

These two responses to the "Eight Elders" letter were posted at the [Presbyterian Outlook](#) site in response to their article on and reprinting of the letter.

Response from Mark R. Patterson, PhD, January 12, 2012

Ventura, CA (Mark is pastor of the Community Presbyterian Church in Ventura, CA)

While I am appreciate the heart of those writing this letter and their passion to keep the church united, this letter is problematic at several points. First, it holds that those considering "disaffiliating" or leaving have been blinded by "one-sided" arguments while those choosing to stay have the full, clear, and accurate picture. I challenge this as crass reductionism, impossible to prove, and actually false. My congregation has studied these issues for years, reading, listening, wrestling, and praying as we seek to discern what the Lord is doing and how we are to participate. To suggest that those considering leaving need to be "re-exposed" to the breadth of opinion in the PC (USA) lest they fall for utopian visions is presumptuous and insulting.

Second, this letter, like countless other expressions from the church, ignores the real issues. Many of us feel that the passing of 10A puts us in a place wherein we are forced to approve and participate in something the Scriptures condemn. To declare the hope to plant a 1001 new churches, that the director of the Foundation came from an Evangelical church, and that good things are indeed occurring is all fine and good. But it does not address the problem that is compelling nearly two thousand people to gather and discuss a new option. All these are fine and good but they do not address or change the problem we are facing. It merely changes the subject.

Third, this letter, again like countless other pronouncements from the church's leadership, boldly asserts that all this is the result of the Holy Spirit's presence and leading. But is this true? Some of us cannot understand how the Holy Spirit would lead the church into practices that contradict the Holy Spirit inspired Scriptures. And surely those writing this letter know from church history, that not all that a church does or believes is truly the work or fruit of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's leading was claimed for the crusades, the inquisition, indulgences, and the German Christian church under Hitler. I challenge the premise that the passing of 10A is the result of the Holy Spirit bringing us into a better, more godly future. And I am skeptical of our leaders' assertion in and after every event and change that it is the result of the Holy Spirit. And I reject in the strongest terms the antithesis that implies those of us troubled by the passing of 10a are not listening to or discerning the work and presence of the Holy Spirit.

I would ask these eight (and other leaders in the church) when they will quit producing "spin" and honestly address the concerns that are being increasingly voiced? When are our leaders going to honestly listen to those who are frustrated to the point of wanting to leave? Our moderator (one of the eight!) has voiced her intention to not attend the Orlando gathering, denouncing it as "schismatic." This is especially troubling when understood with the letter above. I would suggest that she and other leaders in the church be "re-exposed" to the to the "voices of fellow Presbyterians" and turn from the one-sided arguments that may be leading them to take a course filled with "perils" and "unintended consequences". It remains to be seen whether the leaders of the church will only continue to dismiss and even demean those so

troubled by current events they now consider leaving or whether they set aside the spin and denial and actually address the issues tearing us apart.

Response from Mark R. Patterson, PhD, January 15, 2012

First, thanks for publishing all responses received by the Outlook (save the faux Rolex ads!). This is good, right, and valued by us all. I wish the larger church was as amenable to open discussion.

Second, while I have no doubt that some congregations are not receiving the “whole” picture and even agree with the letter in its call to be “re-exposed” to the voices of other Presbyterians I think you missed my point. The letter from the eight is clearly addressing the evangelical wing in general and specifically those attending the Orlando Fellowship Gathering and/or considering leaving the PCUSA. Thus these words of advice are not addressed to the whole church or even both sides of the debate but only one part. This public letter is not a call for all to study, wrestle, and discuss the issues. Rather it singles out one part of the body, clearly suggests they are ill-informed and misguided, and urges they do better. I personally find this very troubling and hurtful. I believe others feel the same way. And it is confusing. I wonder why the leaders of the church continually see the need to correct, guide, and cajole the evangelicals while no such letters or statements go forth to the progressives. The letter from the eight is an excellent example. Another is the public letter sent out following the passing of 10a signed by every former moderator but one. I ask the eight, do you believe that only one side of the church needs to be “re-exposed to the voices of fellow Presbyterians”? If not, why did you only address one side in this letter? Even more, why is this the normative approach in the PCUSA?

