

## OUR LIFE TOGETHER

### LESSON FOUR: LIFE TOGETHER - IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

Is there a dirtier word in our world, than “denomination”? Probably. But you get the idea: many people believe denominations are just plain bad. You may hear or think...

“If Christianity is so great, why can’t Christians get along?”

“What exactly is a Christian? The different churches have such different beliefs.”

“What does the Bible mean? You have hundreds of interpretations of every verse.”

These complaints have some legitimacy. The larger church’s lack of unity is always sad and sometimes disgusting. Churches have sometimes separated for silly reasons.

But not always. As we learned in an earlier lesson, not all churches are created equal. We must have a love for the truth and a love for people, or we can hardly call ourselves a church.

As we think of denominations, I offer you two thoughts to ponder:

1. Denominations are a reality. I can’t change that. You can’t change that. Ultimately, you have to land somewhere.

You may say, “I will not join a denomination. I will be part of an independent church.” But an independent church is just a denomination of one!

2. Denominations can be a resource. A pastor friend in Alabama, which has no shortage of churches, expressed this to me once.

Some denominations are good at evangelism. Some denominations are good at worship. Some denominations are good at biblical scholarship. Some denominations are good at practical service.

The point? If the body of Christ includes more than just your denomination (which it does), you can accept the fact that the different members of the body will do different things well. The kingdom benefits from all sorts of churches.

This lesson is about our denomination: the Presbyterian Church in America. We are far from

perfect! But we believe we do have something to contribute to the larger church.

## WHERE DID THE PCA COME FROM?

We have come from...

### 1. THE BIBLE

That seems obvious. But this is important. While, as we will see, the PCA is a relatively young denomination, we seek to be “ancient” in our faithfulness.

Notice these verses:

*\* Colossians 1:18: And he (Jesus) is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*

Who is the head of the church? Jesus! But how do we know what he wants for the church?

*\* John 14:26: But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*

Jesus is speaking here to the disciples. He promises them that they will be reminded of his teachings. But how do we have them now?

*\* 2 Timothy 3:16: All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...*

By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (which we will discuss more in the next lesson), Jesus has provided for his Father’s people to know his Father’s desires for the church.

We want to be guided and directed by the Bible.

### 2. THE REFORMATION

Do you remember the story of the Reformation? In 1517, a rather tortured young monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 “Theses” to the door of a church at Wittenburg, Germany. Luther had fought great struggles in his soul - especially regarding the question of salvation. He arrived at a

number of conclusions that did not fit well with the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholics. He did his nailing not to “start a new church,” but to begin a conversation.

In God’s providence, he ignited a firestorm. If you know your European history, you know this was a time of great change in:

- \* Population. People were moving to cities.
- \* Printing. Information could be produced and distributed much more quickly than before.
- \* Politics. The old feudal system was breaking down.

The result? Luther’s teachings (and the teachings of others), which challenged many practices and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church, spread quickly throughout Europe.

The next result? The formation of so-called “Protestant” churches - churches which protested the abuses and errors in the Roman Catholic Church, and sought to “reform” the church.

Luther was not the first person to seek the reform of the church. But in God’s timing, he was the person who kindled a Reformation that still blesses us today.

Why do I say that? Our Reformation heritage includes five core beliefs:

*Scripture Alone.* The Bible is the final authority for our faith and lives.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the tradition of the church is the final authority. Where the Bible and the church conflict, church teaching prevails. Catholics would not say it this way. Their claim is that the church *interprets* the Bible. But too often, the Catholic Church has *reinterpreted* biblical teaching, so that it conforms to church tradition.

The church is important! The Reformation does not diminish this. But the church must always submit to the Bible as the final authority.

*Christ Alone.* We receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life only through Jesus. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Only he brings peace with God. Only he is worthy of our worship.

Once again, this is in contrast to the Roman Catholic practice of exalting others, especially Mary, to a place that they become objects of worship and mediators between God and people.

