

## **Reasons for Change #2**

### **The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture**

This is the second in a series of papers addressing the central reasons that the Session of CPC recommends to the congregation that Community Presbyterian Church seek dismissal from the PCUSA and seek affiliation with the EPC. The paper will address the Bible as the primary source for knowing God, understanding salvation as it is offered in Jesus Christ and living in a way that brings glory to God.

#### **The Authority of the Bible**

At CPC, we believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the church's first and final authority in faith and life. Though written by human beings in human language, the Bible speaks with the authority of God Himself. The judgments of Scripture regarding good and evil, right and wrong are always for our benefit.

II Timothy 3:16 says, “ *All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*”

This belief in the authority of Scripture also finds expression in the historic confessions of our faith. The Westminster Confession written in 1647 and the sole confession of faith of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, states:

“Therefore it pleased the Lord at different times and in various ways to reveal himself and to declare that this revelation contains His will for the church. Afterwards, it pleased God to put this entire revelation into writing so that the truth might be better preserved and transmitted and that the church, confronted with the corruption of the flesh and the evil purposes of Satan and the world, might be more securely established and comforted.”<sup>1</sup>

The Westminster Confession underscores the fact that the Bible is uniquely authoritative. It is the revelation of God's will for the church and for people.

#### **The Interpretation of the Bible**

Much of the Bible – especially those parts that are central to our faith and salvation – is given to us in very plain, clear, and straight-forward language. On the other hand, there are passages that require more attention and effort in order to fully understand their meaning and application to our lives.

The right interpretation of the Bible is not accomplished by human effort alone. We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us understand God's word and apply it to our lives. In I Corinthians 2:12, the Apostle Paul writes about the vital role of the Holy Spirit: “*We have not received the spirit of the world but the spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.*” The work of interpretation begins with humility and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Governing Documents of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Constitution: Volume 2 Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. Chapter 1 Holy Scripture. Rom 2.14-15, 1.19-20, Ps 19.1-4, Rom 1.32-, 2.1, 1 Cor 1.21. 2.13-14, 2.9-12, Acts 4.12, Rom 10.13-14, Heb 1.1-2, Gal 1.11-12, Dt 4.12-14, Prv 22.19-21, Lk 1.3-4, Rom 15.4, Mt 4.4,7, 10, Is 8.19-20, Lk 24.27, 2 Tm 3.16, 2 Pt 3.15-16, Heb 1.1-2, 2 tm 3.15-16, 2 Pt 1. 10, Lk 16.29-31, Heb 2.1-3

As we seek to understand and interpret the Bible, we must remember that God's intent is that the Scriptures speak to us and lead us today. The Psalmist writes; "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and light to my path.*" (Psalm 119:105)

As we read, investigate, clarify and apply the Bible to our lives, we are assured that God is faithful and will help us in our understanding. Again, The Westminster Confession reminds us;

"We must read the Bible with high and reverent esteem, being absolutely convinced that it is truly God's word and that only he can enable us to understand it. We should read with a desire to know, believe, and obey his will as revealed in the Bible. We should pay careful attention to its content and the extent of its meaning, meditate on it, apply it to our lives, deny ourselves under its direction, and use it as the basis for our prayers."<sup>2</sup>

### **Problems with Authority and Interpretation in the PCUSA**

CPC's paper on Christology spoke to the wide range of PCUSA beliefs about Jesus. Equally true, is the PCUSA's increasing acceptance of a wide range of thinking about Biblical authority and interpretation. It is often in the area of interpretation that CPC has disagreed with the PCUSA. Examples we have *disagreed* with include the following:

**We Disagree with a New Test of Authority.** In 1983, A position paper on the Presbyterian understanding of Holy Scripture was adopted by the General Assembly which said in part: "*...all theories of the authority of scripture are tested by the effectiveness and usefulness of the interpretation that they involve.*"<sup>4</sup>

This statement became a significant indicator of a shift in the PCUSA's understanding of authority. The test of Biblical authority has now become its usefulness and effectiveness, rather than the fact that through the scriptures God Himself is speaking to us.

**We Disagree with Harmony Over Truth.** In its final report to the General Assembly in 2006, The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity (PUP) after 5 years of study and reflection produced this statement about biblical authority and interpretation:

*We who disagree on some matters can learn much from one another as we mine together the Scriptures we love. This is further reason for Presbyterians, who share such rich traditions of biblical interpretation, to continue together in fellowship.*<sup>5</sup>

This statement affirms a shared love for the Scriptures, but trivializes disagreements in essential matters. It acknowledges the end of a common view of Scripture as central to our life together within the PCUSA. The PUP Report concludes that it's best to prioritize harmony over truth and to make Christian fellowship and mutual learning the glue that holds us together.

