

**Executive Presbyter's Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon  
Southminster Presbyterian Church, Phoenix, AZ  
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Let me begin by saying that I am totally depraved. Most of you recognize this as a distinctive Calvinist doctrine which claims that all humans are touched by sin and must rely on the grace of God for everything. In the context of Reformed theology, therefore, I confess my depravity in advance of these words to the presbytery. I am aware that my motives are not always pure. Though I strive to be fair and objective, I have my own biases, which I freely acknowledge. My intent is to reflect on matters that threaten our continued life together in this presbytery and in our denomination, and this requires stepping on certain toes. I'll leave it to you to decide whether my words are prophetic, heretical, or something else.

For sixteen years now I've been doing governing body reference checks on pastors and candidates seeking calls to parish ministry. As Associate Executive in Carlisle Presbytery and Executive in Grand Canyon, I have spoken with other execs, stated clerks, COM and CPM chairs, and other governing body staff people about potential matches between pastors and congregations. Theology is one factor to consider when evaluating a match. And over the years, I've noticed an interesting phenomenon when the question about theology is asked. When a reference provider describes a pastor as moderate, centrist, left of center, or right of center, that usually ends the sentence. However, when a reference describes a pastor as very conservative or very liberal, I've learned to listen for a key word that indicates a second clause. That word is *but*.

This pastor is very liberal, *but*.

This pastor is very conservative, *but*.

And do you know what usually follows? A variety of caveats have been expressed in a few cases, but typically, this is what I hear about otherwise competent pastors on the left side of the spectrum: This pastor is very liberal, *but* she doesn't just preach about her favorite issue. She doesn't wear out her welcome by excessively fixating on the particular issue she cares most about. I hear something different about otherwise competent pastors from the right wing. The reference will say this pastor is very conservative, *but* he is loyal to the denomination. He is not involved in any efforts to divide the church.

There is something in the denominational air that seems to equate very liberal pastors with hobbyhorse social issues that they ride into the ground. Perhaps this harkens back to the sixties when many Presbyterian pastors preached passionately for civil rights and against the Viet Nam War. In any case, it is a caricature that nevertheless has a faint ring of truth clinging to it born of historical experience.

Likewise, there is suspicion in the denominational air that very conservative pastors may not be loyal. This, too, is a caricature, but there must be some reason for it. Why else would reference providers so often make a point of affirming that despite being evangelical, particular pastors are not disloyal? Maybe it arises from the various historic schisms and exoduses in our denomination precipitated by extreme conservatives.

The seventh ordination question in our Book of Order is: "Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?" The General Assembly's Theological Taskforce has discussed the concept that our unity is in Christ and not in the uniformity

of doctrinal beliefs. I want to suggest something similar about the purity of the church. Insofar as it is the Body of Christ, the church is already pure, and there is nothing we can do to change or improve that. But insofar as it is made up of depraved human beings, the church will never be pure, and the task of furthering purity in that context may be a fool's errand.

Five centuries ago we Presbyterians answered the question of how to maintain the purity of the church in the face of human depravity. That answer is our polity, which provides checks and balances on the exercise of all ecclesiastical power. Our polity seeks to assuage our mutual suspicions about one another. Our polity seeks to order our lives together in ways that protect the church and its members from our own worst inclinations. Left to our own devices, we would certainly be tempted to use any means to achieve our desired ends. That's certainly the case in the world of secular politics. But our polity tempers this particular expression of depravity.

With scripture and our constitution as referees, we Presbyterians are called to do our best to act morally and follow the will of God as we discern it. Guided by our distinctive theology and polity, we have found a way to honor the purity of the Body of Christ while not deluding ourselves about our own purity. Yet in recent years, particularly in the last decade, elements within the Presbyterian Church (USA) have been tilting away from these touchstones of the Reformed Tradition and toward the doctrines of the holiness tradition. And this is a trend to be wary of.

Our brothers and sisters in the holiness tradition believe that humans are perfectible, and they place great emphasis on working toward becoming perfect as preparation for salvation. This view of holy perfection is utterly incompatible with Calvinism, which maintains that we cannot escape depravity by our own efforts. The Reformed Tradition holds that we are justified solely by the grace of God. The problem is that in recent decades some in the Reformed Tradition have absorbed the views of non-Reformed evangelicals and now rely more heavily on theology associated with words like purity, perfection, sanctification, and holiness, and less on the Calvinist language of depravity, covenant community, the sovereignty of God, justification, and grace. There is also a trend toward linking salvation with individualistic doctrinal confessions or in some cases even with baptism. These are, of course, antithetical to Reformed beliefs.

Now, I'm all in favor of testing the limits of the Reformed Tradition. Pushing at the edges to learn new things and incorporate new insights is part of the continuing process of being reformed. We claim to be reformed always reforming. But there is a difference between testing boundaries and forsaking a tradition in favor of its opposite.

The great irony of our times is that most of the pressure for the PC(USA) to move away from Reformed theology is coming from those who would call themselves conservative. Conservatives and liberals alike are struggling with issues related to sexuality, albeit from different perspectives, and each side appeals to Christian tradition to support its positions.

Sexuality notwithstanding, it is people on the progressive side of our denomination who seem to be investing more energy in reinvigorating our roots. Nearly all of the movement to reclaim reverent worship, transcendent hymnody, and traditional preaching that engages the mind is coming from liberals and centrists. The struggle against dumbing down worship is being led mostly by liberals. It's time for astute conservatives to lend their voices to this enterprise as they did so eloquently only a

generation ago. The good news in this presbytery is that a number of conservative pastors are already doing this.

