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Discerning the Signs of the Times: Responding as a Confessional Church to the Culture

by William D. Eisenhower

“You are good at reading the weather signs in the sky, but you can’t read the obvious signs of the times” Mt 16:3 NLT.

I have a digital bathroom scale that gives a different read-out every time I step on it. I do not mean from day to day. I mean from moment to moment. Any morning I do not like what it is telling me, I can just keep stepping back and forth until I get a read-out more to my liking.

A parable for life in an over-informed age. Our lives are beset by a ceaseless flux of continuously changing opinions on every conceivable subject. True enough: to some, this flux is to be preferred. To some, life could not be better, for the fact that opinions keep changing would seem to leave each individual free to choose the digital read-out he or she prefers. To some, preference is more than a brand of hair coloring — it’s a gladly-embraced philosophy of life.

But, for many others, this flux of changing opinions is a symptom revealing that at a deeper level something is seriously, even dangerously, wrong. Even among those who do not have the benefit, say, of a robust doctrine of sin, the drift of American culture just feels wrong. Of course this feeling could be misguided. Emotional responses, even wide-spread ones, still have to be

evaluated. Yet, the feeling that things have come unglued, and the moral flux which has prompted it, are the preeminent social facts of our day.

So, how are we to evaluate them? As a rule of thumb, any set of interpretive principles, religious or otherwise, which hopes to gain wide acceptance will have to provide a plausible unriddling of the more pressing social facts presenting themselves. This means that a time such as ours would seem to be custom-made for what the Presbyterian churches have traditionally excelled in. Our message is one designed to make sense of — and provide reassurance for — those times when everything seems out of whack. This ought to be our turn to shine!

And yet there are those among us who seem to believe that we are powerless before the social ungluing of our day, that we should not look to our strong past for our cues, but rather should cave in under the pressing weight of the *Zeitgeist* (cultural attitude reigning at the moment). In fact, some so much as say, “the bathroom scale may be broken, but by George, only a fundamentalist would try to do something as foolhardy as . . . fix it! A new set of cultural assumptions reigns everywhere, there’s nothing we can do about it, and besides, when you think about it, it really isn’t that bad. Isn’t it perfectly obvious that the truly Christian thing for us to do is make the *Zeitgeist* our friend?”

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The Confessions Express the Reformed Churches' Distinctive Vision

Lest we join the chorus too quickly, it will be worth our while to ponder the words of William Placher and David Willis-Watkins, "We are convinced that to the Reformed churches a distinctive vision of the catholic faith has been entrusted for the good of the whole Church."¹ What would it mean to share this conviction? For starters, it would mean knowing what this distinctive vision is — knowing beyond the doctrines of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and beyond the *solas* of Protestantism (grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone), what it is that defines the theological perimeters of Reformed Christianity. This is where the Reformed confessions come in. They are expressions — irreplaceable expressions — of that distinctive vision.

Sharing this conviction also involves a desire to be a faithful steward of that which "has been entrusted for the good of the whole Church."² This means continually asking our tradition to be faithful to Scripture, even as we ask one another to be faithful to our tradition, something the *Book of Order* makes clear: "These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The church is prepared to counsel with or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions" (G-2.0200).

The confessions 'identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions'

To some, such words may sound harsh. But consider what the confessions do. They "identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation." (G-2.0100a) If the idea of holding one another accountable to confessional standards seems harsh, no doubt the reason is that the identifying/guiding/directing/equipping functions they perform no longer seem important.

We will be well served if we keep in view the twin tasks of holding our tradition accountable to Scripture while holding one another accountable to our tradition. Doing so, enables us to ask, "How well are we discerning the signs of the times with respect to Amendment B, the 'fidelity and chastity' amendment?" The amendment is really quite

simple and straight-forward: "Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament."

Holding our tradition accountable to Scripture while holding one another accountable to our tradition

These would seem to be sentiments which all Presbyterians could rally around. And yet many are vigorously arguing against them. Some of their arguments are just plain silly; some could be valid in other contexts; but the thrust of all the arguments taken together, if widely adopted, would mean that the Presbyterian Church (USA) would no longer be a Reformed body in any real sense. It would mean that we have fudged, and fudged, and fudged with respect to what truly matters to the point of having lost everything which could be credibly identified with the Calvinist wing of the Reformation. Having abandoned what we essentially, necessarily are, our message would then ring quite hollow, and of course, our members would see through the charade and depart in even larger numbers than they already have. Our epitaph would then be: the Reformed church continued reforming itself until it was no longer Reformed, nor even a church.

Lest anyone doubt, PCUSA leaders, in showing us what they consider to be serious disagreements with Amendment B, have given us instead what amounts to a bathroom scale gone haywire. For two examples, we turn to the letter from fifty-seven leading Presbyterians, and to articles printed in the Fall, 1996, issue of *Network News*, the official publication of The Witherspoon Society.

Critiquing the Letter of Fifty-Seven from the Perspective of Reformed Faith

The letter from the fifty-seven was initially printed without benefit of title or letterhead, but was subsequently designated "An Open Letter from leaders of the Presbyterian Church (USA)." And true to this title, the signatories are indeed some of our ablest and most influential leaders. One hesitates to disagree out of respect for the positive and in some cases outstanding contributions these signatories have made to the church in their respective areas of expertise. Yet, we must regretfully note that in this instance, their persuasive words threaten the Presbyterian Church (USA) at its very core.

Consider. The letter begins with the profession that those signing it are motivated by a deep love for the church and a

commitment to Jesus Christ. Each point thereafter concerns pragmatic considerations. Before those points are taken up in turn, it is important to ask just how much weight should an appeal grounded in sincerity and pragmatism have? The answer is, not as much as the authors seem to believe. First of all, when the Church considers reaffirming its traditional stance on any fundamental moral issue, its members have to reckon with all sorts of factors, but the love and commitment of those who oppose reaffirmation is not very high on the list, nor are the practical difficulties this party foresees. Secondly, suppose someone rounds up fifty-eight sincere, prominent Presbyterians who claim that the practical difficulties that a departure from the Church's traditional stance would inflict are far more injurious to the denomination than the proposed reaffirmation ever could be. Who would deserve to carry the day? Actually, neither party. If the question is, "is it right?" then motives and practical difficulties cannot be allowed to determine the outcome.

Sure, we could answer in kind. We could say that we have a deep love for Jesus and a commitment to His Church. It is amply clear to us that it is the continued fudging, the continued blurring of right and wrong, the continued backing away from making the tough calls that is unworkable, not the recommended reaffirmation. But what would be the point? The Reformed Church has never prided itself in being the church of the sincere pragmatists. To begin arguing on that basis now would be to radically depart from the Reformed tradition — which is unfortunately what the letter does.

And things do not get any better when we examine the points the letter advances. Take, for starters, the claim that the amendment will lead to an "examination of behavior potentially bordering on inquisition." Really? We are going to start burning heretics at the stake? If this is not a hysterical overreaction, then it is hard to imagine what might be. Why are the signatories panicked about the thought of Presbyterians expecting their leaders to live self-disciplined lives?

