

June 27, 2016

To the congregation of City Reformed Presbyterian Church:

As Pastor Rob Gray mentioned in his sermon this past Sunday, the 44th General Assembly of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), took a somewhat historic action this past week. To put this into context, we are writing to give you some of the history of our denomination. This history involves sins that our denomination has since called "heinous" and has "condemned," but they are part of our past and require an honest look. We encourage our members not to draw a sharp line of separation between ourselves and our forefathers; but rather to ask ourselves how generational and corporate sins connect to us, and how they may still affect us in the present. This idea of confessing the sins of our forefathers "as a people" may seem strange to some. A spirit of individualism tends to reign in American and evangelical churches. However, as we proclaim every week when we practice corporate confession of sins, we are not just isolated individuals but connected to the Body of Christ, and in particular to our visible part of that Body, the PCA. Therefore there are sins that we share in by virtue of that union. In the Old Testament, God frequently talks of national and corporate sins such as idolatry, even though not every Israelite practiced idolatry.

The PCA was formed in 1973 and quickly grew throughout the 1970's and 1980's as a merger of several small Reformed denominations and a number of churches which had left the Presbyterian Church in the USA (the PCUSA, or "Northern" Presbyterian church) and the Presbyterian Church in the US (the PCUS, or "Southern" Presbyterian church) due to the theological liberalism which had begun to dominate those denominations by the 1960s. By far the largest number of churches which formed the initial core of the PCA were the Southern Presbyterian churches, and the PCA was called by many the "continuing" church of the PCUS. Our denomination is still very much centered in the South.

The PCUS, or Southern Presbyterian church, was a direct descendent of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA), which was formed in 1861 when the American Civil War started. The PCCSA directly affirmed racism at that time, saying in "A letter to all the churches of the world" such things as "we are profoundly persuaded that the African race in the midst of us can never be elevated in the scale of being. As long as that race, in its comparative degradation, co-exists side by side with the white, bondage is its normal condition."

At the 30th General Assembly of the PCA, in 2002, our denomination repented publicly of its "heinous sins" connected with "oppression, racism, exploitation, manstealing, and chattel slavery" in the 19th century. The statement read, in part,

"As a people, both we and our fathers, have failed to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the laws God has commanded. We therefore publicly repent of our pride, our complacency, and our complicity."

In the past year, many in our denomination felt that we should go further, to repent specifically of ongoing sins which continued well into the 20th century. After the Civil War, many churches in the

PCUS which arose out of the PCCSA were segregated by race and remained that way well into the 1960s. The 44th General Assembly (this year) specifically cited the sins of many churches in the PCUS of segregation of worshippers by race, not welcoming people of other races into churches, teaching that interracial marriage is forbidden or discouraged by the Bible, and participation of church members in white supremacist organizations.

The founding documents of the PCA in 1973 are remarkably free from racist language. This is in part due to the influence of Dr. Francis Schaeffer and others who persuaded those leaving other denominations to make the PCA stand for a positive vision, namely faithful proclamation of the Word and world evangelization, and not to be reactionary. Overt racism has not been tolerated in the PCA during its existence, and is subject to church discipline. In 1977, the PCA joined the organization of North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches (NAPARC) in issuing a statement against racism, which read in part,

"We are convinced that we, as Reformed Christians, have failed to speak and act boldly in the area of race relations. Our denominational profiles reveal patterns of ethnic and racial homogeneity. We believe that this situation fails to give adequate expression to the saving purposes of our sovereign God, whose covenant extends to all peoples and races. We are convinced that our record in this crucial area is one of racial brokenness and disobedience. In such a situation the credibility of our Reformed witness, piety and doctrinal confession is at stake...In repentance we acknowledge and confess that we have failed effectively to recognize the full humanity of other races and the similarity of their needs, desires, and hopes to ours; and thus we have failed to love our neighbor as ourselves."

However, some of the early leaders of the PCA in the 1970's were never directly confronted for their past racist statements. For example, one of the members of the initial organizing committee of the PCA in 1973 had written, only eight years earlier in 1965, "There are many false prophets of oneness, and many shallow stooges, who seek to force the amalgamation of the races," and the first moderator of the General Assembly of the PCA had written in 1964,

"As a matter of practical consideration in a culture that has been sharply segregated for so long, it seems the point of wisdom to keep a segregated pattern in the sanctuary when there is joint worship. The fact is that most Southern white congregations would be willing to have Negroes attend, if they were coming for true worship, and would be willing to sit together...Most Christians throughout the rest of the nation and world are shocked to hear that Negroes are turned away from white churches in the South. The ground for this is the assumption that the reason for the coming of the Negro to the church today is not to worship, but rather to integrate and prove a point. That this is the case is shown by the fact that when offered segregated seating in the church, the Negroes refuse it. They insist that they should be allowed to enter and sit where they please."

Although the PCA repudiated such thinking at least as early as 1977, there was, in effect, for the first 30 years of the PCA, an implicit agreement not to reopen old wounds.

Although many of us were not born then and/or did not belong to PCA or PCUS churches, we are all part of one church body and share in the guilt of these sins of omission and commission. Also, while most Northern churches did not practice official segregation, many members of Northern churches practiced bigotry and avoidance of other races and were not held accountable by others in the church, and such sins persist to this day. In addition to confessing sins of the Civil Rights era, the 44th General Assembly confessed continuing sins in the present. The Assembly set up a national study committee to look into issues on how to pursue racial reconciliation and to study where racial sins may still be occurring. The Assembly also encouraged local churches to examine themselves and consider how they can pursue racial reconciliation.

This has already been happening. A former pastor from the Pittsburgh area, who is now a pastor in a church in Alabama, told a story at the Assembly meeting of how he and his elders had opened the minutes of the church from past decades and found that the church had deliberately moved to exclude black members. To show their repentance, he publicly repented for his church at a meeting of black churches in his city on Martin Luther King Day, and then went to the City Council of his city and publicly repented to them as well. Their church is now pursuing multi-ethnic ministry. It was greatly encouraging to us at the General Assembly to see that many Southern pastors and churches are now leading the way on racial reconciliation and providing examples of specific and concrete repentance, and the many black pastors and elders in our denomination who were at the Assembly welcomed the resolution with rejoicing, forgiveness, and graciousness.

The language of the statement of the 44th General Assembly is that we “**recognize, confess, condemn, and repent of corporate and historical sins, including those committed during the Civil Rights era.**” This is the strongest possible language. Some members of our church may be dismayed to learn of the connection of our denomination to past racism. As a session, we feel that true repentance includes telling the truth without making excuses. But we encourage our members not to stand in judgment over others in the past who participated overtly or covertly in racism, viewing ourselves as separate from them, but rather to examine ourselves, recommit ourselves to racial reconciliation, and to acknowledge that we are corporately connected to those who have sinned, both by organizational unity and as members of the Body of Christ. On the positive side, we see this as an opportunity to witness to the world of the unifying work of the Spirit on the basis of the Gospel of grace. We ask that you pray for us as a session as we consider future steps to advance racial reconciliation in practical ways in our own community.

Sincerely,
Matt Koerber, teaching elder
Robert Gray, teaching elder
Andrew Alexander, ruling elder
Brad Chappell, ruling elder
James Partridge, ruling elder
David Snoke, ruling elder