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## **We believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: 4 Theses**

*by Charles Wiley, Associate for Theology, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

We begin by reading the creed:

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,

who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

A brief note before I begin: Usually when I speak as an Associate for Theology I must be very careful in representing the General Assembly Council. In a few weeks I will serve at our 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly as a resource person before a host of committees to represent the General Assembly Council. I will do my best to avoid controversy, to speak consistently with General Assembly policies, and to avoid making people unnecessarily angry. That is an appropriate role for me to take, and I have to admit that I take a fair amount of pride that I do it rather well.

Nonetheless, that is not my role today. Re-forming Ministry has a chance to succeed only if its participants are willing to take risks publicly: testing ideas before they're "perfected," working publicly together with colleagues, being willing to say "I was wrong about that" when helpfully challenged by others.

My presentation will consist of four theses about the one holy catholic and apostolic church, one thesis for each attribute of the church. After a previous incarnation of this presentation, one of the hearers remarked that it seemed very pessimistic. I am not a pessimist about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In fact, I have great hope for it. However, I do believe that we are at a critical juncture in this church's history. And at this time we need nothing more than we need honesty. Better public relations will not carry us forward to a better place; speaking the truth in love just might.

**THESIS ONE: The greatest future possibility for the Presbyterian Church is also its greatest challenge: to repent of our idolatry of our past for an uncertain future where the Presbyterian Church is no longer *mainline* nor a *denomination*. This painful path is the way we must take in order to develop a robust ecclesiology for a new day.**

I come as an outsider to the Presbyterian Church, having been raised Pilgrim Holiness. That has been a deficit for me in some ways. I do not have the natural networks that some have, but it also provides me with perspectives that are helpful. When I was in seminary as a new Presbyterian, I noticed the way that folks told the story of Presbyterianism. It almost always started something like this: "Presbyterians have featured prominently in United States history."<sup>1</sup> The story centered around the importance of the Presbyterian Church to the republic, e.g., that the governmental structure of the United States was modeled on Presbyterian polity. Did you know that nine US presidents have been Presbyterians (including a remarkable three-in-a-row streak of Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison and . . . well . . . Grover Cleveland . . . but that is still three-for-three)?

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the account of the denomination's history posted on the PC(U.S.A.) website: <http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-history.htm>

Much of this history was indeed true, but it also became clear to me that it was much more than a listing of events—it was an identity-creating story. We Presbyterians are, in a word, important. And we can prove it to you by showing you how important we have been in our nation's history.

Whether you agree or not with Stanley Hauerwas that we Christians have never handled such success well<sup>2</sup>, it is no longer true that we are important as an institution. There are still important Presbyterians in American government: Donald Rumsfeld, Bill Frist, and Condaleeza Rice in the current administration, just to name a few, (although they seem to show a considered indifference to General Assembly social witness policy!). As an institution, that cultural power is at best a nostalgic memory.

Had you been a loyal reader of *Newsweek* on March 28, 1955 you would have seen Eugene Carson Blake, future Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (a predecessor to the PCUSA) on the cover. Just six years later *Time* readers would have spotted Blake on their cover, now the Stated Clerk of newly formed United Presbyterian Church. And in neither case was this coverage the result of scandal or crisis in the church. Even now we can still remember those heady times of Blake and Eisenhower, but the memory grows dim. Mark Smutny of Pasadena Presbyterian Church put it well in a sermon on January 20, 2002:

Nobody in power is really listening anymore to the mainline churches despite all the "God bless Americas" and faith-based initiatives from political officials. True, General Assemblies and their counterparts among Lutherans, Methodists and the rest continue to issue progressive resolutions, but nobody of influence is really listening. In the 1950s when Eugene Carson Blake was Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian General Assembly, he could pick up the phone and call President Eisenhower on a matter of church concern. He was the last Presbyterian to do so. Our clout as an establishment church is gone. The cozy alliance of mainline church and a benevolent government where the church helped shape governmental policy and promoted vague civic virtues is only a memory.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that Cliff Kirkpatrick is a fine man and a good Stated Clerk—a man I respect. The position he holds may have the same title as the one Eugene Carson Blake held, but it is a different job. Cliff is the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He is not, as Blake was, splitting that job with being a Protestant Pontiff and a member of the shadow cabinet.

