

## **PCUSA Professors and Theological Educators Respond to “Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment”**

An occasional paper (series no. 3) published by the Office of Theology and Worship of the PCUSA General Assembly, “Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment” written by William J. Weston has recently prompted dialogue and discussion about the leadership, governance, and structure of the PCUSA. While we celebrate the intent and desire of the author to offer a constructive reflection on the future of the Presbyterian Church, we are deeply troubled by the perceived authoritative status vested in this document by many of its readers and the perceived endorsement of this document by Theology and Worship. As professors and theological educators associated with the PCUSA we feel called to highlight several problematic aspects of the document that draw into question its legitimacy as a source of theological discernment on the future of the Presbyterian Church.

1) The author does not provide qualitative or quantitative data to support his assertion that increasingly inclusive leadership in the structures of the PCUSA has led to its decline. While sociological analysis is a respectable and useful resource in reflecting on the institutional, cultural, and historical trajectories of the Church, accepted standards of social scientific research require either statistical or qualitative data as evidence to support an argument. The argument in this paper is based on establishing a correlation between the decline in membership and authority of mainline Presbyterianism over the last fifty years and the rise of new governance structures that include minorities, women, and other people who had largely been excluded from positions of leadership and authority previously in the church. However, Weston does not simply see this as a correlation, rather, his argument is based on establishing that the decline of the PCUSA was actually *caused* by this shift in governance. Weston asks, “So what has been the net effect of disestablishing the Presbyterian Establishment? Women, racial-ethnic minorities, and youth are indeed included at higher rates in the church structure. But the church structure itself has less and less authority.”

2) The argument to “rebuild the Presbyterian Establishment” is rooted in a model of ecclesiological power and authority rooted in a hierarchical rule that has clearly been rejected by the PCUSA as oppressive and unbiblical. Weston’s call for a return to what he describes as the “Presbyterian Establishment” based on the leadership of tall-steeple pastors and more traditional patriarchal forms of Presbyterian policy is more than simple nostalgia. His proposal is based on a highly sacramental ecclesiology emphasizing a heightened clerical authority at odds with the basic tenets of Reformed theology. The Confession of 1967 implies that all believers have equal voice in the leadership and discernment of the day-to-day decision making practices of the church. The church is not simply a social or political “establishment” but the redemptive body of Christ. “Tall-steeple” pastors are not simply the church’s “natural leaders” as Weston claims, but co-laborers in God’s work based on a theology of community, shared governance, and mutual discernment. As indicated in Galatians 3: 26, “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus,” the church is not simply an “Establishment,” but the redeemed *ecclesia* (gathering) of God’s children, bearing witness to God’s realm on earth. The Church, therefore, is a Eucharistic community called to celebrate God’s reign in the world, where “there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28).

3) The proposal for “rebuilding the Presbyterian establishment” fails to respond to the needs of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Any reflection on the nature and mission of the Church, particularly concerning the future of the Presbyterian Church (USA), must begin with a critical and faithful discernment of God’s call for the church in the present age. The Confession of 1967 also makes abundantly clear that “God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the mission of reconciliation to which he has called his church are the heart of the gospel in any age.” It is this ministry of reconciliation that guides and directs the church’s programs, policies, polity, and overall structure. The challenge for the PCUSA in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to figure out how to further the work of reconciliation in a world with different social realities and challenges than the world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reverting to forms of leadership and control that dominated the last century may be far from ideal in helping us address the new problems and realities of our present world.

4) The proposal that “tall-steeple” pastors, who Weston claims are the “natural leaders of the church,” should provide the primary leadership of the denomination will reestablish a denomination led almost exclusively by white, male pastors.

Weston is quite aware of the effects of his proposal, stating, “it is likely that [a restored Presbyterian Establishment] would be overwhelmingly white, predominantly male, and very largely traditional, bourgeois, pious, old, and straight.” His vision of effective leadership is a very particular model that emphasizes centralized authority and control. This is particularly evident in his criticism of leadership models that encourage including racial/ethnic, women’s, and youth representatives in determining the vision and future of the church (presumably at any level) as “failed” leadership. From a sociological perspective, this argument ignores the real social and economic differences that impact the lives and perspectives of believers who are not white, male bourgeois, old and straight. Theologically it denies the shared Reformation theological principle of the priesthood of all believers in a covenant community in which all are involved in working together to live into the realm of God on earth.

5) The claim that we no longer need structures of inclusivity fails to recognize the deeply pernicious nature of structures of racism and sexism in our culture and our church and contradict the Book of Order.

Weston’s claim that “[p]ermanent advocacy committees for women’s concerns and racial-ethnic concerns institutionalize mistrust of the denomination’s authority structures” demonstrates a misunderstanding of the role and function of advocacy work. Scripture and the Church’s teachings attest to the sinfulness of human nature, corrupting its institutions, systems, and even ideas. Therefore, structures must be put in place to “approximate” the justice of God in human institutions, as Reinhold Niebuhr would say. Many of the institutional structures that Weston criticizes (e.g. Committees on Representation, Advocacy Committees, ministry programs that focus on ministry with racial-ethnic communities and women) have been put in place precisely as a response to the human sins of racism and sexism that continue to be manifest in our society and in our church, despite Weston’s assertions to the contrary. Advocating for the perspectives and inclusion of persons who are marginalized by structures of racism and sexism is a positive example of the church’s commitment to justice and inclusivity and goes a long way toward Weston’s goal of promoting “leadership chosen for its ability to help us work together effectively”. Furthermore, the Book of Order clearly recognizes diversity and inclusiveness as

fundamental to the unity of the church (G-4.0403) and ensures access to leadership and representation (G-9.0104). God in Christ, who directs and sustains the life of the Church through the presence of the Holy Spirit, establishes the meaning of justice for the church and the world and challenges any complacency with traditional group privileges.

#### Concluding remarks

As educators, we promote the free discussion of ideas as a meaningful and important contribution to processes of deliberative discourse and shared governance. Weston and others certainly have the right to the opinions expressed in this document. However, we are interested in promoting an informed and Reformed discussion about the issues at hand. We recognize that the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church in the United States may very well require a renewed conversation about the role of institutions and structures in living out God's reconciliation in our world. However, we believe a more nuanced historical, theological, and cultural analysis is required to adequately think through the challenges before the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in this new century. With that in mind, we call upon leaders, friends, colleagues, and lay-persons to engage in a meaningful and informed dialogue on the future of the church. Indeed, there is a critical need for ongoing reflection and discernment in casting a faithful vision for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) guided by the inclusive, all encompassing, call of the Realm of God on earth.

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