



Dear Members and Friends of First Presbyterian Church, Orlando:

*"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."
Romans 1:16*

For the last twenty-five years, our denomination has been wrestling with theological issues related to the authority of Scripture and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Put more simply, do we believe that Scripture is God's Word, and thus authoritative in our lives, and do we believe that Christ alone is the means of salvation? The answer at First Presbyterian Church, Orlando, is an unequivocal yes on both. This is not something we are ashamed of, but something we proudly and earnestly affirm.

In our wider denomination, however, the answers are not so clear. While FPCO has maintained her Biblical and Confessional standards, the PCUSA has drifted away from those same standards, leaving many to wonder just what the PCUSA believes in at her core. As discouraging as this may be, there is some good news. Nine months ago, I started meeting with six other pastors, men who are my friends and who also pastor large churches in our denomination. Through the Spirit's leading, and in His time, He led us to create a new idea for our denomination that would allow us a way forward.

This idea was presented to the whole denomination in a letter written by the seven of us last month. It outlines our rationale as well as the structures necessary to make it happen. It would allow like-minded churches who have a long history of shared ministry and relationship to stay together within the denomination while also providing relief for those congregations that no longer believe they can remain. You may view the letter on our website at www.fpc.org.

The Steering Committee (our group of seven) has met with leaders from both the General Assembly office and those who would represent the liberal side of our church. It is our great hope that this is something that would be positive for both. It will allow the space needed for each group to create ministry in the manner they think best without having to endure the constant rancor and endless debates. It further would provide for the creation of a new Reformed Denomination that churches could be dismissed to, should they feel led to such a course, without the fear of reprisal or legal action. Tentatively called **Fellowship PCUSA**, our first meeting will be in **Minneapolis August 25-27**. We are working to have the confessional and structural plan necessary to move us forward at that time.

When we first created this initiative, we had no idea what was on the horizon. I tell you this now because in the next few weeks, it is quite likely that you will begin to hear about the passage of Amendment 10-A. This amendment to our constitution was passed by our General Assembly last summer and was then sent to the Presbyteries for ratification during the past nine months. If a majority of Presbyteries pass the amendment, then our constitution is changed accordingly. (Two other items are being voted on as well: a new Form of Government that would replace our Book of Order; and a new confession, The Belhar Confession, to be added to our Book of Confessions).

Amendment 10-A is a radical shift in our qualifications, or standards, for who can be ordained as ministers, elders or deacons. Currently, our constitution states "those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture....among these standards is the requirement to either live in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." (G-6.0106b)

The amendment would replace that language with the following: "Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000)."

That is not the entirety of the language, but you can see the implications. While "submitting joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ" sounds good on the surface, what that means is anyone's guess. In the absence of a clear standard centered in God's Word, it opens the door for the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons and others who are not faithful in their marriage between a man and a



woman or chaste in their singleness. As you might expect, this outcome is sending individuals and churches to Fellowship PCUSA by the hundreds. As I said earlier, our conversations were no doubt in God's time.

As the media gets rolling with coverage of this, you will hear it said that this passage represents a "movement of the Holy Spirit in the PCUSA towards a new understanding of God's love" or something to that effect. That is false. The reason the vote has passed is because many faithful, Biblical Presbyterians have left the church in the past ten years, with the speed of those departures increasing rapidly in the past two years. The vote is changing because people have left, not because the Spirit has moved.

Needless to say, many will be saddened, disheartened and discouraged by this result. Others will insist on immediate departure. I know I have had a wide range of emotions myself. Even so, let me ask for your patience and calm as we work through this. Our Session has been aware of my work on this for some time, and they have been very supportive. The Session recognizes the tectonic shift that such action will mean, and stands ready to lead us as a body as these details unfold. I would also ask your patience with me in the time this is taking for me personally. Creating such an entity is no small task, but I trust the Lord will strengthen us for this time.

Needless to say, I covet your prayers. Pray for our church. Pray for the momentum that God has generated at FPCO in the past 18 months. Implore Him to not allow these controversies to quell it. And pray for our denomination that the Spirit of God would move and work through all of those leading to help create a new way forward, a way that will allow us to be the true church He is calling us to be.

With prayers and joyful expectation, I remain

In His Grip,



David D. Swanson, Senior Pastor



Dr. Case Thorp, Associate Pastor



Rev. Donna McClellan, Associate Pastor



Rev. Sam Knight, Associate Pastor

Endorsed by the Session of First Presbyterian Church, Orlando at its stated meeting, March 22, 2011.