Let us keep going. Referring to the values of chastity and fidelity, the letter allows that they are important, but then asks, "But what does it mean to turn these values into criteria for ordination and/or installation to office? When an ideal is reduced to a legal requirement, the spirit of Law has become narrow legalism." These authors are supposed to be Calvinists? Which Calvin tosses around ideals we are supposed to appreciate but never, never, never try to govern our Church by? Which Reformed confession teaches, never expect your church officers to be models of self-disciplined obedience, because that would be so narrowly legalistic?

True enough, legalism — not what is purported to be in Amendment B, but the real thing — distorts the gospel, or better said, destroys it. In legalism, God's free offer of salvation is reimagined to be a response to human effort, or a conditional subsidy requiring subsequent grace-less (and thus ultimately thankless) obedience on our part. But let us be honest. Among extreme antinomians, any talk of moral

standards, of costly grace, or of moving away from the slippery slope on which we now stand will be perceived to be a reckless plunge into the warren of the pharisees — not because it actually is, but because moral bankruptcy has been misinterpreted and embraced as though it were Christian freedom.

But what do Calvin and our *Book of Confessions* say? Far from bending over backward to avoid the appearance of "narrow legalism," each allows ample room for ordering the Church's life according to God's standards. In the words of the Second Helvetic Confession, "We teach that the will of God is explained for us in the law of God, what he wills or does not will us to do, what is good and just, or what is evil and unjust. Therefore, we confess that the law is good and holy" (5.080).

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Second Helvetic Confession

Yes, of course, one of the things we learn from the law is that we fail to fulfill it. But for Calvin, if God's law has a single most important function, it is to stir us lest we settle for less than the best. "We ought not to be frightened away from the law or to shun its instruction merely because it requires a much stricter moral purity than we shall reach while we bear about us the prison house of our body. For . . . law points out the goal toward which throughout life we are to strive" (*The Institutes*, 2.7.13). In this spirit, Calvin speaks of the principal use of the law, that being its double use to teach and to exhort. In this regard, he seems to find it . . . shall we say, rather stern and unbending? "The law is to the flesh like a whip to an idle and balking ass, to arouse it to work. Even for a spiritual man not yet free of the weight of the flesh the law remains a constant sting that will not let him stand still" (2.7.12).

No one needs to claim that the Reformed tradition has a single, unaltering position on law and morality to insist that ours has been that form of Christian faith which prizes God's standards and confidently applies them to our life together. To put it as simply as possible, to try to be a Calvinist while opposing as legalistic the effort to hold church officers accountable to Scriptural/confessional standards is not to be a Calvinist at all, which is precisely the untenable position the fifty-seven have adopted.

We find similar fatal flaws with the fall issue of the *Network News*, recently sent to all ministers and clerks of session of the PCUSA. The Witherspoon Society includes in its mission statement the objective of revitalizing the church "so that it may be biblically and confessionally faithful . . ." — an irony, given that this fall issue concentrates on objections to an amendment designed to do

just that, and given further that the various authors unite in holding that the Bible is fine, but is really not all that clear, and that the confessions are important, but are really not all that helpful if taken as guides for faithful living.

For starters, note carefully the position staked out by Witherspoon Society president, Gene TeSelle, in the newsletter's cover letter. Amendment B "threatens the very heart of our reformed and Presbyterian heritage," he says. We would be completely in the dark as to what that heart and that heritage might be, except for the challenge issued two sentences later: "it is time for our church to remain faithful to our long tradition of openness to God's continuing revelation of truth."

But the idea that God dispenses new revelations and new truths, which TeSelle identifies with "the very heart of our reformed and Presbyterian heritage" has nothing whatever to do with it. In fact, Reformed theology is very much taken with the conviction that God does not issue new revelations. The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it this way, "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men" (6.006).

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Thus, with all due respect, in Dr. TeSelle's exhortation to the Church to remain true to its past, that past has been comprehensively and explicitly misrepresented, so that being false has been construed as though it were being true. Some would counter that Reformed theology has quite clearly developed and broadened over the centuries so that no one document (for instance, The Westminster Confession of Faith) and no one figure (say, Calvin) can fairly be cited as representing the whole. Yes, of course. But do not miss the issue here. Dr. TeSelle represents the view that Reformed theology has broadened and developed into its *complete opposite*. Let us hope that he is wrong, for if not, the world will have lost that "distinctive vision" — that sturdy, gruff, honoring-God-by-honoring-the-Word stance which Calvinism has historically represented.

But someone might ask, Isn't there some "big tent" way to view Reformed theology so as to make room for all of those claiming to speak for it? Dr. TeSelle and the others writing for the *Network News* do not seem to think so. In "A subversion of our heritage," the Rev. Gail Ricciuti speaks as though a vast chasm separates advocates and opponents of Amendment B, and as though only the latter know what it means to be Presbyterian. The article casts the former, the traditionalists, as innovators — reckless radicals even — who have insidiously set about to insinuate a strange,

unprecedented "new dogmatism" into the denomination, one which would amount to a "sea-change [in] denominational identity." This is quite odd, in as much as any honest commentator would have to concede that: 1) throughout Presbyterian Church history until quite recently, the notion that church officers were called either to fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness was commonly understood to be obvious; 2) specific language to this effect was never put into the *Book of Order* because this common understanding made it unnecessary; 3) the Fidelity and Chastity amendment would not have been controversial in the least to any generation of Presbyterians prior to our own.

Yet, Ricciuti seems to think that Presbyterians have only just this year begun to think of relating (a) traditional sexual morality to (b) denomination-wide standards for ordination. Suddenly, an un-Presbyterian crop of upstarts have started trying to hoodwink the denomination into getting strangely picky about who we want to ordain. This sudden "sea-change" is alleged to involve subverting our denominational identity, and radically altering our Reformed theology. How? Well, so the argument goes, true Presbyterians owe their obedience to Jesus Christ alone, yet the amendment requires obedience to Scripture. What is more, true Presbyterians have appreciated their confessions as "attempts to interpret scripture for the needs of a particular day and age and never (until now?) as standards requiring compliance." We are to "be instructed and led by those confessions," but not "conformed to" them.

But is any of this true? Let us think it through. For starters, the Confession of 1967 explicitly connects Scripture and obedience, referring to "the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written" (9.27). Second, no one denies that the confessions are human documents evidencing the limitations of the historical periods in which they were written. But so are the articles in *Network News*. The question to ask is: Which are more reliable expositions of the essential tenets of the Reformed faith? The ones officially adopted by the Church? Or the ones from the Witherspoon Society which at many crucial points are antithetically opposed to them?

Now. As we noted earlier, the confessions are subsidiary standards. At any point wherein Scripture and the confessions disagree, we are to follow Scripture. But this specious distinction between being "instructed and led" without being "conformed to" them demonstrates a willingness to say whatever it takes to cloud the issue. To the extent that the materials in our *Book of Confessions* are "authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do," then we are to be led by them, instructed by them, grateful for them, and yes, conformed to them. Why not? They are summaries of Scripture!

