

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
The 5th Sunday in the Season of Thanksgiving
November 6, 2022

Exodus 3:7–12, 4:10–13, John 3:16–17
“With Confidence and Energy” by Rev. Sue Trigger

I have a letter to share with you this morning that comes from the General Council of the Presbyterian Church. It begins, “Dear Fellow Presbyterians, ...The General Assembly has made the following pronouncement for the guidance of all Presbyterians: “All human life should be lived in accordance with the principles established by God for the life of humankind and of nations. This is a tenet of Biblical religion. It is also a basic emphasis in our Presbyterian heritage of faith.

As individuals and as a group, Christians are responsible for adjusting their thought and behavior to those everlasting principles which God has revealed in Holy Scripture. It is no less their responsibility as citizens of their nation, to seek, as far as their influence will extend, to bring national life and all institutions of society into conformity with the moral government of God, and into harmony with the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Things are happening in our national life and in the international sphere which should give us deep concern. Serious thought needs to be given to the world today and to the undoubted aim on the part of leaders to subvert the thought and life of the United States. The structure of American society is in imminent peril of being shattered by a satanic conspiracy, dangerous developments are taking place in our national life. Favored by an atmosphere of intense disquiet and suspicion, a subtle but potent assault upon basic human rights is now in progress. Treason and dissent are being confused. The shrine of conscience and private judgment, which God alone has a right to enter, is being invaded. Un-American attitudes toward ideas and books are becoming current. Attacks are being made upon citizens of integrity and social passion which are utterly alien to our democratic tradition. They are particularly alien to the Protestant religious tradition which has been a main source of the freedoms which the people of the United States enjoy.

We suggest, therefore, that all Presbyterians give earnest consideration to the following of three basic principles and their implications for our thought and life.

1. The Christian Church has a prophetic function to fulfill in every society and in every age. Whatever concerns humankind and their welfare is a concern of the Church and its ministers. Religion has to do with life in its wholeness. It is, therefore, under obligation to consider the life of humanity in the light of God's purpose in Christ for the world.

While it is not the role of the Christian church to present blueprints for the organization of society and the conduct of government, the Church owes it to its own members and to humankind in general, to draw attention to violations of those spiritual bases of human relationship which have been established by God. It has the obligation to proclaim those principles, and to instill that spirit, which are essential for social health, and form the indispensable foundation of sound and stable policies in the affairs of state.

2. The majesty of truth must be preserved at all times and at all costs. Loyalty to truth is the common basis of true religion and true culture. Despite the lofty idealism of many of our national leaders, truth is being subtly and silently dethroned by prominent public figures. ...falsehood is frequently preferred to fact if can be shown to have greater propaganda value. In the interests of propaganda, truth is deliberately distorted and remains unspoken. Truth is thus a captive in the land of the free.
3. God's sovereign rule is the controlling factor in history. We speak of "This nation under God." Nothing is needed more today than to explore afresh, and to apply to all the problems of thought and life in our generation, what it means to take God seriously in national life. There is an order of God. Even in these days of flux, God reigns."

Does anyone want to take a stab at when the letter was written? It sounds like something that could have been written today, doesn't it? The letter was written in 1953. Many of us here today were not yet born or were at least quite young when it was written. The issue at the time was a fear of Communism. I took the liberty of updating the language of man and mankind to read humanity and humankind. If you'd like to read the full, unedited letter, we printed a few copies

that you can take home. If you are at home and would like a copy, send us an email and we'll send it to you.

I shared this letter with you this morning because I want to address the issue of politics and the church. It is an issue that has become a source of tension in American Christianity. There is confusion about the role of the church in political issues that has caused some deep conflict in some congregations. There has been some of that in the history of GCPC. The best way to help resolve confusion and conflict is to shine light on it. So, at this time of year when we remember and give thanks for our Reformed and Presbyterian heritage, and with an election just days away, I invite you to think with me about some Presbyterian history and theology.

