

Summer 2005 Pastoral Letter

August 2005

Dear Trinity Presbyterian Church family,

Greetings in the name of Christ! The purpose of this pastoral letter is to help us all take stock of the Lord's work among us over the last year or so. This has been a time of dramatic change and growth, and it's helpful for us to reflect on these things, even as we look ahead to what may come next. We have so much to be thankful for, so much to rejoice in, and so much to plan for in the future.

About a year ago, God began to set in motion the process that would bring me to pastor the congregation that was then known as Reformed Heritage Presbyterian Church. That whole process ended up entailing a change in our denominational affiliation, a change in the church's name, and some significant changes in the church's liturgy. There were (no doubt) some who thought Reformed Heritage was crazy to even attempt calling me as pastor, given the various controversies swirling about in the Reformed world. There were others who thought I was crazy for even considering a move away from the safety and comfort of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, LA to a small, fledgling body that had not had a full time pastor in years. But I think it's obvious now that God has made us into a good match. My family has been delighted with our move to Birmingham and our role in the life of this local body. We couldn't be happier, and getting to know you all has been a constant joy! I trust the Lord will give us many, many fruitful and faithful years together.

Let's review some of the changes that have taken place. Obviously, I'm telling you a story you already know (since you just lived it!), but I trust the following will at the very least be helpful in explaining to friends and family members outside our church why we've gone the direction we have taken. Also, some of you have joined our church since these moves were made, and a little more background may be helpful in understanding our history and identity as a congregation.

Why did we move out of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and move towards membership in the Communion of Reformed and Evangelical Churches (CREC)? Some have said that Evangelical presbytery kicked me out – or kicked the church out. But that isn't an accurate portrayal of the facts. Our parting of ways with the PCA was amicable in every way. As we stated in our letter to the presbytery explaining why the congregation had voted to remove itself from the denomination, we continue to hold the PCA in high esteem and we are thankful for God's

continued work there. We pass no negative judgment on the denomination as such. I maintain many friendships with PCA folks, even though I am no longer formally a part of the denomination. My years in the PCA were a wonderful time of fellowship, learning, and maturing.

Our reasons for leaving the PCA had very little to do with the PCA as a whole. It simply boiled down to the fact that the examining committee from the particular PCA presbytery in this region (Evangel presbytery) wasn't comfortable with our view of covenant children. I met with the examinations committee last October for about three hours to discuss my transfer into Evangel presbytery from Louisiana presbytery. In that meeting, I explained that we view covenant children as believing Christians, even from infancy. We believe these children should be nurtured in their faith and, as they grow, warned against presuming upon God's grace. Personally, I believe this covenant nurture is best practiced if baptized children are included at the Lord's Table with us, though I was willing to abide by the PCA's standard requirement of a profession of faith before partaking of the covenant meal.

This was not the view of the committee members. A rather prominent member of the committee insisted that children could not make a valid profession of faith before nine years old. He even termed this as the "age of accountability." Another examiner said my commitment to infant faith (a doctrine taught by Martin Luther and John Calvin, among others) required a redefinition of faith altogether and thus fell outside the confessional standards. Yet another was concerned that viewing covenant children as believers entails the possibility of a real apostasy, since obviously not all baptized children grow up to be faithful Christians. My answers to all these types of questions can be found in my soon-to-be-published book entitled *Paedofaith*. There's no need to pursue them here.

Other issues were touched upon with the committee, but the status and nature of covenant children was the real focus of the discussion. At the end of the exam, an elder from Reformed Heritage was allowed to make some closing remarks. He insisted that after hearing me articulate my position in that forum, he was more certain than ever that I was the right pastor for the church. He also pointed out that these doctrines were not new or strange for the congregation even if they were unique in the presbytery; indeed, they had been believed and taught for quite some time at Reformed Heritage (going back to Peter Leithart's tenure as pastor in the late 1980s and early 1990s, if not before). It was also pointed out that this was a transfer exam, not an ordination exam, and all my positions had been

acceptable in Louisiana presbytery. Catholicity and intra-denominational brotherhood demanded they receive me.

Nevertheless, the Evangel committee decided against recommending me to presbytery for acceptance. They still offered the church the opportunity to proceed with my call before presbytery, but the Reformed Heritage elders would have to do so without the blessing of the examining committee. To make the situation even more awkward, when the Reformed Heritage elders asked the committee to state a formal reason for their decision, they refused to give one. The official grounds of my non-recommendation were left murky.