But this willingness to say anything, no matter how insubstantial, to confuse the issue, while accusing traditional Presbyterians of subverting our confessional standards, a tactic the *Network News* articles share with the letter from the fifty-seven, forces us back to the concern with which we began: how to discern the signs of the

times? What sort of criteria is most liable to prove helpful as we interpret the radically various readings of our societal bathroom scale? To be a part of the confessional church means placing one's hopes with a relatively fixed standard, one which is not answerable to the flux of our times but which rather gives us a vantage point in some sense independent of that flux. The alternative means looking to a standard which is not fixed in the least, but is rather as subject to change as the conflicting, various, constantly changing clamor of voices we seek to judge between. The former option, while recognizing that the Reformed tradition has indeed undergone a slow process of development, nevertheless does not see in this fact a license to call "Reformed" whatever suits a current ideological agenda, but instead seeks that continuity of perspective which the Barmen Declaration identifies as the Church's "inviolable foundation" and aptly characterizes as "the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is attested for us in Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the Confessions of the Reformation" (8.05).

To be part of the confessional church means placing one's hopes with a relatively fixed standard

A relatively fixed standard deserves to be called the gospel — the Good News — because it offers the world something the world cannot offer itself. The alternative is neither

Good nor News, but is rather a religion-tinged echo of what the world already believes.

The alternative is . . . a religion-tinged echo of what the world already believes

Paul warned the Church at Corinth not to acknowledge a different Jesus, a different spirit, or a different gospel (2 Cor 11:4). Paul could be wrong. The Barmen Declaration could be wrong. The entire Reformed tradition could represent the sad unfolding of one gigantic mistake, but those who share its "distinctive vision" do not think so. Perhaps it is time for those who do think so, who believe that life ought to be lived on some other foundation than the one "attested for us in Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the Confessions," to just say so, instead of pretending to honor this foundation, all the while denying the obvious. Their attempts at discerning the signs of the times fail to connect with the moral convictions Presbyterians have traditionally held, and the reason is that their reimagined gospel, with its new revelations and new truths, and its mistaken equation of personal morality with legalism, is not the gospel witnessed to by Reformed Christianity.

1. William C. Placher and David Willis-Watkins, *Belonging to God: A Commentary on a Brief Statement of Faith*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) p. 22.

2. *Ibid.*

The Presbyterian Church Struggle: Reflections on the Relevance of the Barmen Declaration

by James R. Edwards

There is a general consensus today, I believe, that the Presbyterian Church (USA) stands before a defining hour. Anyone who has attended a General Assembly or followed the debates in recent years in *Monday Morning* cannot doubt this. Whether one inclines toward the conservative side of the spectrum that hopes to recover the biblical and theological basis of the church or to the liberal side of the spectrum that is committed to the pluralistic and thoroughly inclusive nature of the church, it is clear that the

denomination is locked in a contest that will affect its very existence.

The roots of the crisis are due in part to developments in the culture at large. As America moves increasingly toward pluralistic values and goals, churches within the culture will inevitably be confronted and affected by those same values and goals. This is more or less true of all denominations, of course, but it is especially true of Presbyterians. Some theological traditions establish church life as an alternative to the prevailing culture, but the Reformed tradition, and Presbyterianism in particular, have historically defined themselves according to a prophetic role, endeavoring to transform culture with the claims and values of the gospel.

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If the poles of the spectrum are defined by separation from culture versus redemption of culture, Presbyterianism leans toward the latter. I affirm the Reformed tradition on this point, but it has an obvious downside: greater openness to culture opens Presbyterianism to greater influence by culture.

Other roots of the crisis are more unique to Presbyterianism *per se*. In 1967 the denomination adopted the Confession of 1967 and established a *Book of Confessions*. The *Book of Confessions*, which included nine different confessions at the time (ten as of 1991 with the inclusion of A Brief Statement of Faith), replaced the Westminster Confession as the single defining confession of the church. Exactly what it means for a denomination to be “guided” by a collage of confessions as opposed to one confession is a question of particular urgency in the current debate over Amendment B (the “Fidelity and Chastity” amendment).

Finally, it is evident that there has been a concerted strategy to force a radical feminist and gay agenda on the Presbyterian church. I have spoken at several presbyteries in the past years on the question of the ordination of self-affirming gays and lesbians (to which I am opposed), and I have experienced the pro-gay strategy firsthand. I have witnessed the dramatic demonstrations at General Assemblies, clearly orchestrated in advance, after pro-gay issues have been voted down. And I have witnessed — quite by coincidence — a strategizing session myself. In November 1995 I was flying back from a meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in Philadelphia. A group of eight or ten women who had been associated with the Re-imagining conference were returning from the same conference. Across the aisle of the plane they were discussing “the takeover of the denomination at the big showdown in Albuquerque” in 1996. Not the least revealing aspect of this incident was that only one or two of them were Presbyterians. The others, with whom I was familiar from Re-imagining, were Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, and United Church of Christ. This clearly indicates that pro-gay strategy in the Presbyterian Church (USA) is supported by interests well beyond our denomination.

Confessionalism versus Accommodation to Culture

I find two instructive parallels to the current state of the Presbyterian Church in the history of Barmen. The Barmen Declaration (1934), the eighth confession in the *Book of Confessions*, grew out of what was known as “the German church struggle.” The struggle was perceived and articulated by the Synod of Barmen in terms of confessionalism versus accommodation to culture. Specifically that meant a conflict between two understandings and models of Christianity. The one, represented by the “German Christians,” advocated a “positive Christianity” that sought to integrate the gospel as far as possible with the prevailing ideology ushered in by Hitler and National Socialism. This included discarding the Old Testament and abandoning the Jewish context of Christianity, Aryanizing Jesus, downplaying or denying the

cross and atonement as symbols of weakness and defeat, and recasting Jesus as a heroic figure serviceable to the Nazi cause.

The other understanding of Christianity was expressed by the “Confessing Church,” which at Barmen and subsequent synods raised a voice of protest against reformulating Christianity according to Germanic and especially Nazi archetypes. Barmen appealed to Holy Scripture over Nazi ideology, to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the demagoguery of the “Fuehrer,” to the freedom of the church over a “Brown” culture and ideological captivity. “We reject the false doctrine,” declares the first article, “as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.”

The issue of confessionalism versus secularism is immediately relevant to the current struggle in Presbyterianism, and indeed beyond it. I realize how potentially dangerous it is to adduce an analogy from the German church struggle with Nazism. I am NOT suggesting that those who advocate the ordination of homosexuals, for instance, are to be equated with Nazis. That would be grossly unfair: the considered inclusiveness of many pro-homosexual advocates simply cannot — and should not — be likened to the impulses of domination, power, and hubris inherent in the “German Christian” movement. The likeness is thus not between pro-homosexual ordination and “German Christians,” nor between the Presbyterian Coalition (an independent Presbyterian renewal group), for example, and Barmen, for that matter.

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The lesson from Barmen is rather in this: the current struggle in the Presbyterian Church is also over the authority of Scripture and creed versus the authority of the alien and humanistic ideologies, between the church’s faithfulness to the Lordship of Christ as he is attested to in Scripture versus an accommodation and reformulation of Christianity to the spirit of the age. The issue at stake is who sets the agenda for the church: *sola Scriptura* or *solum saeculum*, Holy Scripture or the dominant ideology of the day?

The debate over sexuality is only one facet of a larger struggle. The more fundamental struggle includes the question of whether the gospel is the final authority and only means of salvation for all people, or whether Christianity is one of various equally valid means of salvation, one of many paths leading to the same summit. It includes the question at the forefront of discussion today

whether a theology of creation or a theology of redemption — what we are versus what we ought to be — expresses God’s ultimate and saving will for humanity. It includes the question whether God, through the Holy Spirit, reveals his will through human experience and cultural change, or through Scripture as divine revelation. Above all, it includes the issue of Christology, whether Jesus Christ is by his death and resurrection the one sufficient savior of all people, or whether he is by his life and teaching simply a model or guide.

