



The PCA at 50: Essential Elements from the Past Will Guide the Future

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I had the great privilege of being among the delegates to the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which was formed 50 years ago at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama. This current anniversary celebration provides an opportunity to think back to our origins and consider how those origins might point us toward our future as the Presbyterian Church in America, one among many true churches of our Lord Jesus Christ worldwide.

Consider three essential elements of the PCA's past that will guide our future.

1. Bible

The PCA came into existence because its founders believed the Bible was “the only infallible rule” of what you are to believe and how you are to live. The Word of God alone is capable of creating among sinners a body

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of people that may be presented to Christ as a “pure virgin” (2 Cor. 11:2). Nothing else has the power to sanctify the church of the Lord Jesus Christ other than the Bible.

We have our secondary standards: the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. These beloved standards are essential to our life together. But let us never forget that our primary standard is the Bible and the Bible alone. If our church is ever to have peace and unity, it can only be achieved by the common commitment of all that are involved to a glad acceptance of what the Bible as the Word of God says.

We proud Presbyterians might benefit a little by humbling ourselves and learning from our Baptist brothers. Consider Billy Graham, the son of a North Carolina farmer, a good old Tar Heel. He was the counselor to five consecutive presidents of the United States. He preached to the Queen of England, and the rumor in England is that the queen was converted to true Christianity through his preaching. He lectured to the intellectuals at Oxford University. In one sermon, he preached to over a million people in Seoul, South Korea.

What was the trademark of the ministry of Billy Graham, our Baptist brother? If you ever heard him preach, you will never forget. Gesturing to an open Bible stretched forward to his hearers, he slashes the air with his hand and declares, “The *Bible* says!”

2. Confession

In the old denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), commonly known as the southern presbyterian church, persistent efforts were made to get rid of the Westminster Confession of Faith, or at least to water it down.

The PCA was born, in part, because we could not live in a denomination that no longer held to the Westminster Confession of Faith as its authoritative statement of what we believed.

The first General Assembly of the PCA adopted a message to the watching world. At the bottom of that statement, you will find 296 signatures of ruling and teaching elders. If you’re interested, you can find my signature in column two. But what is it that we wanted to communicate to the world by this statement?

We declare that we believe the system of doctrine found in the Word of God to be the system known as the Reformed faith. We are committed *without reservation* to the Reformed faith as set forth in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. (emphasis added)

Compare this statement of our faith to the beautiful wool sweater you bought while you were visiting Scotland. Your precious sweater has one

dangling thread that's come loose. Do you pull out that thread? No, you don't dare. The whole sweater has been skillfully knit together as a single whole. Pull out one thread and the whole thing unravels. The original founding fathers of the PCA adopted the entire Westminster Confession of Faith as the essence of what we believed. That's the meaning of "full subscription."

As the writer to the Hebrews says, "Hold fast [your] confession" (Heb. 4:14). It's the wholeness, the fullness, the entire system of doctrine that holds together. It's impossible to pull out one part without the whole thing unraveling.

3. Leadership

We who were in the old denomination had been burned by those who led us. We had been led astray in two places.

Permanent Committees

The General Assembly's Permanent Committee of Christian Education, for instance, had adopted the negatively critical views of the Old Testament. These views were saying Moses could not possibly have written the Pentateuch. Those first five books of the Bible couldn't possibly date back that far. Instead, they were saying, in the Pentateuch we have a record of the evolutionary development of Israel's religion across many generations. This view was called the JEDP hypothesis. Along with its subsequent modifications, it was totally destroying faith in the divine origin of the first five books of the Bible.

At the same time, the literature being provided for our young people who were growing up in the church said, in a sophisticated way, that Isaiah the prophet could not possibly have written the whole of the book that has his name. They were denying the possibility of predictive prophecy.

The Permanent Committee of Christian Education was leading our young people astray by the literature that was being put into the hands of teachers—good people who did not understand what was going on. They were denying the divine inspiration of the Bible, and they were leading the church astray.

When the PCA was being formed, the question was asked: How is the emerging PCA going to deal with this problem of permanent committees of the General Assembly leading the church astray? How are we going to be sure that we do not fall into the same trap as in the old PCUS?

In the end, the PCA did something that no other denomination had ever done before. “Committees of commissioners” were created to oversee the work of the permanent committees. In this manner, the presbyteries as courts of the church oversee the work of the committees through the ruling and teaching elders working as committees of commissioners.

The courts of the church, not the committees or the administrators, lead the church. The presbyteries, the sessions, and the General Assembly as courts of the church will determine the future of the church.

Let us not forget the wisdom of the founding fathers. A great deal of the ministry of the denomination hinges on the work of those permanent committees of the General Assembly. But let us remember that they have a responsibility to give account to the committees of commissioners every year. Let all sessions and presbyteries be sure they send their commissioners, that we might continue to be led by the courts of the church.

Seminaries

We in the old denomination, the southern presbyterian church, had been led astray by its seminaries. We had four seminaries, all sponsored by the General Assembly of the PCUS: Union Seminary in Virginia, Louisville Seminary in Kentucky, Columbia Seminary in Georgia, and Austin Seminary in Texas. Virtually all ministers of the PCUS received their

training in these four seminaries. Sad to say, despite their glorious heritage, all those seminaries eventually began leading the church astray.

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On one occasion, the presidents of the seminaries contributed to an article in a magazine that asked, “Do we have

an infallible Bible?” A very proper question to ask the leadership of seminaries. Each one of the presidents answered that question in basically the same way: “We do not have, nor do we need, an infallible Bible.” With this answer coming from the presidents of the four theological seminaries, it was clear: we were being led astray by the seminaries.

So how did the PCA respond? What would it do that was different? The PCA said from its beginning, *We will not restrict ourselves to denominational seminaries. We will affirm it's altogether appropriate for any court of the church to sponsor a seminary.* A session of a local congregation was regarded as an appropriate sponsor for a seminary. In addition, a group of individuals could form a board that would sponsor a seminary. This gave rise to a variety of biblically committed, Reformed seminaries that serve our denomination's ministers today.

All these “schools of the prophets” provide an invaluable service for the churches of the PCA. But let us be ever on guard to be sure that the Bible continues to be presented in each of these seminaries as the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice.

Aspiration for the Future

Paul says in writing to the Corinthians, “I promised you, even the Corinthian church, I've promised you to Christ as a pure virgin” (see 2 Cor. 11:2). Let this be our fondest aspiration for the future. Let us do everything necessary to present this church to Christ as an unspoiled virgin. He deserves no other.

The perfect Son of God and the perfected Bride for Christ are a perfect match.

Editors' note: This article was adapted from an address originally presented at the 50th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America.