

# Grace Presbyterian Church of Hanover, Pennsylvania

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A congregation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church  
Dr. Jeffery A. Sheely, Pastor

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Brethren,

Please bear with me as I seek to explain some of the thinking behind our session's resolution and the manner of its publication, by answering some of the objections raised here and elsewhere. (I should add that we have received more communications of support than of criticism, though I am sorry to say that most of the supportive ones have been private rather than public.)

**1.) The most frequent objection is that the John Kinnaird case is over, this matter is settled, the General Assembly has spoken, and there is nothing more to do without acting against the authority of the Assembly.**

On the contrary, the situation is decidedly unsettled, and we do not act without a proper basis. The 70th General Assembly said, "The Session and Presbytery erred in finding the Appellant's teaching to be contrary to the Church's Standards." These teachings are in conflict with Gospel doctrines of justification and sanctification. Despite this, the General Assembly did not require the appellant to make any formal correction to his teachings which were the evidence cited in the specifications of the case. By this action (and inaction) the General Assembly left standing, with its implicit approval, the teachings cited in support of the charge and specifications.

Our Form of Government, chapter XV, paragraph 8, states: "Deliverances, resolutions, overtures, and other actions which have the effect of amending or adding to the subordinate standards shall not be binding unless they have been approved by the general assembly and presbyteries in the manner provided in this Form of Government for the amendment of the constitution." Therefore, we believe that this action, which is contrary to the Scripture and our secondary standards on a fundamental of the Gospel, even though it is not constitutionally binding, has created such an unsettled situation for the Church that it must be corrected for the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

**2.) Some have suggested that we should not have gone public with this, or that we have acted in an un-presbyterian manner in the way we have done it.**

This matter is already public. The course of the Kinnaird case, and documents associated with it, have been public for some time. The actions of the session of Bethany church, the Presbytery of Philadelphia, and the 70th General Assembly were all public actions. The doctrines involved have been matters of public discussion for a long time. Much has been written on both sides. Some who openly wish to abandon historic Protestant Gospel doctrines of justification and sanctification have cited the outcome of the Kinnaird case as a vindication of their views. Others think that we can straddle the fence and declare two sets of doctrines to be within the pale of our secondary standards. We live in a time when intolerance is often the only intolerable thing, and

there is discomfort with absolutes even in the Church. But we believe there are Scriptural absolutes at the heart of this issue, and have added our resolution to that public discourse.

Such public discourse is hardly without precedent, even among Presbyterians, and even regarding issues that are before presbyteries and general assemblies. Students of our church's history may recall that Dr. Machen and others carried the debate of his own time into the editorial pages of the New York Times, which were in some ways the 1920s equivalent of a 21st-century Internet forum. Interestingly, since the publication of our session's resolution we have heard from some elders and lay persons who tell us that either this is the first they have heard of the current problem, or if they had heard of it, the seriousness of the issue was played down by those having the rule over them. I believe that the first state of affairs is dangerous, and the second state of affairs is perhaps something worse. But these states of affairs are not unlike those of Machen's day. One of the reasons Machen went public was to awaken conservatives within mainline Presbyterianism to the dangers of their time. They were not hearing about those dangers from pulpit or session. By God's mercy his writings had that awakening effect among some. We do the same, and pray for the same. Once this happens, further actions such as corrective overtures will be possible. Finally, we must put all this in proper perspective. The surrounding issues are different now than they were in the 20s and 30s. But the root issue was the same then as now - the Biblical definition of who is and is not a Christian, what is and is not the Gospel.

### **3.) Some brethren tell us that we have no right or reason to withhold financial support over this issue.**

We believe that we have such a right and responsibility. First of all, the OPC imposes no mandatory 'head tax' or other fees on its membership. Financial support is strictly voluntary, according to the purposes of the heart.

Secondly, as a result of the General Assembly's action there is in fact a real question as to our denomination's stand concerning the Gospel. Two disparate views of the heart of the gospel - justification - now bear the stamp of approval of the OPC. And we now hear and see a view that diverges from the true Gospel being defended by men of pulpits, sessions, and the mission field. This knowledge bears hard upon our conscience. This is about the Gospel, not psalmody or some other lesser issue where brethren may Biblically disagree.

Thirdly, there is precedent for our action, within the events that led to the founding of our own denomination. Men and churches found themselves no longer able, in good conscience, to support a denominational agency. They formed one that would be true to the Gospel, and directed their support to it. That action became the basis for the high-handed disciplinary actions against some of them. Students of our history may recall that the statement was made in a committee report of that time, that "offerings to the denomination were as much an obligation as the celebration of the Lord's Supper."

We do not seek to establish independent agencies or divert our support elsewhere. Far from it. We pray for the day when we may in good conscience cease withholding funds - the day when our denomination eliminates any question as to its stand for the one true Gospel of Christ.

### **4.) Some brethren object that we are disturbing the peace of the church.**

We are not. The peace of the church has already been disturbed, by actions already taken. We seek to restore peace and unity - but not a false peace and unity established at the price of the Gospel. Let us not be like the prophets the Lord spoke against in Jeremiah 6:14: "They have also healed the hurt of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace!' When there is no peace." In

verse 16 the Lord says, "Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls."

**5.) Some brethren object that we are disturbing the purity of the church.**

On the contrary, the purity of the church has already been disturbed, and we seek the Lord's mercy to restore it. But the purity of which Scripture speaks, in Ephesians chapter 4 and elsewhere, is a purity based on sound doctrine concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ.

**6.) Some brethren object that we are disturbing the unity of the church.**

On the contrary, the unity of the church has already been disturbed, and we seek the Lord's mercy to restore it. But the unity that is restored must be "the unity of the faith" centered in the person, work, and headship of Christ, of which Paul speaks in Ephesians chapter four. It cannot be an artificial unity on some other basis.

Brethren, I pray that the Lord would open eyes to see that we confront, as Rev. John P. Galbraith has put it, the greatest crisis in the history of our Church. Having attended every general assembly of our Church from the beginning, he of all men has the right to make such a statement. May the Lord be merciful to His Church, and restore unmixed fidelity to the true Gospel doctrine of justification by faith alone, apart from works.

Sincerely in Christ,

Paul M. Elliott  
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