

West Valley Presbyterian Church

Theological Differences between PCUSA and WVPC

V1.0 - For Town Hall Meeting on 3/2/2014

The purpose of this document is to provide evidence and examples that demonstrate how the Presbyterian Church (USA) [PCUSA] has transitioned in their theology to a position that is substantially different from that of West Valley Presbyterian Church [WVPC] and the Essential Tenets that its Session has adoptedⁱ.

In demonstrating these differences, it is not the intent of this paper to judge the merits of the different positionsⁱⁱ. It merely seeks to demonstrate that the differences exist. It is left to the reader to determine which of the theological positions has more merit.

Disclaimer: This is a working document. The contents of this document may change as we continue to learn and correct.

1. Other Religions: Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

WVPCs Essential Tenets state "Christ's righteousness and atonement are the sole basis for human salvation. Faith in Christ is the only instrument by which this righteousness is received by individual believers, resulting in their justification."ⁱⁱⁱ It also explicitly does not affirm "any doctrine that asserts that salvation can be obtained through other religions or that other religions have equally valid solutions to the human problem, or that there is salvation in some other name besides Jesus Christ"^{iv}

However recent actions and policies in the PCUSA appear to differ. Consider the following from the three most recent General Assemblies:

- a. The 218th General Assembly (in 2008) voted to endorse common worship with non-Christian faith systems. This would include Jews, Christians and Muslims celebrating religious holidays together and holding congregational suppers on designated days of worship.^v It further suggested that Christians and Muslims could "participate in sacred and holy observances in each other's traditions".^{vi}

In response, some question how the meaning of Christian worship can be consistent with Jewish and Muslim worship unless Jesus is "moved to the sideline".^{vii}

- b. The 219th General Assembly (in 2010) began with an opening processional that incorporated a non-Christian, Native American ritual into the worship that included an opening prayer to a Holy One "whose flesh is the flesh of hills and hummingbirds and angleworms; whose skin is the leathered skin of an old Ojibwe Chief, and the smooth skin of a newborn babe; whose color is the color of the zebra and the brown bear and the green grass snake; whose hair is the aurora borealis, rainbows, nebulae, waterfalls and a spider's web"^{viii}
- c. The 220th General Assembly (in 2012) included a plenary address by a Hindu priest who chanted and prayed over the assembly as part of the ecumenical portion of the GA.^{ix}

2. Church Membership: Can I Play Too?

WVPC's Essential Tenets state, "In faith we accept, receive, and rest 'upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.' (Westminster, 6.080)"^x

However, the PCUSA makes church membership available to those who do not profess a faith in Christ.

- a. The new Form of Government [nFoG] was adopted by PCUSA and went into effect on July 10, 2011. According to nFoG, in the section entitled "Unity in Diversity", it states "God unites people through baptism regardless of . . . theological conviction".^{xi} Therefore, a belief in Christ is not required for membership.

Furthermore, the paragraph in nFoG goes on to state that the PCUSA "shall guarantee full participation in its . . . governance"^{xii} to its members. This would imply that ordination to deacon, elder or pastor is available to members regardless of theological conviction as well.

- b. When describing those who are part of the church, nFoG deleted the line "who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior" which had been in the former Book of Order.^{xiii}
- c. As an example, consider the case of Robert Jensen, an avowed atheist who was accepted as a member into St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Austin, TX in 2006.^{xiv} The matter was reportedly brought before the Presbytery.^{xv} But, in 2011, Jensen was still active in the church and, in fact, the church blog has evidence that Jensen had been invited to deliver a sermon to the church.^{xvi}

3. Jesus Christ: Who is This Man?

The mission of WVPC is to know Christ and to make Him known. This is a worthy endeavor because, as stated in WVPC's Essential Tenets, "Jesus Christ is God's only Mediator between God and humankind and God's unique agent for the salvation of the world".

Some in the PCUSA also believe this while others do not.

- a. Landon Whitsitt was Vice-Moderator of PCUSA's General Assembly from 2010 -2012. During this time he wrote Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All in which he stated, "Just because God has called you into relationship through the work and person of Jesus Christ doesn't mean everybody has to be in relationship with God through the work and person of Jesus Christ."^{xvii}

On his website, he posted in February of 2012, "I do not consider myself a Universalist [sic] . . . but, rather a Pluralist (the belief that God calls people into relationship through various religious traditions)."^{xviii}

These viewpoints were apparently acceptable enough to the General Assembly that it found it appropriate to invite Whitsitt to offer the prayer during the communion service in the 220th General Assembly later in 2012, where he prayed, "Grant us the grace to recognize you wherever bread is broken, wherever love is offered, wherever compassion is shared. Then our praise will be sincere, and our thanksgiving holy"^{xix} which would imply that communion is available to all and not just Christ followers.

