

Hope for the PC(USA)? Perception Is Not Reality

From [The Personal Blog of Mateen Elass](#) (used with permission)

Yesterday, 8 Presbyterian elders of various persuasions issued a joint letter to the many thousands of disaffected Presbyterians presently contemplating leaving the PCUSA. The letter was a plea not to leave, saying in essence that things are not as bad as you think, that perception is not reality, that there is much going on to stir hope that God is rebirthing this denomination. I felt this letter deserved a response, as one of those apparently misguided, disaffected members to whom it was addressed. There is too much to cover in one reasonably-sized post, so I will offer installment one today, and post the remainder tomorrow.

Though the authors completely skirt the profound issues tearing about our denomination, they do acknowledge that we are undergoing “complex changes.” They want the disaffected to know that they love us, and want to continue to serve Christ together side by side — as long as we remain in this denomination.

I am grateful for these stated affections, but find it hard to receive love that is delivered with such a patronizing approach. I’m sure the authors aren’t even aware of this, but the overarching message that *“Your perceptions of what is going on in our denomination is not at all on target”* discounts our years of experience, struggle and efforts to undo the damage done in the name of “progress” to a once great denomination. They, of course, see the reality; we are awash in false perceptions.

This is seen even in the choice of words to describe how both sides of the debate have responded to the changes in ordination standards and in the revised Form of Government. For those in favor of these, the departures from the past **are** a welcome change. For those opposed, they **feel** like a betrayal. Notice the subtle differentiation which discounts our position. The changes are indeed a good thing, though they may feel to us right now like a betrayal. But one day, these enlightened elders hope, our wounded feelings will pass as we too discover how wonderful these developments really are.

I would like to respond to the claim of the authors that with regard to the health of the PCUSA, “perception is not reality” — that if we only knew the facts, we would join them in tiptoeing through the tulips into a bright, new springtime of hope. Here are some purported evidences to support their view of reality, and my counter observations:

1) “The PC(USA) is deeply missional.” Why? Because a) the 2010 GA reaffirmed the 2008 GA’s call to “Grow Christ’s Church Deep and Wide”; b) the 2012 GA will take up the vision to plant 1001 new worshipping communities in the next 10 years; c) there are now some evangelically-minded leaders at the GA offices level who have dreams of how to equip Presbyterians to turn things around; d) Tom Taylor (formerly an evangelical pastor, now president of the Presbyterian Foundation) “...often affirms, *‘Planting and growing congregations, proclaiming the gospel effectively, building up the church – these are at the core of who we are as Presbyterians.’*”

This is slim evidence for such a bold claim — that our denomination is deeply missional! As a Texan might say concerning a drugstore cowboy's claim to be a successful rancher, "All hat and no cattle." The 2008 GA launched a glitzy campaign to grow the PCUSA deep and wide. How successful was it? The fact that the 2010 GA had to reaffirm this commitment should give us some clue. The GA offices have come out with another plan, one based more on marketing hype than on substance, in my opinion, to create 1001 new "worshiping communities" in 10 years. It's a lofty goal, to be sure. But what constitutes a "new worshiping community"? How long will they stay in existence? What will make them "Presbyterian"? What resources will be mustered for this effort? What motivation in the present church is there to take up this challenge?

It's true that because of significant unrest and refusal of the evangelical wing of the church to financially support the liberal agenda of the GA offices over the last decade, concessions have had to be made by the liberal leadership— the office staff has been downsized and restructured a number of times, bringing in leaders more responsive to evangelical concerns. But after 30 years of liberals at the helm, with our denomination lying on the operating table in danger of bleeding out, is this not too little, too late? The quotation from Tom Taylor (whom I like and respect personally), while nice-sounding, is in reality laughable. What he says was once true of Presbyterians (close to a century and more ago), but it in no recognizable manner reflects the core of who we are as the PCUSA now or in recent memory.

Let's look at some statistics to back up my realism: over the last decade, according to denominational statistics, the PCUSA has **lost 20% of its official membership**. From the 6 years of 1999-2004, our average rate of loss was 1.5% of our total membership annually. For the last 6 years (2005-2010), that rate has jumped to 2.6%. That means over the last 6 years we have lost members at a 73% faster rate than over the 6 earlier years. You may remember that in 2005, the Peace, Unity and Purity report, adopted by the 2006 GA, was made public. To say that we have been "building up the church, growing congregations and proclaiming the gospel effectively" is to blind oneself to the data. We have been trending from bad to worse.