There is another matter coming from a small segment of the evangelical wing that portends danger for our denomination. Certain people are encouraging division of the PC(USA) into two denominations. Some have devised blueprints to accomplish this. One such plan has been called gracious separation, although there is nothing gracious about it. The plan would set members of congregations against one another and turn presbyteries into ecclesiastical war zones, battling over property, money, and membership.

In theory, separation would produce two happy and homogeneous denominations, one progressive and the other evangelical. But that's a fantasy. In practice it would do no such thing. Both liberals and conservatives in the PC(USA) are scattered into numerous camps based on a range of complexities, nuances, and differences. And certainly the loyal centrists represent many views. In a split, the tug of war to capture the consciences and loyalties of our minister members would be dreadful, and people in the pews would become pawns in a high stakes contest. The scheming to take or hold onto especially prized churches for one side or the other would make Machiavelli blush.

The likely result of a split would be two grievously wounded denominations. One would be a broadly representative church struggling to keep the Reformed Tradition alive, and the other would be a narrowly focused group in peril of replacing its Reformed roots with a kind of generic evangelicalism. And in disgust many of our current members would decline to join either of the new denominations.

In the wake of the recent national election, the media pundits continue to rattle on about red states and blue states. Americans are dichotomized thusly as interior culture v. coastal culture, small town values v. metropolitan world-views, rustic v. sophisticated, redneck v. elitist, evangelical v. secular humanist, and so on. Both red and blue have agendas to limit freedom, but in different ways. One side wants the government to control individual morality, and the other wants the government to control corporate behavior, or so they are simplistically presented.

Given the polarization in the country, you'd think there'd be talk about splitting into two nations. Yet despite the respective levels of glee and disappointment with the results of the election, no sane American would seriously consider dividing into the United States of Red and the United States of Blue. We've already had the traumatic experience of trying to divide blue and gray, and it took more than a century to recover from it. The reality is that every state contains red Americans and blue Americans, and neither group fits easily into the colorful boxes the media have created for them. There are more shades of these colors than the eye can easily perceive.

The membership of the Presbyterian Church (USA) mirrors the diversity of the United States of America in nearly every way. It's a free country, and people can talk about anything they want to. The same holds for the Presbyterian Church. Nevertheless, all this behind the scenes plotting to split the denomination is diverting energy from the real mission of the church. Efforts to divide the Body of Christ are an affront to the very purity of the church that advocates of schism claim to pursue. For Christ's sake, it's time to put this debilitating speculation to rest.

What we all need to do is come together in a contrite spirit of confession. Progressives need to repent of the notion that evangelicals are stubborn bigots, and evangelicals need to give up the view that progressives are scandalous heretics. All

parties need to let go of the conceit that their side occupies the moral high ground. Some actions supported by evangelicals today are clearly immoral by the standard of historic orthodox Christian belief, and the same holds for some actions supported by progressives.

The name Marcion is known to some of you. He was a second century Christian whose views were judged heretical, and he was excommunicated. One element of Marcion's heresy was a truncated canon. That is, he accepted only selected parts of the canon of scripture as authoritative. The parts he didn't like he excluded or edited. The reason I mention this is that Marcion's heresy is still very much alive in the church. The awful truth is we're all Marcionites. We all have our personal canons within the canon. All of us from biblical literalists to crypto-unitarians pick and choose from the Bible what we want to believe and try to ignore or explain away the rest. Some may deny doing this, but they're guilty just the same. We all emphasize certain texts and play down others that are embarrassing or don't comfortably fit our beliefs. Therefore, we all need to confess our Marcionite tendencies and beg forgiveness of our sister and brother heretics.

All of us also believe the Bible, but we believe different things about what it says. And those who boastfully describe themselves as "Bible-believing" are just as prone to interpret scripture incorrectly as are those who call themselves skeptics. Over the years I've encountered some pretty bizarre interpretations of the Bible coming from true believers of all stripes.

Here's the big picture. The PC(USA) exists in a world that is increasingly hostile to the Christian faith in general and the Reformed Tradition in particular. We are living in an era of post-denominational Christianity and rising secularism. As an institution we are under siege from without as well as from within. Powerful forces in the larger Christian community are seeking to define the faith in ways that are narrow, simplistic, and trivializing. They seem to be succeeding. And secularizing forces are trying to define Christianity as anti-intellectual, superstitious, and irrelevant. They can claim some success also.

Friends, we are living through a new Dark Age, caught in the middle of a struggle between scientific rationality and religious faith. And we have something precious to preserve amidst the swirling clamor, something that has been fed and nurtured by both armies, religion and science. That something is the Reformed Tradition. Our tradition affirms that reason and faith belong together as partners in wholeness. Not holiness, but wholeness. And to preserve that tradition, we've got to stick together. We rely on Christ for our unity and purity, but it's up to us to make peace with one another.

I don't say we should cling to a monolithic structure and steely doctrines about double predestination. Our theology needs to grow up along with our increasing knowledge of the world we live in. We have to change to survive. As we prepare to endure the siege, and perhaps in the providence of God even grow stronger and prosper from it, we need to decide what parts of our tradition may be obsolete. What creedal treasures from the past have lost value? What can we authentically add to our tradition from ecumenical partners, biblical scholarship, and emerging discoveries of science?

Foundational to the task of staying together and protecting the church God has entrusted to us, I think, is humble confession. So, I'll end the way I started. I am totally depraved and in constant need of God's grace. What about you?