In the letter I just shared, the first point says: "The Christian Church has a prophetic function to fulfill in every society and in every age. Whatever concerns humankind and their welfare is a concern of the Church and its ministers." This is a basic principle that was emphasized by our founder, John Calvin. He upheld the biblical understanding that all of life is lived in the presence of God, and it is our responsibility to care for the welfare of all humankind. You'll find that principle in the first two chapters of Genesis. Among other things, this means that both rulers and their subjects are accountable to God. It means that religious beliefs have public consequences. "The religious reform, that was born during the Reformation, was meant to lead to social, political, and economic reform. And all of this was to be pursued for the glory of God."ⁱ

One of the things I really appreciated about our years in the NE was the opportunity to learn about the history of the United States in a tangible way. The church we served in New Jersey was chartered in 1758 and was on the frequently traveled route from New York City to Philadelphia. You could think of it as a political trade route. There were members of the congregation who were military leaders. The story goes that George Washington attended worship there. After the service, he stood on the church lawn and recruited soldiers, then he headed up the hill to the iron mine to order cannon balls. The church was as a congregation of people who participated in plotting and planning the revolution against the tyranny of Great Britain. Throughout the colonies

pastors were actively involved in preaching and teaching a vision of justice and independence from an oppressive government. In many ways, the revolution was a holy war.

Ambrose Serle, secretary to British General Howe in New York City, wrote to the British Secretary of State in 1776 telling him that the American Revolution was ultimately a *religious war*. Serle boldly asserted that the revolution could not be sustained in America if it were not for the Presbyterian ministers who bred it. He lamented the fact that almost every minister in America doubled as a politician. Most significantly, he echoed a chant by loyalists throughout America, namely, that at the bottom of the conflict was the Presbyterians' desire to gain "the Establishment of their own Party." In other words, he claimed that the war was fueled by the Presbyterians' desire to establish their religion as the official church of the new American government. King George, after hearing these reports, named the revolution "The Presbyterian Rebellion."

There is a lot of truth in what the secretary reported, but one thing he got wrong, and it's important for our understanding today. The Presbyterians did not want to establish Presbyterianism as the official church of a new nation. Many of them were in the new colonies partly because they wanted to be free of a state church. What the Presbyterians wanted was a democracy where people could freely practice their faith, no matter what religion they practiced without having to fear government intrusion. No state mandated religion.

The influence of Presbyterians in the drafting of our constitution is undeniable. James Madison, the man who wrote the Constitution, was a Presbyterian. He had a pew with his name on it. (literally) He attended the College of New Jersey. (which is known as Princeton University, home of the oldest Presbyterian Seminary, today and has deep Presbyterian roots.) He studied under the Rev. John Witherspoon. Madison studied theology and considered becoming a Presbyterian minister; instead, he became a political theorist and one of the most influential founding fathers. If you've ever noticed parallels between our Presbyterian polity and our national government, there might be a reason for it. You've surely heard of the three branches of government, teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons. Concepts like the balance of power and checks and balances

are principles shared by Presbyterians who had an understanding of democracy that obviously appealed to the founders. This is just one of the Presbyterian stories of political engagement. It wouldn't be wrong to say that political engagement in is the DNA of Presbyterianism.

For us, as American Presbyterians, we often struggle with politics in church because we understand that the separation of church and state is constitutional. That has become understood as a reason why churches shouldn't address anything that the government is involved in; but that is a recent development. The Rev. Jimmie Hawkins, Director of the Office of Public Witness of the PCUSA addressed this in an article called, "Why Are Presbyterians Sticking Their Noses in Politics?" "We are speaking out following the mandate we have received from Jesus and from Scripture," Hawkins says. "You cannot read Scripture and not talk about justice. It's throughout the pages. As a matter of fact, the second book of the Bible, the Book of Exodus, is about deliverance from slavery and how God intervened to set right that which is wrong." He continues, "I think people have a real misperception of what it means to be a person of faith, especially in this American context we're in. People talk about separation of church and state and think that means there's no engagement. That's not what it means. Actually, it's to protect our rights as people of faith so the government can't dictate to us what to believe and how we are to do it. But it does not say we cannot be involved."ⁱⁱ

Hawkins then cites the Johnson Amendment, 1954 legislation introduced by Lyndon B. Johnson, which said nonprofit organizations, including churches, could not endorse or oppose political candidates. But that, Hawkins notes, is where it ends. No endorsements, and no financial contributions to or from politicians.

