would be clear. But let us never confuse systematically false teaching with the isolated heresy and bumbling incompetence that has plagued the church from the beginning. Sinfulness and incompetence afflict all of us to varying degrees, and the means of grace have a way of working in spite of us. But false teaching confessed and taught by proper teaching authorities removes the means of grace themselves. For these situations alone is reserved the fearful recourse of the solemn anathema!

Before we proceed further with the development of our theses, we need to add another brick to the theological foundations we have been laying for our discussions. We have spoken already of the believer's union with Christ as the heart of the Christian life. The additional insight we need now to recall is that this union and communion with God in Christ by the power of the Spirit represents not only the deepest reality of the church as we know it here and now, but is in fact the final destiny of the whole cosmos.

We are not in doubt as to how the story will come out. "Every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11). (We will leave aside for now the question how God is going to fit those who presently reject Christ's rule into this picture.) "When all things are subjected to [Christ], then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). "[T]he creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). We know how the story is going to come out. We have God's promise. And so Paul can speak of the Holy Spirit as our pledge and guarantee (2 Cor. 5:5), the first fruits of this redemption that will overtake the whole creation (Rom. 8:23). The church that by the Spirit has its life in Christ is thus a harbinger and a foretaste of the coming redemption that will overtake the entire cosmos.

This is our glory and our hope, brothers and sisters. The Spirit and the gifts are ours—however modest and unimpressive they may seem in your own neighborhood. The gates of hell will never prevail against this hope that appears among us in the Spirit's work establishing fellowship with God and one another in Christ. The reality of the church is one of joyful confidence.

Now here's the question for you. How do we embody that hope and joy and confidence in our life together? How does the outward form of our fellowship reflect this kingdom reality that forms the heart of our church's existence? To help us answer that question I want us to look at two episodes from church history, turning points where this confident, joyful reality has shaped and molded the form of church life. Ironically, both instances might be described under the rubric of Paul's assertion, "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10), for Paul knew that God's power is most clearly seen, and the true state of things is most evident, in situations where human weakness makes it impossible for us even to entertain the thought that we are going to save ourselves.

The first historical turning point I want us to consider is Augustine's debate with Pelagius in the early decades of the fifth century. Pelagius, as some of you will remember, was a British monk who proclaimed a strong and bold and confident Christianity. The church as Pelagius portrayed it was to be a fortress of righteousness, its Christians all seasoned and battle-hardened warriors on behalf of goodness and charity and truth in the midst of a dark and fallen world. It was and continues to be a powerful image and ideal.

It is also something less than the hope of the gospel. Though he admired Pelagius's zeal and dedication, Augustine argued that the church Pelagius was describing took away the transcendent hope in the kingdom *God* has promised, and substituted in its place the kingdom that we Christians are going to build ourselves.

Augustine's characteristic images for Christian believers were not warriors and conquerors who triumphantly trample sinful unrighteousness into the dust. Augustine rather described the church with images of invalids and little tiny babies, persons helpless and utterly dependent upon the sustaining grace of God to nurture that long, slow process of growth toward wholeness, toward the image of Christ.

The church Augustine described, you see, was not a fortress with high walls to keep out the unrighteous. The walls of such a fortress would surely have to cut straight through the middle of each of our hearts! Augustine's church was rather a hospital for sinners. And the very practical result of that, you see, is that Augustine was not afraid to contemplate having a lot of very sick people within its walls. The true mark of the church as God's people, as the foretaste and anticipation of the kingdom, is not the accomplished righteousness of its members—they are still too sin-sick for that! What makes the church the church is that it dispenses within its infirmary the medicine of immortality, the means of grace whose effects we know will one day redeem and transform the whole cosmos. God will be all in all!

If you're Pelagius, you judge the true church by the righteousness of its members. If you're Augustine, you judge the church by whether it retains possession of the medicinal means of grace. If you're Pelagius, you keep the really sick people out of the church, or separate when their numbers get too large—because their presence might compromise its purity. If you're Augustine, you invite the sick ones in—the halt, the lame, and the blind, spiritually as well as physically.

I have thought about this sometimes in the pastorate and in the schoolhouse when I find myself growing frustrated over the antics of those 20 percent of the people who take up 80 percent of a pastor's time. I remind myself that the presence of these spiritually and mentally and physically halt and lame and blind is a sign that the church is doing its job. Such people flocked to Jesus during his earthly ministry because they sensed he could heal them. And they continue to come to Jesus today for the same reason. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Matt. 9:12).