The very descriptor *mainline* is now sociologically puzzling. This term, borrowed from the churches that lined the Main Line in Philadelphia, now appears to be as appropriate for Pentecostals as it is for Presbyterians—at least there are more of them in church on a Sunday than there are of us.<sup>4</sup>

But if this is the case, if we are no longer at the heart of the culture, we are blind to it. Hauerwas and Willimon put it well:

Mainline American Protestantism . . . [has] plodded wearily along as if nothing had changed. Like an aging dowager, living in a decaying mansion on the edge of town, bankrupt and penniless, house decaying around her but acting as if her

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<sup>2</sup> Resident Aliens, p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ppc.net/sermons/text/01-20-02.html>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.adherents.com/rel\\_USA.html#families](http://www.adherents.com/rel_USA.html#families).

family still controlled the city, our theologians and church leaders continued to think and act as if we were in charge, as if the old arrangements were still valid.<sup>5</sup>

Yet it is precisely this analogy that helps to explain Presbyterian blindness to the situation clearly before us: we are not bankrupt and penniless. We believe that we still are the mainline—a belief sustained by riches. Frankly, as someone who has lived through three reductions in force over the past four years, we are starting to get the picture, but the financial stress we have been facing is primarily because our significant endowed funds have produced less income because of the stock market drop of 2000. It only goes to show how dependent we are, to put it bluntly, on dead people. If this building were run just on current giving, we'd only be in that four story building next door—or more likely in a mirrored office complex out on Hurstbourne Drive, sharing space with a temporary agency. Instead, even in hard times we can sustain an existence in this building that provides a sense of authority and prestige.

If our future lies in no longer being mainline, it also must like in no longer being a denomination. *Denomination* is clearly one of the slipperiest words in this discussion. I have been working on it for a couple of years, and I have yet to find a completely satisfying description. There are a lot of nuances to the question that demand a separate hearing, but to put it simply:

- when we are considering the spiritual life of our children over 18, *denomination* does not mean church in any way. If our children attend worship of almost any Christian tradition, as long as it does not practice human sacrifice, we jump with joy and do not consider them to have abandoned the *church* when they affiliate with a denomination other than the PCUSA.
- when we are considering congregations and their property, we use words like schism and consider breaking fellowship with the PCUSA nigh to breaking fellowship with the church universal.

There may be good reasons for both of the above, but it does point to what I believe is a basic incoherence in our understanding of the status of being a *denomination*.

The best that I can come up with so far is that denomination is the form of social relation that Christian traditions have in a market-driven culture where each is simply one of the choices that people have. As Amy Pauw noted yesterday<sup>6</sup>, voluntary association may be a better model for the church than some. Nonetheless, there is a deeper understanding of church that we must claim. Part of the way we conduct ourselves now is to recognize that we are both:

- a. competing with other faith traditions for adherents, and,
- b. open to suggesting more compatible forms of Christianity for those that give us trouble

I wonder if either of these gives us a very good model of “church?” Our future lies in being church, not just another option on the religious landscape.

**THESIS TWO, holy: The greatest challenge to our polity is that while most Presbyterians find their experience in congregations life-giving, they find their experience, or at least their perception, of governing bodies life-draining. Members**

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<sup>5</sup> *Resident Aliens*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> In her response to an essay by John Burgess.

**experience the church beyond the life of the congregation as no longer dealing in holy things.**

The significant exception this thesis, as far as my experience goes, is General Assembly commissioners. The vast majority of those I have spoken with at the Assembly find it an exhilarating, faith-building experience. They would not trade it for the world. But of course, they don't have to attend it 6 times a year! For many, especially those in vital churches, the work of governing bodies has become a distraction at best, and a life-draining burden at worst.

This is no one's fault in particular, as if the fault could be laid at the feet of presbytery executives or the like—it goes way beyond presbytery leadership. It is the natural reaction of people within a failing institution. We become focused on internal, structural issues and forget our true purpose. And while this may be a strategic problem for many kinds of institutions, it is fatal for the church. The problem for us is ecclesiological: we mistake the quite necessary institution of the church that supports a greater purpose for the end itself.

