

A Summary of what the Bible Says about Interpreting and Deviating from Scripture

The Presbyterian Church (USA), PC(USA), has undergone a major, steady transformation over the last fifty years, a transformation that has become evident to all due to a series of major decisions over the last five years or so regarding ordination and sexual ethics. Despite these issues which have dominated the headlines in recent years, there is a more foundational matter at stake in our denomination, namely *the authority of Scripture*.

We Presbyterians have anchored ourselves in the historic Reformed understanding of the authority of Scripture – “Sola Scriptura.” This is the principle that the Bible is the only inspired, perfect, sufficient, and authoritative word of God, and the only source for Christian doctrine. Scripture is understood as God’s revelation of the truth to us. This understanding is rooted in what Scripture testifies about itself (e.g. Isaiah 40:8; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21), as well as what the confessional portion of the constitution of the PC(USA) says about Scripture. Unfortunately, in many cases actual decisions and actions of the PC(USA) demonstrate that the authority of Scripture is no longer a governing principle. This is due in part to a differing understanding of what the authority and interpretation of Scripture are.

For the purpose of clarity, it may be helpful to define some terms. To do this, we are citing a report from a church in our denomination that summarizes the two major views of scripture in a concise manner. To quote the report:

The simplest way to understand the divide regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture is to draw a distinction between the Historical position and the Progressive position.

i. The Historical Position. Typically, those favoring an historical position begin by affirming what is often called the principle of the “rule of faith” in interpreting Scripture. The “rule of faith” always gives precedence to a “traditional” (though not unexamined) interpretation of the Bible (as guided by our historical Confessions of Faith), unless there is compelling evidence not to do so.

Therefore, the historical position also takes the more “traditional” (though not less intellectually rigorous) position that the Bible, though written by individuals and reflecting both their personalities and the particular circumstances of their historical setting, has been so controlled and inspired by the Holy Spirit that it is both an essential part and trustworthy record of God’s self-revelation, inerrant and infallible in all that it teaches in matters of theology (faith) and ethics (practice).

ii. The Progressive Position. Those favoring a progressive position will typically affirm the principle of biblical interpretation called the “rule of love.” This principle

states that all interpretations of Scripture are to be guided by the two-fold command to love God and neighbor.

The progressive position also gives precedence to the historic Reformed tenet that the church is both “reformed” and “always reforming.”¹ Therefore, the progressive position often yields authority to “new” revelation that comes to the church through human reason, or individual or cultural experience.

Finally, the progressive position believes that “higher” biblical criticism (a study of biblical writings that seeks to evaluate the authenticity or historical composition of texts through such techniques as textual, source, form, socio-scientific, post-modern or feminist criticism), yields the position that some portions of Scripture may not be what “tradition” holds them to be and that they are not inspired by God, but are rather a historical record of human moral and religious experiences.²

This latter view has resulted in a “pick and choose” approach to the Bible, whereby we accept what we think accords with modern wisdom, and reject what doesn’t. This tendency has manifested itself in the grievous revisions to key documents of Christian faith. One example is the doctrine of salvation, where there are a growing number of voices who do not believe that Jesus is the only way to God.

One of the other significant indicators of the departure of our denomination from its historical commitment to the authority of Scripture is the changing of the wording of the Book of Order by replacing G.6.0103b with the wording of what was at the time referred to as Amendment 10-A at the 219th General Assembly (2010).³ The result of this

¹ A part of an original quotation discussed in “Semper Reformanda” an article authored by Michael S. Horton Professor of Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary, California. This quotation’s first appearance was in a 1674 devotional by Jodocus van Lodenstein, who was an important figure in Dutch Reformed pietism — a movement known as the Dutch Second Reformation. The whole quotation (per Horton’s translation from the original Latin) is: “The church is reformed and always [in need of] being reformed according to the Word of God.”

² *Report from the Session’s Task Force on Denominational Issues – Examining Changes in PCUSA Governance and Related Matters*, First Presbyterian Church, Houston, Texas. page 10.

³ The former language of the *Book of Order*, section G-6.0106b (repealed) read in pertinent part: “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 between 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.” (Emphasis supplied.)

Effective July 10, 2011, this language was replaced in G-2.0102b by:

“Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240; 14.0450) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”(Emphasis supplied.)

change made ordination standards a local option, whereby each Presbytery and Session would decide whether a church officer candidate was in compliance with the ordination standards it (i.e., the Presbytery or Session) set down. Consequently, since this change a number of candidates who are engaged in a lifestyle that is contrary to Scripture have been ordained as pastors (aka teaching elders).

The redefining of ordination standards has opened the door to a number of steps in a direction that is further away from the clear teaching of Scripture. Perhaps the most troubling is the movement towards redefining marriage from a relationship between a man and a woman to a relationship between two persons.

At the most recent General Assembly (the 220th that met in June 2012), the motion to redefine marriage was defeated by a very small margin. There is a high likelihood that a similar motion will be placed upon the agenda of the next meeting of the General Assembly (the 221st in June 2014). This, coupled with the departure of evangelical churches over the past two years, increases the likelihood that such a motion will pass.