

Two Clouds: What Shall We Do?

Hebrews 12:1-13

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,[‡] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of[‡] the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

³Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners,[‡] so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. ⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

“My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;

⁶ for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts.”

⁷Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. ⁹Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. ¹¹Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

¹²Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

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In today's sermon I want to speak to an important decision taken last week by commissioners to the PC (USA) General Assembly. I believe it is important that you understand the action and its implications.

Then we will ask the resulting question of faith “what shall we do?” In that we will be guided by the Scripture reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. There is more than could be said, but today's focus is on where we shall put our first energies.

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A cloud has been hanging over our society for some time; it is disagreement over issues of sexuality.

Many in our society have come to accept sexual standards that diverge from tradition. Some television programs and movies promote the acceptance of these new standards.

The question before the Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian and other churches has been whether such new standards are a part of God's plan for blessing. Some people and advocacy groups have pressed for the adoption of new standards; others have defended the wisdom of our tradition. Both disagree about what Scripture means.

My first exposure to this cloud was in 1973 when I was a youth advisory delegate to the General Assembly. Every year since, issues of sexuality and faith have been in the news. Many are weary of the discussions, debates and disagreements.

I think of it as a dark cloud in the church because people of sincere faith see the matter differently. Times for study and opportunities for dialogue have not led to any consensus. To say it personally, people whose faith I respect and whose friendship I cherish are on both sides of this issue.

Four years ago, at a meeting of the PCUSA General Assembly, a taskforce was approved with the charge to discern our Christian identity in issues of "Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power"¹.

The task force was called the Peace, Unity and Purity Taskforce but the appointment of the task force did not set people at ease. As one person wrote: "Conservatives feared that the task force would give away the farm. Liberals thought that the task force would not consider any real changes. And most of the Presbyterian membership ignored the whole thing."²

The make up of the committee was diverse and included people who have been leaders of opposing theological positions.

It is widely held that the taskforce made an earnest endeavor to address its wide ranging charge.

To put it simply: the church called some of its best leaders and they gave an impossible task their best efforts.

Their report came for action to the national meeting of our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) which met last week in Birmingham, Alabama. It is called our "General Assembly".

By a vote of 298 to 221 (57% to 43%) the General Assembly adopted the task force report which may affect the issue dramatically.

I say MAY affect because there is disagreement over the results of their actions.

First, what was adopted?

¹ PUP Report, Introduction

² Richard Ray, "Another Way Home" in Peace, Unity and Purity? Reflections on the Theological Task Force Report, p. 19

The task force recommended and the General Assembly adopted that individual presbyteries and sessions may interpret locally the nationally adopted standards.

This assembly did not change our official beliefs. Our constitutional standards regarding ordination remain including G-6.0106b which requires that candidates for ordination live in fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. That standard was re-affirmed by this General Assembly in a vote of 405 to 92.³

Every officer, pastor, elder or deacon, must uphold the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as spelled out in our Book of Order. But what those essentials are may now be left up to local governing bodies (Presbyteries and Sessions) to determine for themselves.

Some have referred to this section of the report being a “poison pill that could kill our entire church”⁴

Of the opposite opinion are all the previous General Assembly moderators (except one), and some respected seminary professors and presidents who urged adoption of this report believing that it held promise for helping the church to move forward.

One person who has served on the supreme court of the Presbyterian Church has written unofficially that the outcome of this action is unclear. This is one of his questions: “May an ordaining body determine that a person “adheres to the essentials of the reformed faith and polity,” even if that person openly violates a mandate of the [church’s] constitution?”⁵

And another person wrote, “Since the General Assembly approved the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force report, some of the press have been reporting that it has approved the ordination of non-celibate homosexual persons at the discretion of local ordaining bodies. The press have it wrong, and in fact the Authoritative Interpretation approved by the General Assembly has probably made it less likely that such ordinations will be allowed.”⁶

Part of the cloud under which we stand is the uncertain affect of the General Assembly action.

Some have claimed that this decision puts the church in crisis.⁷

Another trusted church leader wonders whether our standards are slipping away.⁸

³ See “Assembly votes against change to ordination standards” at <http://www.pres-outlook.com/tabid/913/Article/2045/Default.aspx>

⁴ See Richard Ray, p. 20

⁵ See Chris Yim, “Speak Now or Forever Hold Your Peace” at <http://www.pfrenwal2.org/new/content/view/291/>

⁶ Edward Koster, “How it is Less Likely that the General Assembly Did Not Authorize the ‘Local Option’”, Presbyterian Outlook at <http://www.pres-outlook.com/tabid/921/Article/2073/Default.aspx>

⁷ See “Renewal Movement Speaks With One Voice: Responding to the 217th General Assembly's Action on Ordination Policies” at

http://www.ga2006.com/home/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=225&Itemid=1

⁸ See Richard Ray, p. 24

And then there were those dedicated task force members and the moderators and seminary personnel who think we should give this approach a chance.

