

The Reformed Institute is offering a series of essays over the summer months to consider the state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). An introduction to this series by Director R. Bruce Douglass explains its purpose.

Whither the PC(USA)?

SUMMING UP (FOR THE MOMENT)

First a word of appreciation: I want to thank all the contributors to this project for their willingness to participate. Each of them has contributed something valuable to the conversation, and I appreciate the time and effort they have put into their essays.

Next, a word about next steps: I intend to recommend to the Institute's Board of Directors that we continue this project in some form in the coming months. We undertook the project on the assumption that it might prove useful to get Presbyterians in the D.C. area talking seriously about the sort of issues I posed in my charge to the contributors to this series, and I think that assumption has been confirmed in the essays submitted thus far. So if the Board concurs, we will be having more discussion of these matters in the work of the Institute in the days ahead. Stay tuned for further news on this.

Now to the essays themselves: I have many thoughts about the things our authors have said in these pieces, but let me confine my response at this point to just a few observations.

1) I am struck, first, by the absence of references to the topic that has caused so much agitation in our governing bodies in recent years. One might have thought that a series of essays on the current state of the PCUSA written in the summer of 2011 might contain much discussion of the issue of the ordination of homosexuals. But that has not turned out to be the case, and I don't think it is a reflection of a desire on the authors to avoid controversy. I may be mistaken, but I think the reason for the lack of attention to that topic in these essays is more that the members of the PCUSA actually have many other things on their minds when they think about the future of the denomination besides the so-called "Amendment B" issue. Personally I think that is good, and I hope this set of essays will help us attend to a broader set of concerns than the most recent controversy has inclined us to do.

2) I am also struck by the relative absence of identifiably "liberal" or "conservative" views in these essays. Or, to make the same point more positively, I am struck by how much of what is said in these essays reflects concerns that are--or should be, at least--common to people across the spectrum of different views that are represented in the current make-up of the denomination. Perhaps that is just a function of the particular people we asked to write these essays, but I think there is a better explanation--which is that the authors of these essays are actually quite representative of the way in which most members of the denomination (clergy as well as laity) think. Admittedly, some of us do appear to be

doctrinaire liberals or conservatives; but even when all the people in those camps are taken together, they are not a majority. Every reliable piece of data I have been able to find (the Presbyterian Panel findings, e.g.) shows that most of us who consider ourselves mainline Presbyterians are somewhere in the middle. I do not say this because I think there is some inherent virtue in being in the middle; being there has its dangers just as the ideologically purer positions do--the most obvious of which is being lukewarm or even indifferent about things that really matter. But being in the middle also has its advantages, and I think it is just common sense to make the most of that situation if in fact it is where we now find ourselves.

3) I wish there was more evidence of strategic thinking in these essays than I can find. I don't want to overstate this point. Some of the essays offer tantalizing hints of possible directions the denomination might take in the years ahead, but they are just hints. One cannot discuss strategic issues intelligently without a good understanding of the current state of affairs, and we will certainly want to continue to seek such an understanding in the later phases of this discussion. But we need to talk strategically as well--and not just as an afterthought.

4) I have refrained on the whole in these remarks from responding to any of the specific points made by particular authors. But I can't resist the temptation to respond to the challenge posed by Miles Townes in his provocative comments about denominationalism. It is no accident, I suspect, that Miles is the one who brings this topic up. For he is the youngest of the contributors, and his remarks reflect a point of view that appears to be widely shared among Americans (especially Protestants) who are in their 20's and 30's. Miles' articulation of that point of view is unusually nuanced, and for that reason I find myself agreeing with much of what he has to say. I myself have spent much time in ecumenical initiatives of one kind or another over the years, so I understand well the logic of the case for Christian unity. But I think it is a mistake to state that case in such a way as to imply that difference must mean conflict or that the differences among Christian communions serve no good purpose. I grant that many of the differences among Christian communions today are the product of deep disagreements and even bloody conflicts in the past. But out of those conflicts have come a variety of beliefs and practices that many Protestants in particular are now inclined to regard as a good thing, and the reason this is the case is that we recognize that the Christian religion lends itself to diverse interpretations--and that none of us has the full truth. So the Episcopalians do it one way, the Presbyterians another, the Methodists another, etc. But at the same time we also recognize that the traditions in which we stand have some elements that are worth preserving, and I think it is sociologically naive to believe this will happen in the absence of institutional support.

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