As for planting new churches in the midst of closing or losing existing ones, here are the facts for the period from 1999-2010. The PCUSA was made up of 11,216 congregations in 1999. Over the last 12 years, we have established 248 new congregations, averaging a little over 20 per year. In the past we used to receive at least some congregations from other denominations or from independent status that wished to transfer in. In the last 6 years, that has dwindled down to an average of around 1 per year (these represent mostly Korean congregations wishing to affiliate with the "mother church.") Of course in the last 12 years we have also lost churches either to institutional death, merger or dismissal. This number totals 1099, an average of roughly 91.6 per year. We now stand (2010 figures) at 10560 congregations, a total net loss over the last 12 years of 656 churches.

So, how are we doing at growing the church deep and wide? Pretty miserably, when we look at the facts. If one were to compare our statistical trends to those of countries and their emigration rates vs. their immigration rates, I'm afraid we would mirror countries like Iran and

North Korea (where people are straining to leave) more than the United States or England (where people are straining to get in). Yet this letter tells us that we have always been missional, that this is at the core of our being as a denomination, and that great things are happening. My response to the authors: your perception is not reality.

Part 2

Yesterday I began a response to an open letter from “the Chicago eight” concerning the future status of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The authors’ claim is that the future of our denomination is bursting with hope, and that we disaffected evangelicals are just blind at the moment — our perception is not reality. Today’s blog is my concluding response to that open letter.

2) Halfway through, after attempting fruitlessly (see yesterday’s blog) to show how deeply missional the PCUSA is, the letter claims, *“The PC(USA) simply has not turned its back on proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”* Yet the very fact that the writers felt the need to make this declaration shows the sad state of our denomination. Who in a healthy denomination would feel the need to defend their institution from the charge that the institution has turned its back on proclaiming Christ as Lord and Savior? Why would such a charge ever be leveled at a church that is faithfully following Christ? Only if the charges have some *prima facie* support would one even tackle the question. How sad that the authors at least implicitly recognize there is enough evidence against our institutional faithfulness to feel they have to come to its defense. Yet what they offer as a defense is worse than flimsy.

3) This letter urges those in congregations contemplating departure to *“...insist that your leaders re-expose you to the voices of fellow Presbyterians who are resolute in their intentions to stay. Do not allow one-sided presentations to be all you consider as you seek to discern God’s call to you and your congregation.”* Yet earlier, the authors said, *“We know that those contemplating the possibility of leaving are bathing the decision in prayer, and are genuinely seeking to discern God’s will in this.”* Is God not capable of speaking clearly to those genuinely seeking His will, who are “bathing” their questions in prayer? What makes the Chicago eight assume that evangelical leaders are unfair and one-sided in their presentations to their flock of these profound issues? Why were there no similar calls to the liberal wing of the church in its single-minded and blindly one-sided push to divide the PCUSA by ramrodding a change in ordination standards? I am offended by the implication in this paragraph that those committed to staying in the PCUSA are truly following God’s will, and those contemplating leaving are in danger of missing it.

It would seem to me that if the Chicago eight were wholly committed to seeing God’s will followed, they would equally urge those congregations that are not presently considering leaving to call on their leaders to expose them to those in the church who are resolute in their intentions to leave, so that they are not limited by one-sided determinations to stay. The implications from the words of this letter are clear: staying is right; leaving is wrong.

4) We are further warned not to be tempted by greener grass elsewhere because: a) such grass has its own problems; b) our grass may be regenerating in ways we haven't seen; c) the process of jumping the fence brings heretofore unknown perils. Beware the law of unintended consequences, and remember to count the cost before taking action (after all, we are reminded, Jesus gave us this piece of wisdom).