The debate . . . includes the question whether God. . . reveals his will through human experience and cultural change, or through Scripture as divine revelation

To a church whose message and purpose has become eclipsed by causes or movements other than the authority of the gospel, or perhaps worse, to a church that is tempted to divide its allegiance, following its historic creeds and way of life where they are compatible with prevailing ideologies and abandoning them when they are not, Barmen speaks a trenchant and saving word, that Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Scripture is the one and only Lord of the church.

Authors of Barmen were Pastors and Laity

There is a second parallel between the current struggle in the Presbyterian Church and Barmen. The 139 representatives who convened at Barmen in May of 1934 were pastors and laity as opposed to officials of the church hierarchy and professors from university faculties. Over one-third of the delegates at Barmen were laity. The remainder were almost without exception pastors. True, Karl Barth, the driving force behind the drafting of the Barmen Declaration, was a theological professor from Bonn, but when his name is subtracted from Barmen a body of pastors remains who were the backbone, muscles, and sinew of the Confessing Church: the Niemoellers (Martin and Wilhelm), Dibelius, Asmussen, Wurm, Meiser, Iwand, Hesse, Merz, Held, Vogel, Koch, Beckmann, Kloppenburg, Link, Bosse, Immer, Fiedler, Horn, Jacobi, and others. Even this lengthy list is too short to do justice to the pastors whose names deserve to be on it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s name is not listed above because he was not present at Barmen, although he was part of the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer, however, illustrates the point at hand, for he declined a chair of theology at the University of Berlin in favor of a pastorate because he feared that a tenured professor was tempted — or expected! — to substitute theological abstractions for the active engagement with the gospel that was demanded of a pastor.

The forerunner of the Confessing Church was the Pastors’ Emergency League, founded by Martin Niemoeller. An *ad hoc* convocation of 150 pastors, the Pastors’ Emergency

League sought to stem the tide of encroaching National Socialism in the churches. It is significant that there was never a “Professors’ Emergency League,” or a “Church Administrators’ Emergency League.” Unfortunately, it was from the latter two strata that the chief opposition to Barmen and the Confessing Church were to be found. It is no secret that the “German Christians” were largely maneuvered by the church hierarchy from Berlin, many of whom — Mueller, Jaeger, Hossenfelder — were stooges of the Third Reich.

More troubling, however, were the number of theology professors who either absented themselves from the conflict, or opposed Barmen and the Confessing Church. Their names are known even in the English-speaking world: Hirsch, Weber, G. Kittel, Sasse, Heidegger, Althaus, Grundmann. A single statistic brings this bitter reality to clarity: more than 3,000 pastors were imprisoned by the Nazis, of whom no fewer than twenty-one were killed for the sake of the gospel (this figure does include the July 20, 1944 conspirators). By contrast, very few professors (including theology professors) opposed National Socialism, fewer still were dismissed because of their opposition, and only one, Professor Huber from Munich, was executed for doing so. Albert Einstein’s observation is worth recalling: resistance to Nazism came not from the universities but primarily from simple Christian laity and their pastors!

The situation in the Presbyterian Church bears a clear resemblance to this description of the Confessing Church-- and has for the past two decades. The effort to stem the drift toward acculturation of the gospel, particularly on the issue of sexuality, has fallen on the shoulders of pastors and lay leaders. The “definitive guidance” of 1978 was the result of an *ad hoc* group of Presbyterian pastors, and the defense of that position has fallen to the same and succeeding pastors since. As a member of the team that drafted the 1991 Minority Report in opposition to the massive Majority Report (*Keeping Body and Soul Together*), I can attest to the virtual silence — or opposition — of seminary faculties, religious departments of denominational colleges, and church bureaucrats on the question of defending biblical theology and morality against its capitulation to secular norms.

The outcry against Re-imagining, whose speakers came from seminaries from around the country and whose funding was procured from various denominational headquarters, was again the result of concerned pastors and laity. The drafting of Amendment B — and its passage before the presbyteries currently — is a replay of the same scenario. I am aware of few presbytery and synod executives or leaders at the denominational level who support the renewal efforts of the denomination by the Presbyterian Coalition, for example. On the specific issue of ordaining practicing, self-affirmed homosexuals, the number of professors from our denominational seminaries and colleges who have publicly defended the confessional standards of the church is a small minority compared to the number of professors publicly opposing those standards.

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The lesson of Barmen — as of Presbyterianism at the end of the twentieth century — is this: the defense of orthodoxy is the task of the gathered church, specifically of its pastors and laity. This should not surprise us. The chief threat to faith in Israel and the early church came not from without but from within, from priests, kings, and false prophets in the Old Testament and from scribes, religious leaders, and the Sanhedrin in the New Testament.

The Presbyterian Panel, incidentally, has over the past two or three decades provided thought provoking data in this regard: respondents from specialized ministries (e.g., ordained professors) and the church hierarchy (presbytery, synod, and General Assembly staff) show a statistical divergence from pastors and laity on questions of theological orthodoxy and biblical morality. If the church hierarchies and judicatories cannot be counted on to support and enforce the confessional standards of the church, and if college and seminary faculties cannot be counted on to defend those standards, then the importance of a theologically literate pastorate and laity becomes not simply an ideal, but a matter of utmost urgency in preserving the integrity of the gospel and the vitality of the church.

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How well we as Presbyterians are equipped at the pastoral and lay levels “to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3) is a question worth asking. A pastor recently thanked me for speaking in his presbytery, saying that he did not feel competent to address the question of the biblical view of human sexuality. That was a sobering admission. A pastor who feels incapable of defending the gospel that he or she preaches Sunday by Sunday is as unsettling to me as a physician who cannot tell you why he or she is prescribing a certain medicine or treatment.

Barmen confessed “that the theological basis [of the church] has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles on the part of its leaders and spokesmen . . . and Church administration.” If that statement does not speak to our experience today, I do not know what does! The Theological Declaration of Barmen addressed that threat by reaffirming the evangelical truths on which the church of Jesus Christ exists. One thing is clear: our denomination must begin the task of rebuilding its theological foundation on “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture” (art. 1) and accepting “God’s mighty claim upon our whole life” (art. 2), or the Presbyterian Church (USA) will cease to be the church of Jesus Christ.

More Religious Than Ever? Modern American Faith Increasingly Drained of Content

by Katherine Kersten

Reprinted with permission from the Star Tribune, Minneapolis, MN, November 20, 1996.

According to recent polls, 70 percent of Americans belong to a church or synagogue. By this measure, our nation is more religious than ever.

At the nation's founding, for instance, only 17 percent of the population were church members; when the Civil War

began, the figure was 37 percent. Today, 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God and engage in prayer. Eighty percent believe they will be called before God to answer for their sins, and 66 percent claim to have made a “personal commitment to Jesus Christ.” Fully 86 percent of teenagers say they believe that Jesus is God. Astonishingly, in a 1994 Harris poll, even 52 percent of non-Christians expressed belief in Jesus’ Resurrection.