Yet this teaching is important today for another reason: in our culture, there is a denial of Jesus as the only way to God. We see a growing rejection of Jesus as the *exclusive* Savior. He might be good for you, but it is arrogant to say there are no other paths to God.

But that is what Jesus claimed to be. That is what the rest of the Bible declares him to be. In the words of C.S. Lewis, was he a liar or a lunatic? Or is he Lord? We are saved by Christ alone.

*Grace Alone.* We are saved purely by God's grace, not by anything we do.

What is grace? It is undeserved favor. It is God's goodness to bad people.

If we have done something to deserve God's love, then that is not grace.

As we saw in the first lesson, the Bible teaches that we deserve only God's wrath. If we are to be saved, it will be purely because of God's grace and goodness to us.

*Faith Alone.* We receive the salvation of Jesus through faith.

Once again, this is a contrast with the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church. That church teaches that we are saved through our faith, plus our good works.

But we cannot do enough good works either to earn God's favor, or offset God's anger over our sin. We do not achieve salvation. We receive salvation.

This is through faith in Jesus. But even this faith is not a "work." It is a gift.

On this point, Luther and the Catholic Church fussed more than any other. The church claimed, "If salvation is apart from works, people will just go crazy, doing whatever they want!"

That's a great objection. But Luther and the Reformers responded, "If they go crazy, that's a sign that they don't believe in Jesus! If we are genuine Christians, we will do good works!

"But we do those works not to get grace, but out of gratitude for grace."

***Glory to God Alone.*** Whatever we think, say or do, we do it for the glory of God.

The Reformers called for God-centered worship, and God-centered living. In the words of a phrase I learned in college, we want “All of Life Redeemed.”

God gets all the credit for giving us eternal life, and God gets all the glory in this life.

We call these statements “The Five Solas.” Sola is the Latin word for “alone.” The Reformers sought to return the church to the pure teaching of these and other truths, which they believed had become obscured and even lost by the theology and practice of the Roman Catholic Church.

You may be uncomfortable with some of this. You may believe you are reading through an anti-Catholic rant. Please understand that no man has the right to judge the soul of another. My words are directed against the *teachings* of the Catholic Church, not *individuals within* that church.

Yet these are important issues. In the PCA, we stand firmly on the side of the Reformers.

Where are we? We have come from the Bible, the Reformation, and we have come from...

### **3. THE EVENTS OF RECENT HISTORY**

Back to history. In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue...and missed the continent altogether. But eventually, people began coming to this land.

Some of them were Presbyterians. (Trivia: the first American Presbytery was formed in 1706, in Philadelphia, by a man named Francis Makemie. You don't need to know that to join the church!)

Presbyterians did what Presbyterians do, which is live, die, and pass on their beliefs. So let's fast-forward to about 150 years ago...

### ***THE CIVIL WAR***

This “unpleasantness” led to a lot of splits, including in churches. Just like the Methodists, the

Baptists, and most everyone else, the Presbyterian Church split along the north-south divide.

The “northern” and “southern” churches remained separated until 1983, when they reunited in what is now known as the PCUSA (Presbyterian Church in the United States of America).

But let’s go back to the years after the Civil War. In both the northern and southern churches, people became frustrated with changes in the churches.

How can we summarize this?

*It was a battle about the Bible.* The frustrated Christians believed their churches were drifting farther and farther away from the Bible - in teaching and practice.

In the north, this led to the formation of new churches like the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and the Bible Presbyterian Church.

In the south...

#### ***THE FORMATION OF THE PCA***

Southerners tend to do things slower than northerners. It must be the heat. While the northern “new” churches formed around the 1930s, the process of developing a new southern Presbyterian church began in earnest in the 1950s and 1960s.

It’s a long, sad story, but the core issue was the same: faithfulness to the Bible. Finally, with pain and tears, about 250 congregations met in Birmingham, Alabama in 1973 to begin the church that we now know as the Presbyterian Church in America.

To this day, the PCA is more of a southern church. If you look at a PCA directory (which you can do online), you will see an abundance of PCA churches in places like Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida. But the PCA is getting bigger in the north.