<sup>2</sup> Governing Documents of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Constitution: Volume 2 Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. Pg 100. Ps 19.10, 119.97, Neh 8.3-6, 10, Ex 24.7, 2 Chr 34.27, Is 66.2.

<sup>3</sup> The "Reasons for Change, Christology: Our Belief About Jesus Christ". CPC Document, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture* page 3. Position adopted by the 123<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly (1983) of the PCUSA. The Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (USA)

<sup>5</sup> PCUSA Peace, Unity and Purity Report. Page 18. [www.pcusa.org/preaceunitypurity/](http://www.pcusa.org/preaceunitypurity/)

**We Disagree with Interpretations of Scripture That Lead to Different Conclusions.** This summer (July, 2010) the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly will hear a report from a special committee assigned to study issues of civil union and Christian marriage. The preliminary report includes this statement:

*We acknowledge that our interpretations of Scripture lead us to different conclusions regarding homosexual behavior and same-gender partnerships. We all confess that Scripture holds out a transforming hope of radical change in Jesus Christ that requires us to be dead to sin and alive to all that is good. However, for some of us, that makes faithful, mutually loving, marriage-like unions of same-gender couples unacceptable; for others of us, that makes faithful, mutually loving, marriage-like unions of same-gender couple acceptable.*<sup>6</sup>

A church which encompasses such contrary interpretations of transformation and sin as defined by Scripture creates a conflicted witness to the world.

### **Consistency of Scriptures Authority and Interpretation in the EPC**

The elders and pastors of CPC believe it's time to align ourselves with a denomination which places the authority and interpretation of Scripture as central in importance. We believe the EPC is that denomination.

In the preamble to their stated essentials, the EPC says of Scripture:

All Scripture is self-attesting and being Truth, requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life. The Bible, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks.<sup>7</sup>

This statement is consistent with the ongoing belief of CPC regarding the Bible, its authority and its interpretation. CPC looks forward to a growing partnership with a denomination committed to God's Word as the first and final authority in faith and life.

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<sup>6</sup> Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage to 219<sup>th</sup> GA, 2010 (Preliminary Report).

<sup>7</sup> Essentials of Our Faith. Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, Constitution: EPC Volume 2

## For Further Study

### Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1 – Holy Scripture

1. Our natural understanding and the works of creation and providence so clearly show God's goodness, wisdom, and power that human beings have no excuse for not believing in him.<sup>1</sup> However, these means alone cannot provide that knowledge of God and of his will which is necessary for salvation.<sup>2</sup> Therefore it pleased the Lord at different times and in various ways to reveal himself and to declare that this revelation contains his will for his church.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards it pleased God to put this entire revelation into writing so that the truth might be better preserved and transmitted and that the church, confronted with the corruption of the flesh and the evil purposes of Satan and the world, might be more securely established and comforted.<sup>4</sup> Since God no longer reveals himself to his people in those earlier ways,<sup>5</sup> Holy Scripture is absolutely essential.<sup>6</sup>

1. Rom 2.14-15, 1.19-20, Ps 19.1-4, Rom 1.32, 2.1
2. 1 Cor 1.21, 2.13-14, 2.9-12, Acts 4.12, Rom 10.13-14.
- 3, Heb 1.1-2, Gal 1.11-12, Dt 4.12-14.
4. Prv 22.19-21, Lk 1.3-4, Rom 15.4, Mt 4.4-7, 10, Is 8.19-20, Lk 24.27, 2 Tm 3.16, 2 Pt 3.15-16.
5. Heb 1.1-2, see General Note.
6. 2 Tm 3.15-16, 2 Pt 1. 10, Lk 16.29-31, Heb 2.1-3.

2. What we call Holy Scripture or the written word of God now includes all the books of the Old and New Testaments which are:

#### Books of the Old Testament

Genesis	II Chronicles	Daniel
Exodus	Ezra	Hosea
Leviticus	Nehemiah	Joel
Numbers	Esther	Amos
Deuteronomy	Job	Obadiah
Joshua	Psalms	Jonah
Judges	Proverbs	Micah
Ruth	Ecclesiastes	Nahum
I Samuel	Song of Solomon	Habakkuk
II Samuel	Isaiah	Zephaniah
I Kings	Jeremiah	Haggai
II Kings	Lamentations	Zechariah
I Chronicles	Ezekiel	Malachi

## Books of the New Testament

Matthew	Ephesians	Hebrews
Mark	Philippians	James
Luke	Colossians	I Peter
John	I Thessalonians	II Peter
Acts	II Thessalonians	I John
Romans	I Timothy	II John
I Corinthians	II Timothy	III John
II Corinthians	Titus	Jude
Galatians	Philemon	Revelation

All of these books are inspired by God and are the rule of faith and life.<sup>7</sup>

7. Lk 16.29, 31, Epha2.20, Rv 22.18-19, 2 Tm 3.16, Mt 11.27.

**3.** The books usually called the Apocrypha are not divinely inspired and are not part of the canon of Scripture. They therefore have no authority in the church of God and are not to be valued or used as anything other than human writings.<sup>8</sup>

8. Lk 24.27, 44, Rom 3.2, 2 Pt 1.21. The Canon of Scripture is not established by explicit passages, but by the testimony of Jesus and his apostles; of ancient manuscripts and versions; of ancient Christian writers and church councils, and by the internal evidence exhibited in the separate books.