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But if we Americans are such a religious lot, why does our culture seem to grow coarser each year? If the Judeo-Christian ethic is widespread and thriving, why do Madonna and Howard Stern top the bestseller lists? Why the rampant materialism, broken families, soaring drug use among middle-class teens, and a 30 percent illegitimacy rate? Perhaps our much-touted religiosity is only “skin-deep.” For most of us, it seems, religious faith means “whatever we want it to mean.” According to a 1988 Gallup poll, the vast majority of Americans agree that people “should arrive at their religious beliefs independent of any church or synagogue.”

As we lose our grounding in doctrine, we’re also losing familiarity with the sources of Judeo-Christian morality. Few, for example, can recite the Ten Commandments — formerly drilled into children as a matter of course. Indeed, Gallup has labeled us a “nation of biblical illiterates.” Fewer than half can list the four gospels, while 70 percent of teenagers do not know why Easter is celebrated.

Modern America exhibits a puzzling paradox — widespread religious rhetoric, coupled with a faith increasingly drained of content, and often having little practical effect on our lives. The origins of this phenomenon are complex. But one factor seems to be that religion — like institutions ranging from the education establishment to the helping professions — has been powerfully influenced by the reigning “therapeutic culture.”

Traditional Christianity demanded a great deal of believers. It required that they strive to reject worldliness, to be “in the world but not of it.” It called them to repent of their sins and to “die to self,” cultivating virtue, self-discipline and humility. But the therapeutic culture — a product of the 19th century Romantic movement and the rise of psychology— champions very different goals. It holds that the highest goods for man are “self-esteem” and self-realization, and the sense of well-being they produce. It promises that if we “follow our bliss”— setting sights on health, safety, pleasure and prosperity — we will tap into the authentic and creative “self” that is normally repressed by social constraints.

Modern man. . . saw himself as born to be pleased, not saved

Thirty years ago, the psychologist Philip Rieff predicted that the new therapeutic culture would dilute religious faith into an amorphous, all-purpose “spirituality.” Modern man, he wrote, saw himself as born to be pleased, not saved. By trading the soul for the “self,” he observed, we would eventually feel free to “use all god-terms” indiscriminately, and to embrace any “faith” so long as it consoled, but did not judge us.

Those who doubt Rieff’s prophetic powers need look no further than the Minneapolis Convention Center. There hundreds of women from many Christian denominations

recently gathered for the third anniversary of “Re-imagining,” a feminist conference billed as “a Second Reformation . . . much more basic and important to the health of humankind than the first.” These women came to hear ordained clergy, and professors from places like Yale Divinity School and New Brighton’s United Theological Seminary, as they “re-imagine[d] all that has been passed on to us through two thousand years of Christian faith.”

“Re-imagining” demonstrated vividly how a free-floating “spirituality” can lead us to worship that with which we are most comfortable and familiar: ourselves. At “Re-imagining,” God was strictly a sideshow, as participants worshiped at the shrine of the Female.

According to “Re-imagining”’s organizers, “Sophia,” or Wisdom, is “the suppressed part of the biblical tradition,” the “female personification” of God. Yet the prayers participants offered to Sophia seemed little more than lip service. Their most fervent praise was reserved for themselves. (Conveniently, Sophia is also at “the place in you where the whole universe resides.”) During the “Ritual of Milk and Honey,” for instance, participants begrudged Sophia a line or two, but quickly got on with the business of “celebrating” “our unique perspectives, intelligences . . . and processes;. . . our bodiliness, our physicality, the sensations of pleasure, our oneness with earth and water.” “With our warm body fluids,” they chanted, “we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations.”

The decor at “Re-imagining” reflected this deification of the Female — no stained glass windows here. One wall boasted large nude “portraits of menopausal women,” while the “goddess wall” invited contemplation — not only of the Virgin Mary — but of deities like Ishtar, the vengeful Babylonian goddess of war; Kali, the bloodthirsty Hindu goddess of destruction, and the Mesopotamian Lilith, described, in part, by Webster as “a female demon dwelling in deserted places and attacking children.”

Yet despite this indiscriminate elevation of the Female, “Re-imagining”’s real bone to pick with the Christian God seemed not that he is “male,” but that he judges. Sophia, by contrast, is the answer to the prayers of a therapeutic world. She recognizes no sin but the corporate transgressions that one speaker listed as “sexism, white racism, classism, ableism, heterosexism and ageism.”

“Re-imagining”’s real bone to pick with the Christian God seemed not that he is “male,” but that he judges

Above all, “Re-imagining” sought the Holy Grail of the therapeutic culture — what one of its original organizers called “that wonderful space where we are truly free to be ourselves.” But what would it be like to attain this elusive promised land — a world without rules, limits or universal Truth? As Ishtar and Kali graphically remind us,

humankind's natural proclivity to greed, lust, injustice and cruelty suggests that — far from being “wonderful” — such a “space” would closely resemble the Christian conception of hell. Worshiping a god who looks like us

may seem liberating for a time. But so limited a deity can never sustain those who “walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” as we all must.

The Church Militant

by Susan Cyre

It would seem that society's expectations for peace have never been higher. People believe that peace is attainable in international relations, especially, now that the Cold War is ended. We demand peace in public discourse. We view personal peace as our “right” and we believe that the church should be a stronghold of peace.

Peace should indeed be a goal of human relationships. We have to be careful, however, because the natural human yearning for peace can also be so seductive that it becomes an end in itself rather than a gift of the Holy Spirit. Our strong desire for peace can cause us to deny the spiritual battle that Truth provokes. After all, we worship the one who is the Prince of Peace and, yet, Jesus told his disciples, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt 10:34). Peace is a gift from God and does not exist apart from the struggle for Truth. For peace to exist, Truth must reign.

Revisionists Argue that Peace is Only Possible when Objective Truth is Denied

Those who promote a revisionist truth-is-relative world view insist that it is *not* when God's objective truth reigns that we will experience peace, but instead, when objective truth is denied that a new era of peace will be inaugurated. They argue that peace will reign when people are free to define truth for themselves according to their own context and experiences. Each person must be allowed to pursue his or her own road to happiness.

The truth-is-relative world view with its lure of peace has gotten a foothold in public politics, as well. In earlier days, the American public expected political candidates to debate and engage one another to peel away the layers of hyperbole, half-truths and deceptions to arrive at the truth. Today, however, candidates that seriously engage their opponents are labeled “mud-slingers.” The public demands

instead, “civil” campaigns, which mean never challenging another candidate's truth claims.

James Lileks, syndicated columnist, commenting on the last election, wrote, “It's as though the nation's political discourse was being supervised by some incorporeal, all-seeing mom, Thou shalt hurt no feelings. Thou shalt play nice.”¹

It is this same cry for “civility” and “non-polarization” which permeates the church. We no longer pursue truth with vigorous debate and clear thinking. Instead, there is pressure from truth-is-relative folks that peace and unity are preferable to the continuing struggle to witness to the Truth in word and action. Even the writers of the new Presbyterian hymnal have done their part in helping us to shape a new view of ourselves by eliminating hymns which describe the church as militant and its members as soldiers. No more “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Instead, we are to re-imagine ourselves a kinder, friendlier people whose God wants us to experience peace and fulfillment.