Part of that is because of the PCA’s union with the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (say THAT three times fast!) in 1982. This was another of the “new” northern churches.

## WHAT IS THE PCA TODAY?

### ***OUR MEMBERSHIP.***

The PCA has about 350,000 members in all 50 states and Canada. We are the second largest Presbyterian church in the United States, after the PCUSA.

How do we feel about the PCUSA? There are some great people and some great churches. But sadly, the denomination as a whole, in our judgment, has continued to drift away from the Bible.

We don't hate them. We hurt for what has happened.

### ***OUR CHURCHES.***

The PCA has about 1700 congregations.

### ***OUR MISSIONS AGENCIES.***

*Mission to North America* is our church planting agency. At any given time, we have 150-200 "missions" churches, which we hope will become self-supporting, self-governing churches.

*Mission to the World* is our world missions agency, with about 600 career missionaries serving around the world. MTW also has one of the world's largest short-term missions programs.

### ***OUR SCHOOLS.***

*Covenant College* is a liberal arts college in Lookout Mountain, Georgia - just up the mountain from Chattanooga, Tennessee.

*Covenant Seminary* is the national seminary of the PCA, and it is in St. Louis, Missouri. Many, but not all, PCA pastors have been trained there.

## WHAT ARE THE PCA'S DISTINCTIVE DOCUMENTS?

As we will see in the next lesson, the Bible is our only authoritative rule for faith and practice.

But we are also a “confessional” church. This means we believe God has provided useful words from godly men, which guide us well in describing our faith and directing our ministry.

*THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH* came from events that occurred about a hundred years after the Reformation.

Once again, let’s review a little European history! During the 1640s, the Parliament in England called together an assembly of pastors and other godly men. Their task was to write a system of doctrine and directory of worship to be used by churches in England, Scotland and Ireland.

This was a time of conflict between the kings and queens and Parliament, and that fighting kept the documents from being officially adopted. But Presbyterians have embraced the Confession of Faith (and the catechisms with it) as an excellent summary of biblical truth.

The Westminster Confession of Faith is a short “systematic theology” book. In 33 fairly short chapters, it expresses biblical truth under different categories. These include:

- \* The Bible
- \* The nature and activities of God
- \* The glory and work of Jesus Christ
- \* Issues in the Christian life
- \* The Sacraments
- \* The church
- \* End times

There is also a Larger and a Shorter Catechism, with questions and answers designed to help us teach these truths - especially to our children.

Is this a flawless document, on the level of the Bible? NO! In fact, it has been changed over the years. But if you study through it, with the Bible in hand, you will learn a lot about the Bible.

Do you need to read this or believe all of this to begin “life together” in the church? No. But we

will use it and refer to it, and we consider it an excellent tool to help us understand the Bible.

*THE BOOK OF CHURCH ORDER* contains guidelines for our Form of Government, Rules of Discipline, and Worship of God.

Is it perfect? Again, NO! In fact, we change it regularly. Most years at General Assembly, we approve one or more changes that are designed to improve it.

But it is a useful tool. It conforms to biblical principles, and it gives the local church great wisdom, so that we may minister well.

#### THE END OF THE MATTER

We are a denomination of fallen men, women and children. We are redeemed, but we are still running the race to glory, and we are not there yet!

But we believe God is using the PCA for his glory, and the good of many people. Our stated purpose is “Reformation and Revival”:

\* We want to *reform* the church. We want to urge the church to be biblical in its teaching and practices.

\* We want to see *revival* in the church. We want to follow the Great Commission in making and teaching disciples.

Denominations struggle to do all things well. The PCA is no exception. Yet the PCA, at least in theory, has an excellent balance.

Churches can be so rigorous about reformation, that they forget or neglect the call to bring the gospel to the nations.

Churches can be so enthusiastic about “bringing people to Christ,” that they compromise the truth of the gospel.

Our hope and our prayer is that PCA will retain this balance. May our life together reflect this!