**4.** The Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. This authority does not depend on the testimony of any man or church but completely on God, its author, who is himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the word of God.<sup>9</sup>

9. 2 Pt 1.19,21, 2 Tm 3.16, 1 Jn 5.9, 1 Thes 2.13, Gal 1.11-12.

**5.** We may be influenced by the testimony of the church to value the Bible highly and reverently, and Scripture itself shows in so many ways that it is God's word; for example, in its spiritual subject matter, in the effectiveness of its teaching, the majesty of its style, the agreement of all its parts, its unified aim from beginning to end (to give all glory to God), the full revelation it makes of the only way of man's salvation, its many other incomparably outstanding features, and its complete perfection. However, we are completely persuaded and assured of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Bible only by the inward working of the Holy Spirit, who testifies by and with the word in our hearts.<sup>10</sup>

10. 1 Tm 3.15, 1 Jn 2.20, 27, Jn 16.13-14, 1 Cor 2.10-12, Isa 59.21, 1 Cor 2.6-9.

**6.** The whole purpose of God about everything pertaining to his own glory and to man's salvation, faith, and life is either explicitly stated in the Bible or may be deduced as inevitably and logically following from it.<sup>11</sup> Nothing is at any time to be added to the Bible, either from new revelations of the Spirit or from traditions of men.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless we do recognize that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for a saving understanding of the things which are revealed in the word.<sup>13</sup> We also recognize that some provisions for the worship of God and the government of the church are similar to secular activities and organizations; these are to be directed according to our natural understanding and our Christian discretions and should conform to the general rules of the word, which are always observed.<sup>14</sup>

11. Mk 7.5-7.

12. 2 Tm 3.15-17, Gal 1.8-9, 2 Thes 2.2. This statement is an inference from the sufficiency of the Scriptures.

13. Jn 6.45, 1 Cor 2.9-10, 12.

14. 1 Cor 11.13-14, 14.26,40.

**7.** The meanings of all the passages in the Bible are not equally obvious, nor is any individual passage equally clear to everyone.<sup>15</sup> However, everything which we have to know, believe, and observe in order to be saved is so clearly presented and revealed somewhere in the Bible that the uneducated as well as the educated can sufficiently understand it by the proper use of the ordinary means of grace.<sup>16</sup>

15. 2 Pt 3.16, Jn 6.60, 16.7.

16. Ps 119.105, 130, Acts 17.11-12.

**8.** The Old Testament in Hebrew (the native language of the ancient people of God) and the New Testament in Greek (the language most widely known internationally at the time the New Testament was written) were directly inspired by God<sup>17</sup> and have been kept uncontaminated throughout time by his special care and providence. They are therefore authentic and are to be the church's ultimate source of appeal in every religious controversy.<sup>18</sup> The original languages of the Bible, however, are not understood by all of God's people. But all of God's people have a right to an interest in the Bible and God himself commands them to read it thoroughly with awe and reverence for him.<sup>19</sup> Consequently the Bible should be translated into the native language of every people to whom it is introduced. Then, the word of God will live fully in everyone; everyone will be able to worship God in an acceptable way; and all believers may have hope through the endurance and the encouragement of the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

17. See note under Section 3 above.

18. Mt 5.18, Is 8.20, Acts 15.14-18, Jn 5.9,46.

19. Jn 5.39, 2 Tm 3.14-15, 2 Pt 1.19, Acts 17.11.

20. 1 Cor 14.6,9, 11-12, 24, 27-28, Col 3.16, Rom 15.4, Mt 28.19-20.

**9.** The infallible standard for the interpretation of the Bible is the Bible itself. And so any question about the true and complete sense of a passage in the Bible (which is a unified whole) can be answered by referring to other passages which speak more plainly.<sup>21</sup>

21. 2 Pt 1.20-21, Acts 15.15, Jn 5.46, Mt 4.5-7, 12>1-7.

**10.** The Holy Spirit speaking in the Bible is the supreme judge of all religious controversies, all decisions of religious councils, all the opinions of ancient writers, all human teachings, and every private opinion.<sup>22</sup> We are to be satisfied with the judgment of him who is and can be the only judge.

21. Mt 22.29, 31, Eph 2.20, Acts 28.25, Lk 10.26, Gal 1.10, 1 Jn 4.1-6.