Truth-is-relative Seeks to Harmonize Dualisms

The truth-is-relative folks prop-up their claims by asserting it is objective truth that causes conflict. Feminist theologians argue that belief in objective truth causes wars and strife as competing truth claims vie for first place. In the past, they argue, men defined truth from their experience and then used their patriarchal power to enshrine it for all time as divinely revealed. Men's truth was dualistic: it spoke of truth and falsehood, righteousness and sin, good and evil, creator and creation. Men's truth drew boundaries and the boundaries caused division and the division led to bigotry, intolerance and ultimately to war.

According to Walter Ong this male perspective is built into their genes. Ong writes in *Fighting for Life* that “male hormones produce combative behavior.” “Preaching Jesus' gospel of faith, hope, and divine love, the church has from the beginning been very much at home in the antagonistic male world...”²

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The feminists propose a god reflective of their experiences: a god without boundaries, holistic, nurturing, inclusive, emotional. Feminists have found support for this new god in Chinese and Asian religions that emphasize harmony — with oneself, with the earth and with the community.

Biblical Faith *does* Draw Boundaries

Biblical faith, with its foundation on objective revealed Truth, understands that peace will come when sin is banished completely and Truth reigns. The revisionist truth-is-relative view argues that when we harmonize good and evil without distinction or boundary then divisions will cease and peace will reign. Biblical faith recognizes an earthly struggle between two forces; the revisionist view seeks to harmonize the forces.

A. W. Tozer eloquently described the difference in the world views,

Our fathers believed in sin and the devil and hell as constituting one force; and they believed in God and righteousness and heaven as the other. These were opposed to each other in the nature of them forever in deep, grave, irreconcilable hostility. Man, so our fathers held, had to choose sides; he could not be neutral. For him it must be life or death, heaven or hell, and if he chose to come out on God's side he could expect open war with God's enemies. The fight would be real and deadly and would last as long as life continued here below.

...How different today: the fact remains the same but the interpretation has changed completely. Men think of the world, not as a battleground but as a playground. We are not here to fight, we are here to frolic. We are not in a foreign land, we are at home. We are not getting ready to live, we are already living, and the best we can do is to rid ourselves of our inhibitions and our frustrations and live this life to the full.³

Biblical faith witnesses to a great spiritual battle being fought here on earth and the church is called to enter the fray and contend for the Truth. The Confessions proclaim, “[The church militant] still wages war on earth, and fights against the flesh, the world and the prince of this world, the devil; against sin and death.” (5.127) And in Ephesians 6, Paul instructs believers to put on the armor of God in order to stand firm, “for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

Spiritual Struggle is Part of the Church's Call

Therefore, when the votes for Amendment B (“Fidelity and Chastity”) are counted, regardless of whether the amendment passes or fails, the warfare will not end. Unless we remember that objective truth by its nature draws a boundary — a boundary which the forces that reject God and His Word will seek to destroy and blur — then we will allow our weariness at the battle's unending demands and our frustration at not achieving a final victory to draw us

into the fold of relative truth or lead us to withdraw seeking quieter, more peaceful vistas. If we understand the radical nature of the Gospel that stands in judgment over us and our culture, then we will not be so prone to despair and weariness when the next skirmish begins.

Scripture tells us that while the power of sin in our lives is broken, its presence will not be blotted out until we enter glory. We face the spiritual war within ourselves every time the alarm clock goes off in the morning. We still have that old rebellious spirit which opposes God and his ways. It is no wonder then that the church is torn by struggle. It is a church militant, not fighting the forces outside itself, but fighting the sin inside. The issue of Truth was never one the world cared much about. The question, “What is truth?” will always be decided at the foot of the cross.

Presbyterian professor of church history, Richard Lovelace writes, “[Jonathan] Edwards, the foundational theologian of revival, held that any movement is more like a street fight than a Spring morning. That is because the essence of revival is spiritual warfare, taking ground away from the world, the flesh, and the devil.” He quotes, J. Edwin Orr, “When there is spiritual awakening, the first person to wake up is the devil.”⁴

The apostle Paul saw the struggle from God's viewpoint when he wrote the Corinthian church, “I hear that divisions exist among you: and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may become manifest among you” (1 Cor 11:19). The Second Helvetic Confession testifies, “For thus it pleases God to use the dissensions that arise in the Church to the glory of his name, to illustrate the truth, and in order that those who are in the right might be manifest.”

Like jewels against dark velvet, real Christians shine best when they are confronting darkness

Lovelace observes, “There is a drama in the struggle of truth against error which apparently pleases God more than the peace of those who have left the battle to seek relief among the like-minded. Like jewels against dark velvet, real Christians shine best when they are confronting darkness.”⁵

There are, of course, rules to this warfare that are detailed in Scripture. We are to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, not bear false witness, let our actions give evidence of the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control; always remembering, “The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (Jas 1:20) This is definitely not a battle where the end justifies the means. For the Christian, the means are in fact the only thing we are called to attend to — the end is God's purview.

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture describes the church as engaged in a great spiritual battle. For three short days it

looked as if the forces of rebellion had won. But then in the early light of dawn as the haze lifted over the battle field, the cry went out that the tomb was empty--sin had been defeated, peace *would* one day reign.

Yet, the skirmishes go on, and we are called to choose a side and not fear the battle or shrink back in search of peace and contentment. We dare not fear the battle within the church or within ourselves. To reject the spiritual battle is to reject our own battle as we struggle between our flesh and spirit--between our fallen nature and our new being in Christ. To reject the spiritual battle is to reject the special mission of the church. Only the church can proclaim and defend the Truth. If we follow the One who is the Truth,

then our warfare is as inevitable today as the cross was on Golgotha 2000 years ago. Not to understand that, is not to understand the Gospel. To fear it or shrink from it, is to reject the One whom we claim to serve.

1. James Lileks, "Voters Want the Candidates to Play Nice and Smile," *The Roanoke Times*, October 18, 1996, p A9.
2. Walter Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) p 52, 169.
3. Warren W. Wiersbe compiled, *The Best of A.W. Tozer: 52 Favorite Chapters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978) , pp 84-86.
4. Richard Lovelace, "The Ruin of the Church: Struggle as a Sign of Spiritual Revival" in *Renewal Life*, Fall 1995, Vol 2, No. 1,
5. *Ibid*.

Don't Forsake Homosexuals Who Want Help

by Charles Socarides, Benjamin Kaufman, Joseph Nicolosi, Jeffrey Satinover, Richard Fitzgibbons

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Suppose that a young man, seeking help for a psychological condition that was associated with serious health risks and made him desperately unhappy were to be told by the professional he consulted that no treatment is available, that his condition is permanent and genetically based, and that he must learn to live with it. Perhaps this young man, unwilling to give up hope, sought out other specialists only to receive the same message: "Nothing can be done for you. Accept your condition."

How would this man and his family feel when they discovered years later that numerous therapeutic approaches have been available for his specific problem for more than 60 years? What would be his reaction when informed that, although none of these approaches guaranteed results and most required a long period of treatment a patient who was willing to follow a proven treatment, regime had a good chance of being free from the condition? How would this man feel if he discovered that the reason he was not informed that treatment for his condition was available was that certain groups were, for political reasons, pressuring professionals to deny that effective treatment existed?