It was a tough sell for Augustine, arguing on behalf of the ongoing presence of sin in the church. But the Christian community eventually recognized the transcendent hope in *God's* redeeming work that underlay Augustine's account, declaring him a doctor of the church while Pelagius was condemned as a heretic. Our hope as a church is not in our own righteous achievement, but in God.

The second snapshot of history I want to present makes its appearance in Martin Luther's theology of the cross, which first appeared in forceful presentation in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. Luther there argued that the Roman Catholic Church of his day, with all its teaching about salvation through meritorious works, was substituting a self-deceived hope in human achievement for true

Christian faith in God's salvation of the world in Christ. A "theology of glory" is what Luther called the Roman position—it is a theology which pretends the kingdom has already come, which pretends human beings are already perfected, which pretends the church in the world is a glorious, triumphant reality reflecting an already-redeemed cosmos. Such an understanding, argued Luther, substitutes human works for the grace of God, human institutions for the kingdom of God, and human pretension and arrogance for our promised redemption in Christ.

Over against the Roman theology of glory, Luther posited a biblical theology of the cross. The church in the midst of a fallen world, he argued, is one with its Master and Head and therefore shares in the fate that befell him in the midst of the same fallen world. The true church shares the cross of its Master—it is battered, afflicted, weak and despised, beset by enemies within and without, utterly lacking in form or comeliness that we should be attracted to it. In short it is utterly dependent on the grace and salvation that God has promised us in Christ, and so its whole life and future is given over to this trust. Can you hear in the background Paul's words to the similarly triumphant Corinthian church?

We have this [gospel] treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor. 4:7-10)

What is our expectation for the normal life of the church, brothers and sisters? Is our hope in the fortress of righteousness that we shall create for ourselves, where all the tares have been uprooted, where the final harvest is complete? Or is our hope in the Great Physician, who came not to call the righteous but those who are sick? Are we out there expecting to find the church of glory, triumphant and perfected and free from taint—at least of those sins we are willing to acknowledge publicly? Or is our expectation to pick up our crosses and follow Jesus—to share in his caring for the sick, the lost, the lame, and the helpless, with our own weakness and questionableness as an institution testifying to the power and transcendent hope of Christ's own presence in our midst? "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong!" I think we are ready to formulate another thesis.

**Thesis 4: The church's struggle with enemies within and without, and the ongoing work of reform in the face of sin, unbelief, and heresy, are permanent features of the church's existence this side of the kingdom.**

The struggles are not going to end, good Christians. Not until Jesus comes back. The struggles are what God has called us to, under the sign of the cross and as a testimony to our hope in him. This is nothing other than the true content of the "*Ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda*" that is such a treasured part of our heritage. A troubled church is not an emergency situation that demands immediate schism or withdrawal. A troubled church is the sign of God's salvation appearing in the midst of a fallen world, of the Great Physician bringing his healing work in the midst of real sinners.

You know, it's always a great comfort to study church history in this regard, because one realizes very quickly that it has *always* been a mess out there. Luther himself, in the golden age of the Reformation, was convinced that Jesus had to be coming back any day now, because things were so bad that there wouldn't be any church left for him to come back to if he waited. Reformed and always to be reformed! The emergency persists, with ebbs and flows, the work goes on—until our Lord returns again in glory!

**Thesis 5: The ongoing work of church reform is faithfully carried out through the evangelical disciplines of prayer, preaching, instruction, Christian nurture, and church discipline that together proclaim our hope in Christ, rather than by resort to schism and separation, which testify to our despair of the workings of God's grace.**

You and I are finally incapable of reforming and renewing the church. True reform involves the conversion of hearts and minds and lives to Jesus Christ by the active working of the Holy Spirit. We haven't the ability to pull that off, but we do have the means of grace and we have Christ's promise: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Our calling is not to run from the patients, to separate ourselves from them, but to patiently employ the medicine Christ has given us. Our task is not building walls to keep the sin-sick from our doorstep. It is faithfully pointing them to God's promise of their healing. Our work is not the necessary means by which God's redemption of all things will come. Our labors are rather prayer, witness, testimony, thanksgiving, and rejoicing in the hope God has given us in his Son.

It's so easy to give in to panic and despair, to give up on our hope! I worry sometimes that we Protestants are dangerously close to making schism—this implicit denial of our union with Christ and our hope in him—a grounding principle of church life. The danger becomes most acute when we Protestant churches face situations of intractable disagreement. If you're a Roman Catholic, you've got the magisterium to fall back on. You can call in Cardinal Ratzinger to knock some heads and de-certify a renegade theologian or two, and the problem is solved! Unity is restored.

