

WHY I'M A PRESBYTERIAN AND WHY I STAY IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

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An Address to New Harmony Presbytery

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We are in a season in which some pastors and other church leaders interested in pulling their congregations out of our communion are proclaiming widely that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has no core beliefs, or the church is caught up in some theological drift away from those core beliefs. I don't believe that, I don't see the evidence of it; but I'm grateful for the opportunity today to explore with you what some of our core beliefs are. And I must admit at the outset that, for me, this is personal; as I suspect it is for you. I love our church. I was born into it. I have a biological relationship with the Presbyterian Church. I have a biological relationship with this particular presbytery, for I became confirmed in the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church in Kingstree, where my father served for a time as pastor.

But I am also a Presbyterian because I choose to be, and keep choosing to be. And so, when I was in my last year of college, I presented myself to the Session of my church, and ultimately to my Presbytery for candidacy, and then after Seminary for ordination, and until this good day, I have served, and loved, the Presbyterian Church. I love the ethos of our tradition, because I love its core beliefs, and I want to mention six of them today.

First of all, I love our tradition because of its central theological theme, the Sovereignty of God—the notion that God is God, and we are not God! That's the root of our theology, it's the root of our polity, it's the root of our worship: God is God and we are not God! As a kid, growing up for a time in one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in South Carolina—they called it “the Mother church” of every other church around—I had to say the Westminster Child's Catechism in order to be confirmed. I don't know many people my age who had to say the catechism, but in this particular church in the Lowcountry of South Carolina, they still have to say the catechism in order to be confirmed. That's a good thing, and it won't hurt them! As a Middle-Schooler, I would meet every Saturday morning in the office of our Director of Christian Education, Miss Wista McElveen, and Miss Wista made me learn every single word—every “a, and, but and the”—of that catechism. “Teddy,” she would say, “what is the chief end of man?” and I would respond dutifully: “Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.” That's the caption that could go beneath the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God: our chief end is not to glorify ourselves, but to glorify and enjoy God. It's not simply to grow bigger and bigger churches, it's not to win souls, it's not even to figure out how to earn our own salvation! In fact, John Calvin, our theological forebear, thought that to be preoccupied with your own salvation was selfish! Don't you hear people say all the time: “I want a church that meets my needs”? Calvin would say, “That's selfish.” The Jesuits put it this way: “Ad majorem Dei gloriam.” That's the motto of the Jesuits, the Society of Jesus, bestowed upon them by their founder, St.

Ignatius Loyola: “Ad majorem Dei gloriam.” “To the greater glory of God.” We are not religious, said Calvin, in order to satisfy our own needs or to find meaning in our own lives, but only because God has created us and called us to God’s service. The cornerstone of our tradition is this preoccupation with the Sovereignty of God. And everything else in our theology stems from that.

A second thing I love about our church is its emphasis upon a strong resistance to idolatry. We often think of idols in a medieval way; we are, after all, a Reformation church, a Reformed church intent upon reforming the idolatries of that generation of the Catholic church. And so often, when we hear the word “idolatry”, we think about the excesses of the Catholic church which we culled during the Reformation. All that Catholic bowing to altars and statues, all the candlesticks and crosses everywhere and things like that. But we have in mind, when we think of idolatry, not just that Medieval stuff, but whatever it is, in any time, that would seek to claim our ultimate loyalty, whatever human endeavor overreaches itself and claims too much for itself. Calvin said once, “The mind of man is a factory of idols.” Just as sure as we think we have one licked, another one pops up. In our time, what do we idolize the most? Security? Money? Power? Or—how about this?—work! I had a parishioner in Atlanta, before we came to Austin, who had just made partner in one of Atlanta’s silk-stocking law firms. He worked hard, and he gave a gallon of blood to that firm. One day, he came into my office, though, and he said, “I’m not sure I can do this anymore.” He said, “Someone at the firm told me the other day that the firm values three primary commitments in a partner’s life—commitment to family, commitment to the community, and commitment to the firm—and partners get to choose which two of those commitments they will care about.” That’s the idolatry of work! But we are called to resist idolatry, in whatever form it comes in our time. When the earliest Christians repeated to one another that earliest creed in the life of the church—the words “Jesus Christ is Lord”—what was not said but was very clearly understood was the converse of that statement, that “Caesar is NOT Lord!”