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Every day young men seek help because they are experiencing an unwanted sexual attraction to other men, and are told that their condition is untreatable. It is not surprising that many of these young men fall into depression or despair when they are informed that a normal life with wife and children is never to be theirs.

This despair can lead to reckless and life-threatening actions. Many young men with homosexual inclinations, feeling their lives are of little value, are choosing to engage in unprotected sex with strangers. Epidemiologists are well aware that the number of new HIV infections among young men involved in homosexual activity is rising at an alarming rate; within this population, the "safer sex" message is falling on deaf ears. One recent study revealed that 38% of homosexual adolescents had engaged in unprotected sex in the previous six months.

Young men and the parents of at-risk males have a right to know that prevention and effective treatment are available. They have a right to expect that every professional they consult will inform them of all their therapeutic options and allow them to make their own choices based on the best clinical evidence. A variety of studies have shown that between 25% and 50% of those seeking treatment experienced significant improvement. If a therapist feels for whatever reason that he cannot treat someone for this condition, he has an obligation to refer the patient to someone who will.

Also, these young men and their parents have the right to know that, contrary to media propaganda, there is no

proven biological basis for homosexuality. A November 1995 article in Scientific American pointed out that the much publicized brain research by Simon Le Vay has never been replicated and that Dean Hamer's gene study has been contradicted by another study.

The truth is that the clinical experience of many therapists who work with men struggling with same-sex attractions and behaviors indicates that there are many causes and various manifestations of homosexuality. No single category describes them all, but the disorder is characterized by a constellation of symptoms, including excessive clinging to the mother during early childhood, a sense that one's masculinity is defective, and powerful feelings of guilt, shame and inferiority beginning in adolescence.

If the emotional desire for another man is primarily a symptom of the failure to develop a strong masculine identity, then a man's unconscious desire to assume the manhood of another male may be more important than the sexual act. The goal of therapy in such cases is to help the

clients understand the various causes of his feelings and to strengthen his masculine identity. It has been our clinical experience that as these men become more comfortable and confident with their manhood, same-sex attractions decrease significantly. Eventually many find the freedom they are seeking and are able to have normal relationships with women.

Help is available for men struggling with unwanted homosexual desires. The National Association for Research and Treatment of Homosexuality offers information for those interested in understanding the various therapeutic approaches to treatment. In addition, a number of self-help groups have sprung up to offer support to those who suffer from this problem.

As we grieve for all those lives so abruptly ended by AIDS, we would do well to reflect that many of the young men who have died of AIDS have sought treatment for their homosexuality and were denied knowledge and hope. Many of them would be alive today if they had only been told where to find the help they sought.

IMPORTANT NEW BOOK *Standing Firm: Reclaiming Christian Faith in Times of Controversy* by Parker Williamson, Presbyterian Lay Committee, 1996. Available through the PLC. "Parker Williamson, as a seminary student, was a good scholar in history of doctrine and a leader in the Inter-Seminary movement. In this book he combines his knowledge of the history of doctrine with experience in the church to document the relation of the present crisis in the church to the Nicene controversy in the fourth century. Then, as now, the decisive question is 'Who is Jesus Christ?' I commend this book." Dr. John Leith, Professor Emeritus of Theology, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, VA.

Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark

CHAPTER 12

(chapter 13 will follow in the next issue)

of THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Observe the text to understand the author's meaning:

Read 12:1-12. This chapter continues the issues the authority and fruitfulness.

Who owned the vineyard? What was the job of the tenants who rented it? Did the tenants give the owner some of the produce? What do they do?

The owner sends three different slaves and finally who does he send? How do the tenants treat the son? What do the tenants hope to gain? What will the owner of the vineyard do?

Read Isaiah 5:1-8. Who in the Isaiah passage is the owner of the vineyard? What did he do for the vineyard?

What did the owner expect the vineyard to produce?

What did it produce? What is the owner going to do? According to vs 7 what is the vineyard? What is the plant? What kind of plant should have been produced? What was produced?

Now relate this passage to the Mark parable? Who owns the vineyard? Who are the tenants? Who are the slaves that the owner sends? Who is the son that the owner sends? What should the tenants have produced? What did they produce? What did they want ultimately?

This is a clear statement that they wanted to rebel against the owner and claim for themselves the vineyard that belonged to God. How can you say this in less metaphorical language.

What did the priest and religious leaders want of the people? What should they have wanted? What kind of fruit should they have produced in the people?

Do you see this parable as a lesson on authority? God had given the religious leaders authority over his vineyard. Not authority to do *anything* they wanted with the vineyard but, authority to produce his fruit that he had planted. Instead, they used that authority to claim the fruit for themselves — an abuse of God's authority which was given to them for a purpose.

This is also a reference to Jesus returning to the temple in the chapter 11 and finding it in disarray. Instead of faithful worship of God, he finds a den of robbers. The owner has returned and finds the tenants who had authority have betrayed him and not produced the fruit they were charged to produce.

Read Psalm 118:22-26. Notice that part of this psalm was quoted in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Now, another section of it is being quoted. It was prophesied that the chief corner stone would be rejected. Jesus is showing himself to be the fulfillment of prophecy. He is also indicating that the cross looms ahead. What is the response in vs 12 of the religious leaders? What should their response have been to such an accusation? What is the response of the multitudes?

Read 12:13-17. What is the next plot cooked up by the religious leaders? What law do they try to trap Jesus in?

They have failed to trap him in questions regarding their law or the law of God now whose law do they try to trap Jesus into rejecting? What do you think their strategy is here?

Vs 14 is interesting. If they believe what they say here, what should their response to Jesus be? Explain how this shows what hypocrites they were.

Read Ex 20:16. What does bearing false witness mean? What are the religious leaders doing here? Whose law are they breaking? If they are not bearing false witness then why do they not follow Jesus who "teaches the way of God in truth?"

It is also interesting that in vs 14 the Pharisees and Herodians say Jesus "court's no man's favor," "he is partial to no one" yet, in vs 12, they act based on the response of the multitudes. Their actions do court favor and respond to pressures.

Do you see the religious leader's response to Jesus not as "misunderstanding" or "lack of knowledge" but outright rebellion. Discuss.

Read 12:18-27. Who is it now that comes to Jesus? What is the central tenet of their beliefs? What is the question they raise with Jesus? Was this a sincere question? What was the purpose of the question?

The text the Sadducees are referring to is Deu 25:5-10. What is the focus of Jesus' response which goes right to the Sadducees' hearts to expose their hypocrisy?

Next in one sentence he deals with their specific question about marriage. What does he say? Finally he deals with the real issue which is whether there is a resurrection from the dead. How does Jesus respond to "prove" the resurrection? If Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were not alive how would God have spoken at the burning bush to identify himself? Look at Ex 3:3-6.

Read 12:28-34. A single scribe overhears the exchange between Jesus and the Sadducees and is impressed with the truth of Jesus' answer. So he ventures a question. What is it? Read Deu 6:1-5 and Lev 19:1-18 to see where these quotes came from. Notice that Deu 5 has the Ten Commandments and Deu 6 begins by saying "keep these commandments." Notice also in Lev 19 how many of the commandments are repeated.