- b. Some churches in the PCUSA openly state that they do not believe that Jesus is the only way to God. We have not conducted an extensive search but are aware that a church in Palo Alto and a church in Oakland both state so openly on their respective websites.^{xx}
- c. For data in a larger scope, we find in 2011, the PCUSA conducted their usual Presbyterian Panel which surveys a range of topics. In it they found that "about two in five members

(42%), ruling elders (45%) and pastors (41%) -- but only a fourth of specialized ministers (27%) -- *strongly agree or agree* that "only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved."^{xxi}

4. Authority of Scripture: The Bible Tells Me. So?

WVPC's Essential Tenets state, "The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are God's uniquely revealed and written Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and are the church's first and final authority in all areas of faith and life including, but not limited to, theological doctrine, mission, church order, character, and ethical behavior."

Evidence suggests that this is no longer the view held by the PCUSA.

- a. Prior to nFoG, the Book of Order stated, "Insofar as Christ's will for the church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed."^{xxii} With nFoG, the wording was changed and now reads, "Scripture teaches us of Christ's will for the church, which is to be obeyed."^{xxiii}

While the change in wording might seem minor, the implications are significant. The former statement holds up Scripture as the authority. If Christ's will for the church comes from another source it must not be inconsistent with Scripture. However, the newer language leaves the door open for Christ's will to come from sources that contradict Scripture, and allows for these other sources to overrule Scripture.

- b. For example, in a ruling by the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly of the PCUSA in April of 2012, two commissioners, in an Opinion that concurred with the ruling wrote, "However, it is not for this Commission or the judicial process overall to test the value or judge the truth of variant interpretations of particular texts, excepting egregious refutation or abuse of primary or first order creedal affirmations, to which level the issue in this case does not rise. The majority decision affirms the historic tradition about the appropriate and traditional place for such evaluation in councils of the church."^{xxiv}

This commission serves in a similar capacity as the US Supreme Court and there is no appeal to its rulings. Hence, this opinion indicates that Scripture which has variant interpretations should not be used in Commission cases but instead the final authority for these interpretations rest with the council of each church. This would imply that for most matters there is no oversight for any Biblical interpretation that a given church chooses to adopt. It would also imply that evidence presented would need to be apart from Scripture as these Commissioners seek to determine Christ's will for the church.

- c. The PCUSA website reports a book entitled A New New Testament which adds 10 additional texts alongside New Testament books and includes some works that were originally rejected by the early church.^{xxv} The back cover of the book advertises, "For the first time, the most significant recent discoveries in ancient scripture are bound together with the traditional canon."

One name in The Council for A New New Testament was listed as "Bruce Reyes-Chow, The Presbyterian Church USA". Reyes-Chow was the Moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008).

- d. The sermon mentioned previously that atheist Robert Jensen preached to St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Austin, TX claimed to use as its "scripture" a poem by Wendell Berry. In it, Jensen claimed, "If scripture is poetry, then poetry certainly can serve as scripture, at least when the Doctrinal Police aren't watching."^{xxvi}
- e. For another perspective on the Authority of Scripture that is permitted to exist within the PCUSA, consider Rev. John Shuck, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Elizabethton, TN. On his blog, he posted,

"Not only that, the PC(USA) is awash in heresy and it refuses to do anything about it.

Take for example, me. I think the Bible is wrong about most everything. It is wrong about evolution, slavery, women, and gays. It has no authority on those topics. I think the Bible is wrong about cosmology, history, our future, Jesus, and God. The texts were all written by human beings without any supernatural or special revelation. Yet I preach in a PC(USA) pulpit. Run! Flee! Escape while you can into the refreshing waters of pure doctrine!

Ten denominations aren't near enough. We will need plenty more break-offs before we finally give up on the oppressive notion of the Authority of Scripture. The Bible contains no truth outside of what we can discover through public means of inquiry. Don't misunderstand. I enjoy the Bible. It is a marvelous human book. I read it and study it with all the critical means at my disposal. In so doing, I will do my part to undermine its Authority which I think is the next important step for religious freedom."^{xxvii}

5. Salvation - What Must I Do to be Saved?

WVPC's Essential Tenets state, "On the sole basis of the finished work of Christ on the Cross, sinners may now be reconciled to a holy God and set free from their bondage to sin and death to live for God in holiness and joy."^{xxviii} It also explicitly does not affirm any doctrine "that teaches that God saves or will save everybody (or nearly everybody) regardless of their faith in Jesus Christ or whether they hear the gospel or not or whether they put their faith explicitly in Jesus Christ or not."^{xxix}

This position differs from the redemption that the PCUSA claims is available to all people.