We Protestants have given up all that. When we face difficulties, the only thing we have to fall back on is...God! The Holy Spirit converting hearts and minds through the testimony of the Word of God—that's all we have to fall back on! We Protestants have often not been patient enough to let that happen. We get panicky. When the problems don't get solved by *our* timetables, we give up on God and decide it's time to form new denominations instead. And so our Protestant churches have imbibed this denial of our oneness in Christ and made it a founding principle of our existence. Is Protestantism a viable vehicle over the long haul for meaningful faith in "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all"? That is an open question, I think. Our actions in the months and years ahead will help determine the answer.

But what of those concrete, flesh-and-blood situations so many of us are facing these days, where prospective church members come eagerly to our doorsteps, flirt with active membership, only to go away sorrowful when they realize our congregations are connected with the PC(USA) with all of its struggles and quarrels and compromises and scandals? Do we not have an obligation to these wandering sheep?

Brothers and sisters, let me suggest to you that the work of reform begins right here in situations like this, that it is here that the means of grace are sorely needed—not to cure or cover over or separate ourselves from all the real and imagined ills besetting the PC(USA)—as if such a prospect were within our grasp—but in reaching these eager new converts with the hope of the gospel, which is far deeper and more profound than they hope or imagine. Do we really think after leaving us they will find the church without sin that they are seeking in another denomination somewhere? No doubt one can find different sets of problems among the different communions, but can our longing for the pure church be fulfilled by anything other than self-deception and theological tunnel vision? Isn't rather our remedy to be the teaching of these seekers that, as Luther puts it,

It is the sweetest righteousness of God the Father that he does not save imaginary, but rather real sinners, sustaining us in spite of our sins and accepting our works and our lives, which are all deserving of rejection, until he perfects and saves us. Meanwhile we live under the protection and shadow of his wings and escape his judgment through mercy, not through our righteousness.

Let me propose a thesis for this situation:

**Thesis 6: To impose our longings for the pure church upon this-worldly institutions is to substitute the kingdom of this world for the kingdom of God, and a hope in ourselves and our own achievements for our hope in the final redemption of the whole world in Christ.**

Is this a counsel of despair, then? Is our message to these idealistic seekers that they must abandon their ideals in order to be Christians? That true discipleship involves the squelching of our highest impulses in order to make our peace with the limitations and shortcomings of this fallen world? On the contrary! These transcendent hopes and ideals are precious gifts given by the Spirit of God for the benefit of the whole body of Christ. The trick of the matter is to recognize them for what they are and to direct them to their proper ends. Which brings us to our seventh and final thesis:

**Thesis 7: Our longings for the pure church are longings for the kingdom of God, and Spirit-sent indications of our citizenship in it.**

We are strangers and pilgrims in this life, resident aliens whose hearts are gifted by God with the longing for our true home. Our true citizenship is in the kingdom of our Lord Christ, and we should rejoice and cling to every heaven-sent longing and discontent that reminds us that our hope is not lodged in this present world. “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!” sings the psalmist from exile in Babylon. “Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy” (Ps. 137:5-6).

It is there that our longings point us, brothers and sisters, to that city which “has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb...” (Rev 21:23). Heaven help us if we settle instead for the Babylon of this world, however spruced up and redecored by our efforts at “renewal.”

The kingdom for which we hope and long will not come by our efforts at reform. It will not come by our winning the current round of debates. It will certainly not come by our running away from the problems into isolated little schismatic enclaves. The joyous good news, however, is that it *will come*. Of that we can be sure. Let me suggest in closing that the path of faithfulness for us may lie less in winning and conquering—or dividing and separating!—than in faithful waiting and watching and praying and hoping upon the Lord. I love the way Calvin puts it:

Although the church is at the present time hardly to be distinguished from a dead or at best a sick man, there is no reason for despair, for the Lord raises up his own suddenly, as he waked dead from the grave. This we must clearly remember, lest, when the church fails to shine forth, we conclude too quickly that her light has died utterly away. But the church in the world is so preserved that she rises suddenly from the dead. Her very preservation through the days is due to a succession of such miracles. Let us cling to the remembrance that she is not without her resurrection, or rather, not without her many resurrections.

Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary.  
They shall walk and not faint (Isa. 40:31).

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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