The *Book of Confessions* is part of our Constitution together with the *Book of Order*. The *Book of Order* says of the Confessions, "this is who we are and what we believe." Both the Smaller and Larger Catechisms say, "*The sum of the Ten Commandments is: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves.*"(7.043, 7.212, 7.232)

In other words, Christ is not replacing the moral requirements of the 10 Commandments with "love" which is defined by our experience or particular situations. Instead, Christ is saying that these commandments summarize the Law. The details of the law in the Ten Commandments remain the same. How do I love the Lord our God with all my heart? It is to keep the first four commandments. How do I love my neighbor as myself? It is to keep the last six Commandments.

The scribe quotes a passage from Hosea 6:6 which deals with "loyalty" or "faithfulness." One of the central themes of Mark is Jesus' authority. Our response to that authority should be loyalty. All of the sections in this chapter deal with "loyalty." Are the tenant farmers loyal to the owner? Are Jews to give their loyalty to God or Caesar? Which husband will the wife be loyal to? Who are the scribes loyal to? Who is the widow loyal to?

This chapter deals with our (and the religious leaders) response to the authority of Jesus...our loyalty should be to love(a marriage covenant term not an emotion) God foremost and then our neighbor.

Do you see the issue the scribes raise in vs 33 as a refusal to obey the moral law while heaping sacrifices on the altar? Discuss.

It is interesting that the last question posed to Jesus by the opposition comes from a scribe who "is not far from the kingdom of God." Why does Jesus say he is "not far?" What is missing?

This is the last question posed to Jesus until he is tried before Pilate. It is also interesting that Jesus concludes his exchange with the religious leaders by pointing back to the law. Jesus does one more teaching in the temple and then spends time equipping his disciples.

Read 12:35-37. Read this OT quote from Psalm 110:1-7. Who is "LORD?" Who is "Lord" in the Psalm? Jesus links his divinity as the Son of God with his humanity as the Son of David here. Explain.

Read 12:38-40. Jesus is in the temple, speaking to who according to vs 37? What does he say about the temple leadership: the scribes?

What does the OT continually say about widows and orphans? See Ex 22:21-24, Deu 10:12-20, Deu 14:28-29.

How were the people to care for the widows and orphans? Do you see that the Levites were to share their food with the widows and orphans? Deu 24:17-20, 26:12-13, Deu 27:19, Isaiah 10:1-2. What do you think Jesus is saying that the scribes were doing in “devouring widows houses?” Are the scribes keeping either the first commandment or the second that Jesus has just referred to?

Read 12:41-44. What does the widow’s action in this section say about her attitude toward God? Who does she look to, to provide and care for her? Does this make the actions of the religious leaders in the previous section all the more deserving of condemnation?

Do you see the widow as an example of Jesus’ teaching in vs 30-31? How is she showing this? Do you see her as the true tenant in vs 1-11? Is she returning the fruits to the owner?

Interpret the Text:

1. What does this chapter teach about who Jesus is? His relationship to God? His mission? The success of his mission?
2. What does this chapter teach about the religious leaders? Is their rebellion “misunderstanding?” Are they hypocrites? How do we know? Are they intentionally breaking God’s laws for their own gain? What are they seeking? What should they be seeking as servants of God?
3. Is this just an issue for religious leaders or does the same rebellion exist in our hearts?
4. How should we respond in loyalty to God’s authority over us — both to God and neighbor? According to the first parable, what is the basis of his claim on us?
5. What is a proper attitude toward the poor and widows among us?
6. What can we say to men and women who have lost a spouse through death and remarried regarding relationships in heaven?

BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Mark 12:1-12.

This quote is a judgment on the religious leaders who were called by God to bring people to a true worship and knowledge of God and instead they reject the One who is

the cornerstone of the church, the very Son of God. The rejection does not come from those outside the church — from Gentiles or pagans but from the religious leaders themselves, those in leadership in the house of God.

This prophecy is also saying that while the cornerstone is rejected by the builders, it will become the chief corner stone because Yahweh has decreed it. “This came about from the LORD.” Human efforts are not at work here but God’s eternal plan. Calvin says, “Christ will hold the place his Father has given him.”

The multitude restrain their leaders. It is interesting that the leaders do not fear God but they fear the multitudes — the mob could turn on them. And also, they are loosing their power over the people. The people are following Jesus who clearly stands against the leaders.

Mark 12:13-17.

Notice that the Pharisees are Jewish religious leaders, the Herodians are followers of Herod — a political group. So, the religious leaders are forming alliances with their hated political oppressors in order to try and trap Jesus.

If Jesus says pay the tax then if Jesus is God, he is paying tribute to an earthly king--he is under the authority of the earthly ruler. If he says not to pay the tax then he will be seen as leading a political insurrection against the Romans.

Some interesting notes here. According to Calvin, Herod was half Jewish. His followers treated the pharisaical and Scriptural laws with license. The pharisees normally would hate them but now they join with their enemies to oppose Jesus.

Also, the tribute is probably the money described in Lev 27 which should have been paid to God, to the temple. Now the Romans were demanding to receive that money. The Jews found this an intolerable offense against God. Yet, Calvin suggests that because Caesar’s likeness is on the denarius, it is an indication that the priests previously capitulated to the Romans and accepted Roman rule over the temple.

Mark 12:18-27.

Calvin makes an interesting observation that we are like angels because humans no longer experience physical decay and death. Also, since humans do not die, there is no need to have more children and so marriage will no longer exist. The purpose of marriage is children.

Mark 12:38-40.

Calvin suggests that the scribes were selling prayers — perhaps the longer the prayer the higher the cost and these widows were willing to pay in order to secure God’s blessing. Christ uncovers the blasphemy of the scribes to free the widows from this seeking after false salvation.

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News from Around the World

RENEWAL LEADERS from U.S. and Canadian mainline denominations have formed the "Association for Church Renewal" (ACR) with a constituency of 750,000 members from North American churches. Chairman of the group, James V. Heidinger, II, who is also president of the United Methodist renewal ministry, Good News, said, "Given the devastating moral crisis in our society, and the abandonment by many church leaders of a public witness to biblical faith and practice, we have a new urgency for working together and speaking out together." The new organization will address common concerns, including "defending orthodox faith, promulgating holy living, countering threats of neo-pagan syncretism and moral relativism, and supporting world mission and evangelism.. Marriage and family, sanctity of life, and free exercise of religion at home and abroad are priority issues for the group." Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry is a member of the group.

The group issued a statement condemning the decision of the Hawaii Circuit Court which placed same-sex marriage on an equal level with the marriage of one man and one

woman. ACR argued, "The Hawaii decision contradicts the combined testimony of nature and history, as well as the biblical revelation: No other human relationship is the same as the lifelong union of a man and woman." For a copy of the statement write to PFFM.

THE PRESBYTERIAN RENEWAL NETWORK which includes leaders from fourteen renewal organizations, issued a statement supporting Amendment B — "Fidelity and Chastity." The statement commends the amendment to the church as "an excellent opportunity to reaffirm our historic faith while giving needed direction to the Church Contrary to scare tactics being employed by the amendment's opponents, even in articles produced by the Presbyterian News Service, the amendment is sound. There is no necessary confusion over the word 'chastity' . . . further, this amendment has no more potential for provoking 'witch hunts' than any other *Book of Order* standard." The statement is expected to appear in the *Outlook* publication. A copy can also be obtained from PFFM.

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes eight clergy and two lay people, six women and four men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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