- a. nFoG begins, "The good news of the Gospel is that the Triune God . . . redeems . . . all people".^{xxx} According to this statement, faith in Jesus is not required for redemption.
- b. nFog states, "In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God sends the Church into the world to share the gospel of God's redemption of all things and people."^{xxxi} Again, there is no indication that any faith response is required to be included in God's redemption.
- c. The former Book of Order stated that "Jesus came to seek and to save the lost."^{xxxii} That language is no longer present in nFoG.
- d. In 2013, published a new hymnal entitled, Glory to God, which excluded the popular hymn, "In Christ Alone". The Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song hoped to change the

words in the second stanza from "the wrath of God was satisfied" to "the love of God was magnified". While the motivation for the change is not clear, such a change would minimize the need for Christ's work on the cross. The copyright holders rejected the request and the song in its original form did not receive the two thirds majority required for inclusion in the hymnal. Some responsible for this decision issued a formal statement in response to media coverage around this decision.^{xxxiii}

ⁱ Specifically, these essential tenets deal with the Authority of Scripture, God (Trinity, Creation, Providence, Sovereignty), Humanity - Original Righteousness and Fall into Sin, Jesus Christ - Incarnation of the Eternal Word, Jesus Christ - His Atoning Work, Salvation by Grace through Faith. A copy of these Essential Tenets are available upon request.

ⁱⁱ In making this claim, the authors fully acknowledge that we are part of the Session that recommended a departure from PCUSA and we realize that we have a position that we will seek to suppress. In times where we fail, we sincerely apologize. It is not our intent to try to influence the reader with our biases.

ⁱⁱⁱ WVPC Essential Tenets, page 12 - 13.

^{iv} WVPC Essential Tenets, page 13.

^v [www.pc-biz.org/MeetingPapers/\(S\(iii40h4ty1vyb4ypbwvfhgdn\)\)/IOBView.aspx?m=ro&id=519](http://www.pc-biz.org/MeetingPapers/(S(iii40h4ty1vyb4ypbwvfhgdn))/IOBView.aspx?m=ro&id=519)

^{vi} <http://www.pc-biz.org/MeetingPapers/%28S%284gfzw1clnoglob1g30315wgnu%29%29/IOBView.aspx?m=ro&id=1725>

^{vii} <http://www.pfrenwal.org/issues/173-contending-for-the-faith-the-way-forward-after-ga-2008>

^{viii} <http://naminghisgrace.blogspot.com/2010/07/presbyterian-church-usas-general.html>.

^{ix} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHJx2PzGajg>

^x WVPC Essential Tenets, page 13.

^{xi} The Foundational of Presbyterian Polity (hereafter, referred to as nFoG), F-1.0403.

^{xii} nFoG, F-1.0403.

^{xiii} nFoG, G-1.0102. In former Book of Order at G-1.0102 and G-1.0104.

^{xiv} <http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/03/07/why-i-am-a-christian-sort-of/>

^{xv} <http://m.christianpost.com/news/why-he-is-not-a-christian151an-atheist-joins-a-church-6697/>

^{xvi} <http://www.progchurchblog.com/?p=241>. For those interested, Robert Jensen has another blog post at

<http://www.progchurchblog.com/?p=253>

^{xvii} page number and copy of book is not available at the time of this writing but you can hear him say it on YouTube at about the 2:40 mark of <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whqWrJHH-6g>.

^{xviii} <http://londonwhitsitt.com/2012/02/08/good-theology-bad-theology/>

^{xix} <http://naminghisgrace.blogspot.com/2012/07/220th-general-assembly-of-presbyterian.html>

^{xx} See <http://fprespa.org/whoware/> and <http://www.mpcfamilly.org/about-us/everyone-is-welcome/>

^{xxi} http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/research/pdfs/panel_profile_survey_2011_summary_color.pdf, page 2.

^{xxii} Book of Order, 2009 - 2011, G-1.0100c.

^{xxiii} nFoG, F-1.0203.

^{xxiv} <http://oga.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/pjc22010.pdf>, page 8.

^{xxv} <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2013/4/2/scholars-piece-together-new-new-testament/>

^{xxvi} <http://www.progchurchblog.com/?p=241>.

^{xxvii} <http://shuckandjive.blogspot.com/2012/01/new-presbyterian-break-off-has-been.html>

^{xxviii} WVPC Essential Tenets, page 12.

^{xxix} WVPC Essential Tenets, page 13.

^{xxx} nFoG, F-1.01.

^{xxxi} nFoG, F-1.0302d.

^{xxxii} Book of Order, 2009-2011, G-3.0102.

^{xxxiii} <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2013/8/9/presbyterian-hymnal-producers-respond-misinformati/>