And by the way, let me linger here for a moment and say another word about this affirmation, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” There are many voices out there, keen on seeing congregations leave the communion, that are just making things up. In my part of the world, it’s being said publicly that it’s only a matter of time before the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly votes to deny the Lordship of Christ. It was said at a public forum in your congregation, and my phone rang the next morning from one of your members. “Is that true?” came the question. My reply was this: “I don’t know everything about the Presbyterian Church and its goings-on, but I know a lot; and I have never, ever heard or seen any inkling that there is a gathering movement to propose that we declare that we no longer believe in the doctrine of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.” I simply believe that statement of such gathering momentum is completely false. Moreover, if it were ever to be proven true, I myself would gladly leave our communion—the church of my baptism and formation. Because to say “Jesus Christ is Lord” is also to say that “Caesar—in every age and manifestation—is NOT Lord.” H. Richard Niebuhr, one of my theological heroes, once said that when one is dependent upon God, one is naturally independent of everything less than God.” Dependence on

God means independence of everything less than God! Only God is great enough to live up to our total loyalty, and every lesser loyalty that we try to turn into an absolute is destructive.

A third thing I love about our Presbyterian tradition is its emphasis upon God's work in all of history, and not just the spiritual aspects of life. Calvin's intention for the church in Geneva was not simply the salvation of souls. He cared also about the schools, the hospitals, the sewer systems. And so do we! For Calvin, the ultimate goal of the Christian is not to get a ticket to Heaven (to plot the ultimate journey that takes us out of the world). No, the ultimate goal of a Christian and the ultimate goal of the Church is the transformation of the world; we call it, "the Kingdom of God." This is what Jesus meant, I think, when he said, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in Heaven." And so we are involved in missions all around the world, not just for the sake of preaching the word, but also for the sake of improving farming techniques, and educating children in free schools and in Presbyterian universities, and building hospitals where adequate medical care can save lives, and on and on. Presbyterians are people who care about everything! Why? Because God is at work in all of history.

A fourth thing I love about our Presbyterian tradition is that it's a thinking church. We believe that "Next to the life of love, the most beautiful thing is a human mind dedicated to the glory of God." When I announced that I was going to Seminary, I had a former Sunday School teacher who shook her finger in my face, and said, "Teddy, don't you let them change you." She had a notion that seminaries were places that destroyed peoples' faith, but for me what seminary did was turn me upside down. It reoriented me to the notion that the intellect is not the enemy of faith; it is the helpmeet to faith. And so we are noted, and I'm proud of this, for a certain rigor when it comes to thinking the faith. As a friend of mine has put it, "We demand that rigor; we could not have it otherwise."

Now, on to a fifth thing. Our tradition has always cared deeply about Scripture. I want to linger here for a few minutes, because many proponents of the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians have expressed concerns about biblical interpretation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). When the Fellowship had its first meeting in Minneapolis back in August of 2011, one of the Fellowship's chief spokespersons, the Rev. Jim Singleton, then the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs and now a professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, said in his address to that big gathering that the Presbyterian Church's change in the ordination standards was, as he put it, "another part of the erosion of the way we understand biblical authority. However, to arrive at our different conclusions," he continued, "there must be a very different set of interpretive tools used. And that other set of interpretive tools affects many other substantial truths of the scripture. Because of that other way of biblical interpretation, something subtle changed between us long ago. We often use the same words, but quite often mean different things by them."

This was a challenge to so-called "critical," or "scholarly" readings of scripture—methods of scriptural interpretation which have been the most accepted ways that Presbyterians and other Protestant mainline and Catholic seminaries have approached

scripture for as far back as the last seventy years. These are ways of bringing the fruits of other investigative disciplines to bear in the reading of scripture, and this approach was characterized by Mr. Singleton as having “allowed us to be Lord over the scripture and pick and choose.”