I want to be clear that I am not minimizing this action. If this action ultimately permits Presbyteries and Sessions to set their own ordination standards, it could cloud the gospel and divide the church.

Given the cloud of ambiguity, it seems prudent, at this point, that we not over react.

Our affirmation of our beliefs has not changed, and how this action will change the Presbyterian Church is unclear.

What then shall we do?

I want you to know that I will be diligent in keeping your Session informed about this issue. Through our commissioners to Pittsburgh Presbytery, we will be full participants in the deliberations and actions that ensue. And we will work to hold fast to those core elements of faith, hope and love on which we have stood and will stand as a church.

But this is more than a political issue. Under the dark cloud that is our disagreement over sexuality and the ambiguity over the affect of this particular decision, there is a second cloud one which its brightness reflects the light of the sun.

It is the cloud of witnesses, leaders of our faith, past and present, who in creed and deed point us to Jesus Christ.

Richard Ray tells the story of one such witness, Richard Sibbes who served faithfully in the seventeenth-century English church. Ray writes,

“The church was deeply polarized. Some of his colleagues...felt that they had to leave [the church]. Sibbes stayed. He saw that reconciliation would not come through the straightening out the church regulations. The way forward first called for godly preaching, as the Puritan movement called it, prayer and holy living. This was the way that would lead to peace.”⁹

As a church of Jesus Christ, we are more than a political community in which we fight over rules and regulations. We are first and foremost a spiritual community where we discern God’s leading, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians, not in words of wisdom but in a demonstration of Spirit and power.¹⁰

The counsel of Hebrews is not to political action, but rather enduring “trials for the sake of discipline”.

⁹ Richard Ray, p. 28

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:4

Does “discipline” here mean that God is somehow spanking us. Not necessarily. It does mean that trials are teachable moments in which we may learn what otherwise eludes us.

Therefore, rather than focus our best energy in the political arena, we begin by laying aside every weight and sin that clings so closely. We are called to “make straight paths for your feet”.¹¹

Our first step is to recommit ourselves to holy living. We confess that we can become distracted, sloppy in our Christian living, or even rebellious. Our trials are rightly times of recommitment to holy living.

We hold fast to our conviction that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life.”¹² He is the one who offers abundant life.

We believe that the more we know the Shepherd’s voice the more we know the Shepherd’s will.

In recent months your Session has been discussing new opportunities for us to grow in faith. Plans have begun for vibrant new small groups in which you may learn God’s presence and leading in your life.

Hebrews suggests that we use our trials for our growth. I want to plant in your mind that seed for growth and ask that you sincerely consider it when the opportunities are presented in a matter of weeks.

Also, Hebrews teaches us that our goal should not be winning a church fight, but healing what is lame. Some reports on this issue will be like children who excitedly shout “Fight! Fight!” If we are primarily a political community that is what we will do. But if we are a spiritual community we will seek healing and reconciliation as led by Jesus.

Having committed yourself to holy living I encourage you to resist a warring spirit. True, Scripture calls us to fight the good fight.¹³ But we are called to speak the truth in love¹⁴ that we may grow up into him who is the head of the church, Jesus Christ.

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We dare not deny the dark cloud of disagreement that can shape the direction of the church. We will be active participants in how this General Assembly action will be understood and applied in our Presbytery. As a church of Jesus Christ, we will continue to hold fast to the core principles of faith, hope and love as shown to us in Jesus Christ.

But we will not forget the bright cloud of witnesses which testify and encourage that we look to and follow Jesus in the moment of trial.

¹¹ Hebrews 12:13

¹² John 14:6

¹³ 1 Timothy 1:18

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:15

As a spiritual community we will use this challenge to rededicate ourselves to holy living. And more than winning a church fight, we will seek the Shepherd's voice and will and healing.

A long time ago, the disciples were in a panic about a storm that threatened to sink their ship.¹⁵ It appears that the Letter to the Hebrews wants to remind us that it was not the disciples, but Jesus who stilled the storm.

Charge to the Congregation

You could leave this day thinking politically – we talked about
Sex
How we cannot agree

Or you can think spiritually – we
Talked about one of our problems
Recommitted ourselves to holy living, and
Affirmed that our Christian goal is not winning but healing.

How helpful will those principles be in our homes and places of work as well as in the church?

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”

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¹⁵ Mark 4:35-41