It is certainly true that the grass isn't always greener on the other side. However, often enough it is, and that is why grazing animals seek to leave their over-grazed or otherwise unhealthy confines. In point of fact, having served in the EPC denomination for 7 years before re-entering the PCUSA in response to God's call, I can affirm that the grass really is greener for evangelicals in that fold than it is in the PCUSA. It suffers from none of the problems that plague our desolate pastures. Certainly there are issues being debated in the EPC, but none of them deals with keeping or jettisoning orthodoxy. We are told that PCUSA grass may be regenerating in ways we have not noticed. Of course, if this is true it's a tautology. If there is regeneration going on, we are unaware of it because we haven't noticed it. This letter, however, does nothing to instill any faith in the notion that PCUSA grass is getting greener anywhere. The most likely explanation for our not noticing any significant regeneration is that nothing significant is happening. Indeed, overtures to this coming GA make it clear that liberals are seeking to spray the remaining grass with Roundup. As to the warning that seeking to jump the fence brings unforeseen perils, many of those leaving have indeed discovered this. The perils relate almost wholly to our denominational machinery doing all in its power to penalize or inflict economic and ecclesiastical harm upon those leaving. I've not heard of any congregations, who having left the PCUSA in the past are now saying, "We sure wish we had stayed." Perhaps there are some, but they must be in the tiny minority. If the authors of this letter are really concerned about the perils facing those contemplating departure (I am thinking specifically of our GA moderator and vice-moderator), I can tell them how they, out of the deep love they profess, could quickly eradicate the bulk of the perils involved in leaping the fence: TAKE DOWN THE FENCE. Why not allow free and unhindered departures for those who believe God is calling them to go? In our local churches we allow any member to move to another congregation without putting up barriers or demanding some payment before releasing him/her. The attitude our larger leadership has had toward churches wishing to shift membership reminds me of repressive regimes that have built border walls not to keep out illegal immigrants but rather to keep in citizens seeking freedom or opportunity elsewhere. All the feeble arguments to justify such draconian behavior fall far short of the law of love to which God calls us all, and sully the name of Christ. Lastly, we are called to beware the law of unintended consequences. This is a good reminder. Would that all the proponents of homosexual ordination and a new form of government had been given this warning and heeded it! We would not now be facing what brings such worry to the Chicago eight. Yet perhaps the consequences our denomination is now reaping were not unexpected or even unintended by the liberal wing. That is between them and God. But as the Scriptures remind us, "We reap what we sow." The authors of this letter also quote Scripture, reminding us of Jesus' words to count the cost. Though they apparently do not realize it, this is exactly what many of us have been doing, leading to the painful conclusion that to remain in the

denomination we have poured our hearts and labors into and thereby lose fellowship with Jesus through disobedience is too high a price to pay.

5) Lastly, these authors tell us confidently that the “season of change” we are experiencing now is simply “...*the birthpangs of a new church as it is being reformed by the Holy Spirit.*” I am astounded by what appears to me to be brazen folly. Our denomination, like other mainlines that have trodden this path before us, is being torn asunder as faithful Christians leave in droves, and these interpreters tell us these wrenching pains are merely birthpangs caused by the Holy Spirit’s reforming work. To many of us, these convulsions are signs of death throes, not birth pangs, and they are due not to reformation caused by following the Spirit, but to conformation caused by following a bankrupt culture. While liberals seem eager to wheel the PCUSA to the obstetrics ward to behold a new birth, we see lying in an ICU bed a beloved denomination whose life is ebbing away from decades of addiction to deadly practices. Time will tell whose diagnosis is correct. But the fact that the Holy Spirit has never led the Church to embrace moral and theological positions in opposition to the Word before should offer some clues.

We are told that “*reformation is strengthened by reinvesting ourselves and all of our congregations....*” But my question is, “Reinvesting in what? In a denomination that is deaf to the leading of the Spirit, and hellbent on pursuing the life of the flesh? To what end? If our leadership showed any degree of repentance and remorse for leading the PCUSA to the brink of destruction, and called on evangelicals to join in reversing direction to regain our biblical footing, I would be among the front lines of response — which I’m sure would be huge. Sadly, however, our liberal leadership seems content in its error. This letter is just one more sign of deluded hubris.

Lastly, the letter acknowledges that “...*the Church of Jesus Christ is facing a complex, turbulent time,*” but that these eight elders together “...*share a genuine hope for the future of the PC(USA).*” I wish I could be so sanguine about our future. But where the church ought to experience turbulence is on the border where her life and influence clashes with that of the world, not in the middle of her heartland where peace, unity and purity ought to reign. The turbulence we see is in the core of our institution, and when the infection causing this distress has so deeply invaded our vital organs, there is not much cause for hope. With no other positive evidence, the Chicago eight tell us they are confident their hopes are sure because they are based on the resurrection of Christ. But I would remind them that a rebellious Israel was confident that God would protect her from captivity or worse, even when she refused the calls of prophets to repent. She was wrong. A denomination that thumbs its nose at God may speak confidently of Christ’s resurrection power, but if we retain any memory of our Scripture we should not be surprised when it reaches out its hand before slipping under the waves of oblivion only to discover that the nail-pierced hand of the Savior is not there to save it.

My prayer is that these eight will listen to their own words — *Perception is not reality* — and see what the vast majority of Christians in this denomination and around the world see so clearly. Should that happen, my hope for the PC(USA) will flicker to life.