Now, as the President of a seminary that takes very seriously the Presbyterian and Reformed commitment to scripture—a seminary whose largest department is the Bible department—I take serious exception to that. The fact of the matter is that the church and scripture have always been in a deep dialogue relationship. If the church and scripture are not allowed to be in that kind of dynamic relationship, then scripture runs the risk of becoming a kind of god in itself—untethered from any context, unapproachable, inaccessible, hovering over the face of the earth without exactly touching it. We can just pluck one verse after another and treat it as something that we might find in a fortune cookie—totally bereft of any setting that might help us understand it better. If you want to talk about “the erosion of biblical authority,” imagine a church that read scripture that way.

The fact of the matter is that the church, itself, determined, finally, the shape of scripture as we know it today. And there have been debates in the church about what should and should not be part of the canon of scripture that go all the way back to the second century, and those debates raged during the Reformation. In the Reformation, there was a rejection on the one hand of the Catholic church’s proposal that we add the Apocrypha to the canon of scripture, as an additional source of God’s revelation; and on the other hand, the Anabaptists were pushing some new additions to the canon of scripture. Scholars struggled over these matters, and what we now have in our Bibles as a result of all of that is the church’s long-fought-over definition of the canon of scripture. That canon has been challenged, by the way, in our own lifetimes, when certain scholars lobbied for Martin Luther King’s “Letter From a Birmingham Jail” to be added to the scriptural canon. My point is that the canon of scripture—what we know as the Old and New Testaments—has been both established and then defended by the Church!

The Church has always been in that kind of relationship with scripture. Why do you think that, when the Westminster Divines wrote the Westminster Confession, they included these words: “Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these...” and then follows a list, from Genesis to Revelation, of the books of the Bible as we know them today? Why did they do that? Because it was necessary in that time, when people were suggesting all sorts of additions, to assert this list as a necessary point of clarification. The Church has always been in that kind of relationship with scripture. On the one hand, the Church by no means owns scripture. But on the other hand, it was the Church that initially determined what would be, and what would not be, our scripture as we know it now.

Nonetheless, at the end of the day, the church is not “the Lord over scripture,” for the Bible—as many have said—is not just “the Book that we read” but also “the Book that reads us.” In its majesty, the Bible reminds us, over and over again, that we are not the

masters of scripture. I remember as a child, growing up in Atlanta and later Kingstree and then Augusta, where I was impacted by the awareness, at least, from a child's and then an adolescent's perspective of the Civil Rights movement, going to church one day and being startled to hear from scripture: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:28-29). It was my experience that if the church in the Civil Rights period attempted to be Lord over that scripture, then that scripture prevailed—thanks be to God.

Presbyterians have generally been nourished by preaching that has been deeply influenced by scholarly tools designed to help us be grateful recipients of the Word of God which we do not own, but rather seeks to own us!

The approach to scripture that is at the heart of Austin Seminary's curriculum and mission, for example, stands humbly under the authority of scripture. Number One, it recognizes that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer, the center of scripture; number two, it depends on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting and applying scripture; number three, it is guided by the doctrinal consensus of the church; number four, it places all interpretations of scripture under the rule of love—Jesus' command to love God and neighbor; number five, it assumes earnest study of the historical and cultural context influencing the text; and number six, it seeks to interpret a particular passage in light of the whole Bible.

In such ways as this, we are persistently claiming that the church, in its ongoing dialogue with scripture from the beginning, is emphatically NOT the Lord over scripture.

Now, a sixth and final thing that I love about our tradition. I love our polity. It is the embodiment, at its best, of what it means for a church to organize itself around the Sovereignty of God. Calvin was suspicious of too much power being held in one person's hands, say a bishop's hands, because of the corrosive possibilities of such power. Calvin did not trust the trappings of imperial status and the potential for tyranny when so much power was held in one person's hands. Calvin was also suspicious of power being held, finally, in the hands of a congregation, period. Pure congregationalism, he thought, was hampered by two weaknesses. First, congregationalism is an order of church life that is designed for saints and not for nominal Christians. Secondly, congregationalism runs the risk of devolving to emphasis simply on the local church, and thus loses the universal character (or catholicity) of the church.