Reformed ecclesiology always is on this knife-edge in relation to the institutional life of the church. The church cannot help but take a visible, institutional form. That the church is institutional is not a problem. But the church errs when its institutional life becomes the focus of its vision and energy. When this happens, life in the church ceases to be holy.

**THESIS THREE: catholic: The greatest challenge to local congregations is the rate of cultural change, specifically related to music, that makes conversations about worship the most divisive issue in local contexts. What does it mean to call the church comprehensive and universal when cultures even within congregations seem incompatible?**

We live in a time of unrivaled musical change and differentiation. After a long period in which the organ (and piano) have almost defined church music, we are moving into a time when the organ is a niche instrument. That there is a variety of music used in Christian worship is nothing new, but that it is stratified intergenerationally is new.

Homosexuality is usually cited as the most church-dividing issue nationally. Music in worship is the most church-dividing issue within congregations.

It is not a crisis that there is a wide variety of music out there. I would argue that it is a good. We are enriched by new and interesting music—often from other cultures. It does become a problem when worship is so identified with particular genres of music such that common worship becomes an oxymoron.

Church buildings are becoming “branded” by type of music in worship. Cathedral type spaces have indicated their genre for a long time. One walks in, sees the giant rank of pipes, and one knows what one will hear in worship. Increasingly, this is happening across many types of churches. One recent trend is that churches that have had their organ pipes discreetly hidden behind screens are putting them out in the open. Churches that have bands are setting up their space for that. More and more, when you walk into a church, without anyone saying a word, you know: “This is an organ church” or “This is a band church.”

I hate sounding like a Luddite, and in the interest of full disclosure you should know that, while I think while much contemporary Christian music is drivel, I think some of it is outstanding and beats the pants off some of our traditional and recent hymnody. Further, I dislike the performance aspect of much that goes under the umbrella of “contemporary,” but if

you really want to see performance in worship, visit one of our tall steeple churches with world-class organs and paid choirs. Such alien features to authentic worship are not restricted to the synthesizer and “let-me-emote-in-front-of-you” praise band leaders.

Worship music has evolved since its introduction in public worship. That is not a problem. What is a problem is a theologically and liturgically coherent account of worship when it is directed to such narrow sociological bands defined by race, class and increasingly by age.

What does it mean our notion that the church is catholic (universal and comprehensive) when we cannot find a way to sustain worship together?

**THESIS FOUR: apostolic: The greatest challenge to our mission is that we lack a cohesive and compelling account of salvation in Jesus Christ.**

A few years ago we, and by this I mean the PCUSA, had something of a triumph at General Assembly. After almost two years of vitriolic debate that seemed to indicate that we had no shared understanding of who our Savior is, the Assembly affirmed a statement that proclaimed the church’s broad faith in Jesus Christ in the document, “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.” As someone who helped write that document, I have to say that the standing ovation from the commissioners that day was the single most satisfying moment in my work on GAC staff.

But as we have moved away from that great day in Columbus, I have been left with a nagging concern.

As you know, the debate those 20 months surrounded the question, “Is Jesus Christ the only way?” The Assembly adopted the statement “Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him.” So we stood together and proclaimed Jesus as *the* way. My niggling concern is that we have little shared understanding of *the way to what*.

In an earlier day we did have a shared understanding: sin condemned us to eternal damnation, and salvation consisted of being spared from hell and granted eternal life in heaven with God. Many in the church find this a less than satisfying answer, but we have replaced it with vague affirmations that we find difficult to articulate.

This makes the first great end of the church, “The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind,” a bit of a mystery. Recent work in the Pulpit and Pew research shows that most ministers are satisfied in their lives as pastors, but 80% find preaching the Gospel to be a significant problem in their ministry. This is worth repeating: most ministers are satisfied in their lives as pastors, but 80% find preaching the Gospel to be a significant problem in their ministry.

Without a Gospel to proclaim, we become an institution searching for a reason to exist. It is often said that without a mission, the church becomes like the Kiwanis club. Well, as a member of the Kiwanis once told me, let’s not insult the Kiwanians that way. As a civic club, the church is pretty pitiful. If we do not have a Gospel to proclaim, we better just close up shop.

I believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church