Third, I understand that the substantive issues would have required “pages and pages.” But again, I think you misunderstand my critique. The letter from the eight leaders, like all other letters from our denominational leaders follows a certain form that has become standard—

- 1) Declaration of awareness: “We know the church is going through difficulties...”;
- 2) Expression of care: “We know many are troubled hurt, confused, etc., etc.”;
- 3) Correction/Rebuke: “But you need to be aware, understand, practice, etc. etc.”;
- 4) Change of Subject “God is doing great things in, though, among us proving we are healthy and pleasing to God”;
- 5) Holy Spirit Declaration. “This is the work of the Holy Spirit” “these are birth pangs of the Spirit creating a new church” etc., etc.

This pattern has become not only normative and oft seen it is also one-sided, directed always toward the evangelical side of the church. In the end and especially after so many such statements from church leaders you must see how such letters come across. They are demeaning, condescending, and insulting. Reading the responses to the letter posted on the Outlook web page and Facebook affirms my assessment. Good people who have long served the church with energy, imagination, and love are deeply troubled by this letter (and the many others like it all taking the same form and bearing a similar message).

Fourth, I agree with and appreciate your reminder that our church has always affirmed the good principle that councils error and not every decision, change, or act may be seen as the

work and sign of the Holy Spirit. But while we affirm this principle, it means little in practice. Our leaders are quick to claim the presence and leading of the Holy Spirit in every decision and change that takes place. And I challenge this. The passing of PUP, NFOG, 10a, last summer's PJC decisions, the ordination of Scot Anderson, and numerous other acts and changes have all been declared to be acts of the Holy Spirit by leaders in the church. Again, I challenge this and believe it untrue. But my main point is simply this: the way this principle works in practice is profoundly one sided. Our leaders declare the Spirit's presence and leading behind every progressive victory and perspective while suggesting the perspectives and desires of evangelicals is contrary to the will and work of the Spirit. This has been done in the past. It was done again in the letter from eight leaders. Those presenting such statements must understand that repeated affirmation of the Holy Spirit's work and will in such events as those listed above, while suggesting the opposite is true of the Orlando Fellowship is deeply problematic and divisive. The letter from the eight, far from bridging the gap and bringing the church together has only served to reveal the depth of its divide. And deepen it.

Finally, I disagree with your perspective that our division is more the result of misperceptions than real or significant differences. The passing of 10a requires me to affirm and participate in (if only tacitly at this point) acts and perspectives that I believe defy and reject Scripture. The Covenant Network's recent guidelines on examination not only show such concerns are justified they also reveal clearly where the church is heading. We are not talking about raising our hands in worship or choosing to kneel in reverence. We are not talking about organ verses guitars or sprinkling verses immersion. We are talking about the authority of Scripture and how these words are to be understood and rightly applied in the reality of our faith and life. And our church is deeply divided over this issue. We are talking about the singularity of Jesus as the only Word of God and Saviour. And our church is deeply divided over this issue. We are talking about theological truths long held and now abandoned, of ethical perspectives long extolled now rejected. We are talking about the beliefs, values, and practices at the heart of our church. And we are not remotely agreed on what they are, what they mean, how they are to be expressed and lived and ultimately, whether they even exist. These (and others that might be listed) are not misperceptions but real and arguably irreconcilable differences.

After 33 years of ministry (25 years of it ordained) and 53 years in the Presbyterian Church, I find that its decades long course combine with recent decisions, acts, and statements to render it impossible I continue in a body that acts, lives, and believes as it now does. Sadly the letter from the eight only served to re-affirm this. Our moderator's declaring the Orlando gathering as "schismatic" (and thus not a work of the Holy Spirit!), the vice-moderator's censorship of a denominational webpage/blog, and countless other events make it clear to me that the best and most faithful thing I can do is to be a part of building something new and different. This decision is neither easily nor quickly made. Nevertheless I am compelled to take this step as the PCUSA relentlessly strives to take up a faith and practice very different than the one I vowed to uphold and serve and worse, as it demands my affirmation and participation. All this makes it profoundly clear to me that it is time to create something new. I sense the Holy Spirit leading me to Orlando and the work of God that will occur there.