Most Calvinists have gone for a polity that locates power in the hands of a representative body, and that balances power between clergy and laity. We take some impressive vows when we are ordained as either teaching elders, ruling elders or deacons. And our vows suggest a lot about our polity. Our polity is based upon the assumption—maybe even upon the necessity—that from time to time, we will disagree. And so it is that we take this vow: "Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's word and spirit?" Now the predecessor to that vow in

the old “Southern Presbyterian Church,” which I took when I was ordained and which I think is stronger, is this: “Do you promise subjection to your brothers and sisters in the Lord?”

The assumption behind each of these vows is that we will, from time to time, disagree; and that it is often in the process of such civil and respectful debate that the will of the Holy Spirit is discerned. Sometimes the will of the Holy Spirit says No, sometimes the will of the Holy Spirit says Yes, and sometimes the will of the Holy Spirit says Not Yet. The Holy Spirit can speak to the Church in any way that the Holy Spirit chooses, and we believe that, sometimes through the act of voting—in a fair process in which some people win and others lose—even then, it is possible that the Holy Spirit, from time to time, is speaking to the Church; and so it is that we take a vow to hang in there, in the life of the Church, even when we lose. And by hanging in there, I mean that we pastors, and we elders, never decide that we’re too superior to take an active part, and not just a spectator role, in the deliberative life of our sessions and presbyteries.

I’ve certainly lost my share of votes across my 35 years of ordained ministry, but I have never, ever assumed that therefore I should leave the Church. If there is a biblical precedent for our polity, it is this verse from Paul’s letter to the Romans: “There are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” We are different parts of one body! We are not “likeminded” parts of one body; we are different parts of one body.

My biggest concern about the schismatic rhetoric going on now in our Church is this emphasis upon the value of “likemindedness.” In the wake of the requisite number of presbyteries finally voting in favor of a new constitutional amendment that created room for our ordination standards to broaden, the initial letter to the church signed by the seven original signatories encouraged those likeminded individuals to come together and to imagine a new fellowship and finally a new church. My problem with likemindedness is that I don’t believe Jesus Christ ever imagined that value as a worthy founding principle for his church. Look at the church he began pulling together. Two of his disciples were James and his brother John—loudmouthed, self-promotional braggarts. And then there were Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot (zealots hated tax collectors, and often tried to kill them; imagine how Jesus probably had to sleep between those guys from time to time). Thomas, of all people, full of doubt and fear. Judas, the treasurer and the betrayer. Peter, with his foot in his mouth half the time, neurotic and frightened, making lots of off-the-wall comments. And the others. And ultimately, that pinched, narrow-minded Pharisee named Paul. That was the church of Jesus Christ—not at all a collection of the “like-minded.” And at its best, the Church has never placed a high value on “like-mindedness.” Which is why we can find our place in his Church.

It’s my own sense that sorting ourselves into tribes of the like-minded is a futile exercise. After all, how long will like-mindedness last? How long has it ever lasted? We can divide over matters of difference, but those matters of difference don’t stand still. And the history of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition—the story of how, so often, schism has in time only bred more schism—teaches us that like-mindedness does not last

for very long. And as Dr. Tom Currie has said, “The heresy of the Reformed tradition is that, somewhere out there, there is a purer church.”

Years ago now, before I came to the presidency of Austin Seminary and while I was still serving a church in Greater Atlanta Presbytery, a particularly fractious meeting of that body ended after a long day of difficult votes. Finally there was the long-awaited moment of liberation—a vote to adjourn—and then we were invited to stand for the closing prayer. Our moderator in that year was a fellow pastor who was particularly steeped in a rich devotional life, and when he led us in prayer it was as if he were curling his toes over the very edge of Heaven itself. As we stood to pray on this occasion, he kept a long silence before he finally uttered these words, which were in equal parts simple and profound: “Lord, we are forever asking you for many things, and what you are forever giving us instead...is the gift of one another.”

At the heart of our polity, and of all of our life together, is the conviction that, even when we do not always agree, God is forever giving us the gift of one another. Liberal or conservative, male or female, black or white or brown, gay or straight; we are given, through Jesus Christ, to one another, and for the sake of a broken world—as a body which, in the mind of God, is at its best a sign of the Kingdom.