The Rev. Christian Brooks, Representative for Domestic Poverty Issues and co-founder of the Presbyterian Voting Campaign explains further. "As we look throughout the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament, we see Jesus talking about how you have some people being greedy and taking advantage of women, taking advantage of the poor and how that wasn't right." "As we're *still* talking through those issues, we have to talk about the effects of that, the effects of taking advantage of the poor, taking advantage of marginalized communities, which includes

things like food insecurity and homelessness. Also, as we are in community with folks we have to speak to the issues that they live with.

“I can’t say to my neighbor, ‘I love you, you’re hungry, but I’m not saying anything about the fact that you’re hungry,’ ‘I’m not addressing the root causes of why you’re hungry. I’m not speaking out against the policies that are putting you in the position to be hungry.’”

Brooks explains, “One part of the reason people sometimes don’t understand why Presbyterian leaders speak out on political issues is that mainstream evangelical Christianity in the United States emphasizes a message of personal salvation that some think should be the sole focus of ministry.

“If you claim yourself as a Christian, it’s not just preaching that everybody needs to be saved.” says the Rev. Lee Catoe, Managing Editor of Unbound and Associate for Young Adult Social Witness of the PCUSA.

Yesterday Mitch and I attended anti-racism training through the Presbytery. The training focused on the history and impact on the native Americans of the colonization of America. As we were reflecting on the presentation with our colleagues, Mitch said something very important. He said, “One of the problems we have today in the church is that people label anything to do with social justice as being political.”

Social justice in the PCUSA is founded on this principle: all of life is lived in the presence of God, and we are responsible as citizens of our nation, to seek, as far as our influence will extend, to bring national life and all institutions of society, into conformity with the moral government of God. The difficulty is always how to interpret what God’s moral government looks like. The letter makes it clear that it is not our mission to provide a blueprint for the government. It is not our mission to impose our beliefs on the nation. It is our mission to work for justice; to uphold the human rights of all people. It is our mission to use our influence as far as it will extend, to ensure that there is liberty and justice for all.

So, if you hear that your pastors want to make the church more political, that's not the case. As Presbyterians, that would be a pretty hefty task. If you hear that your pastors are preaching liberal politics and conservative views are not welcome, that's not the case. In fact, quite the opposite, it takes a variety of voices working together to be able to best discern issues of justice. If you feel that issues are being addressed in the pulpit more than in the past, it might be because of the moment in history we are living in, or it might be a lapse in memory of what has been preached. But this you can count on: we will never preach partisan politics, but we will explore issues. That is our responsibility as preachers of God's message. We will look at what the PCUSA is saying about justice issues so that you are aware of what our siblings (ministers and elders) are discerning. It will be up to you to decide what leaders best represent your beliefs. We will not tell you what party you should support of or how you should vote; we will not advocate for a candidate. When an issue is addressed in the pulpit, there will be biblical teaching grounded in the Reformed tradition. It will be presented with the goal of seeking to be faithful to Jesus, who is the head of the Church, not the king. If you ever question something we say or feel uncomfortable with something we say, please feel free to visit with us. That's one way we can work for justice for all. To do otherwise, or to choose to stand in opposition can harm to the community.

I hope this helps you understand a bit more about who we are as a PCUSA congregation and who Mitch and I are as Presbyterian pastors. May God bless us with guidance and wisdom as we do this work together.

ⁱ Johnson, William Stacy, "John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century"

ⁱⁱ Copley, Richard, **Why are Presbyterians Sticking Their Noses in Politics?** <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/why-are-presbyterians-sticking-their-noses-in-politics/>?, Presbyterian News Service, October 9, 2020.