

WHY ARE THERE
DIFFERENT
PRESBYTERIAN
DENOMINATIONS ?

by Dr. Glenn Parkinson

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) is one of several presbyterian-style denominations. The PCA traces its origin to two groups of churches that severed their relationship from what is now the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). One group did so in the 1930's and the other in the 1970's. These two groups joined together in the 1980's to form the current PCA.

Why has the PCA found it necessary to exist as a separate and distinct denomination?

Some assert that the basic disagreement was over the ownership of property and the handling of finances, and there are certainly differences in these areas. The PCUSA has believed in exercising discipline to keep the denomination economically unified. Indeed, the immediate cause of the 1930's division was the denominational demand that all its churches support a unified budget. The original churches that became the PCA believed that local financial support of denominational efforts should be voluntary. Of even more significance is the PCUSA conviction that the regional Presbytery ultimately controls the property of its local congregations, making it impossible for congregations to leave the denomination with their property. The PCA, on the other hand, guards the right of each local church to own and control both its property and denominational affiliation.

The critical issue that still divides

These issues are important, but hardly critical. A lack of confidence in the denominational budget and a desire to sever affiliation would not have happened without a much deeper disagreement over the nature of biblical authority. This is the crucial issue that still divides the PCA and PCUSA.

The Bible and its authority

Both churches affirm that the Bible is God's Word. The PCA understands that the Bible is the divinely inspired written record of the authoritative teaching of Christ, His apostles and prophets. We believe that the Bible as originally written contains no errors in all that it affirms.

We believe that as we intelligently interpret what the human writers of the Bible meant, we understand the infallible revelation that God Himself gave to mankind about the truth we must affirm and the kind of life we should live. Contemporary experiences and human sciences can enhance our appreciation of the Scriptures, but they will never lead us to refute the Bible or re-interpret it away from the clear intent of the original, inspired authors. Elders and Deacons of the PCA are required to hold this view, and Teaching Elders (Pastors) are diligently examined on this subject before they are allowed to be ordained. Should they later change their views in this matter, they are not allowed to continue in leadership.

The PCUSA does not require such an exacting definition. Indeed, the PCUSA does not believe that the Bible's authority should be precisely defined by the denomination, but rather holds that its leaders have great liberty in the way they individually interpret biblical teaching and authority. This was vividly illustrated by an important public statement appearing in 1924 and signed by 1,274 Presbyterian ministers. The statement strenuously objected to the denomination's official support of any particular theories that defined biblical doctrine. The "theories" specifically in view at the time were: the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth of Christ, His experience of divine wrath on the cross in place of sinners, His bodily resurrection, and the supernatural character of His miracles. The signers of that affirmation did not deny those doctrines, but they firmly maintained that the denomination should not insist that its ministers believe or teach them. That point of view has persisted and grown in the PCUSA over the years.

The essential difference

It must be noted that the PCUSA does not, to my knowledge, officially deny any doctrine that is central to Christianity. In fact, there are excellent ministers within that denomination who understand and use the Bible as does the PCA, and do so most fervently.

The essential difference between the PCUSA and the PCA is that the PCA believes in a disciplined, enforced standard of biblical teaching, spelled out for clarification in the Westminster Confession of Faith. The PCUSA also recognizes the Westminster Confession as a part of its heritage, but has chosen to allow remarkable freedom among its leaders to approach biblical doctrine and biblical authority in whatever way each thinks best. Some in the PCUSA

understand the Scriptures as we do: inspired, historically accurate, objective truth – while others see them as inspirational myths in which a person may subjectively find “a truth which speaks to them”.

This will help explain the confusion often resulting from the media coverage of “presbyterian debates”. The PCUSA may on occasion have lengthy debates on issues of doctrine or behavior that we in the PCA consider to be quite clearly addressed in the Scriptures. They may entertain proposals that would be rejected out of hand in the PCA because we regard the original intent of the Bible as authoritative. Debates in the PCUSA may range more widely than ours since that denomination does not define biblical doctrine or affirm biblical authority in the same way we do.

Not just a matter of interpretation

It is very important to understand that what divides the PCA and the PCUSA is not simply differing interpretations of what the Bible says about this or that particular subject. The issue is really much deeper. Should the church (denomination) enforce among its officers the conviction that the Bible is itself the authoritative revelation of God and insist that they teach to the best of their ability what the biblical authors intended? Or should the church allow its leaders to pick and choose whatever biblical themes they think are still relevant, in practice giving more weight to whatever our society currently believes to be socially correct? Is Christ’s authority uniquely communicated through the Scriptures? Or is the evolving tradition of the church an equal or greater standard?

These two approaches to following Christ are so incompatible that it proved impossible to function as a single denomination. In fact, the PCA and the PCUSA have no formal relationship of any kind.

The PCA does, however, share much in common with several other groups, including the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (not to be confused with some local PCA congregations that have “Evangelical Presbyterian” as part of their names for historical reasons).

Of special importance to us is the family of PCA churches that have prospered in our area of northern Anne Arundel County: Annapolis E.P., Severna Park E.P., Glen Burnie E.P., Broadneck E.P. (in Arnold) and Severn Run E.P. (in Millersville). We are different congregations of the same denomination, seeking to express our common biblical commitment with diversity and creativity.

Let us in the PCA take great care to maintain our own biblical perspective, but let us also pray for our brethren in other Presbyterian branches and ask our Lord to perfect us all in our faith and life.



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