In some respects, I think the Evangel committee's decision against recommending me was borne out of a lack of confidence to play the part of judge in the so-called "Auburn Avenue" or "Federal Vision" controversy. There has been so much misinformation (even propaganda) spewed out over these issues, it is very difficult for busy pastors and elders to sort through it all in a timely fashion. (For my latest thoughts on the hullabaloo, see [my essay conversation with Bryan Chapell on our church website.](#))

One of the committee members even told me off the record some time after my exam that he was hopeful the PCA General Assembly would eventually appoint a qualified study committee to examine the issues because most teaching and ruling elders were simply not competent enough or educated enough to make a determination on these complicated theological points. I, too, am hopeful that will happen in the near future, for the sake of the peace and purity of the PCA. I can sympathize with the confusion the Evangel committee members felt in light of the cacophony of viewpoints being expressed over these matters by men who are widely considered leaders in the Reformed community.

I regarded, and continue to regard, all the men who served on Evangel's committee as exemplary Christian men. They are faithful pastors and servants in Christ's kingdom. Our disagreement over covenant children does not outweigh the many truths we hold in common. But rather than give the appearance of fighting against the committee (and perhaps even the presbytery), the Reformed Heritage elders and I decided it would best serve the peace and purity of the wider church for us to look for a denomination in which our views would be received with less controversy. The elders presented this plan to the congregation (as you know), and the overwhelming decision was to move out of the PCA and into another confessional, Reformed denomination. I resigned from my membership in Louisiana presbytery on good terms so I could accept the call to Reformed Heritage. After extensive evaluation of our options, we chose to move into

the CREC, a process that (Lord willing) will formally begin this October at the CREC's presbytery meeting in Oregon.

Obviously, it is easy for uninformed outsiders to misunderstand or misinterpret our actions. We have tried to execute the whole process in a way that manifests humility and catholicity. We have tried to make the transition in a way that is as peaceable and submissive as possible. We did not leave the PCA in a huff of anger or a spirit of self-righteousness. Rest assured, our view of God's kingdom and mission are larger than ever. We see ourselves as working in tandem with PCA churches (as well as churches in other denominations), as we seek to fulfill God's vocation for the body and bride of Christ in this locale. We trust that these feelings are mutual on the part of local PCA churches.

Such a move on my part and your part is not unprecedented. For example, John Williamson Nevin transferred from Presbyterianism into the German Reformed denomination with Charles Hodge's blessing in the nineteenth century. Nevin found the new body more congenial to his liturgical and sacramental views, though he continued to appreciate many aspects of Presbyterianism. In the mid-twentieth century, Gordon Clark transferred his credentials out of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) into another Reformed denomination in order to mitigate his brewing controversy with Cornelius Van Til. (While I side with Van Til on the theological issue at stake in the debate with Clark, I do not approve of the way Van Til and his followers continually hounded Clark rather than pursuing a more catholic solution to the problem.) More recently, John Frame transferred from the OPC into the PCA for a variety of prudential reasons. Congregations occasionally move from one Reformed denomination to another for a variety of motives as well, just as you have done.

The bottom line is that in a denominational situation, as opposed to a "catholic" (one church) situation, denominational loyalties must always be held in a loose hand. (I explored this topic some time ago in my essay, "An Immodest Proposal," published in the Winter 2004 issue of *Reformation and Revival Journal*. See also John Frame's fine book *Evangelical Reunion*.) Our highest commitment is to Christ's kingdom, not a particular denominational expression of that kingdom. In our circumstances, it seemed it would be a waste of very limited resources to pursue the matter further with Evangel presbytery since good men have long disagreed over the matters that separated us. We tried to work around their decision rather than break through it. We felt we could accomplish more effective ministry for the kingdom by moving on, rather than getting involved in a potentially

litigious situation. I think the wisdom of our decision has been confirmed even in these few short months.

Not long after I arrived in Birmingham in early December, we began to contemplate a name change. While in no way abandoning our “Reformed Heritage” (we fully, adamantly, and joyfully affirm all the great Reformational *solas!*), we believed the church’s identity could be better communicated under a new name. After many discussions, the session recommended Trinity Presbyterian Church and you all voted to make the switch. This was not a mere facelift; it was an attempt to bring our name and vision into alignment with one another. We chose this name for several reasons, including: [A] *Continuity* with our Presbyterian past, theologically and governmentally, which we wanted to emphasize; [B] *Catholicity*, given the centrality of the Trinity in defining orthodox Christian faith over against all idolatries and false religions, and in uniting Christians of various denominational loyalties together in one family of faith; and [C] *Simplicity*, indicating our desire to uphold and embody the “great tradition” of classical Christian faith and practice in our ministry and worship. I preached a sermon on the name change, and it will soon be available on the sermon web page if you would like to review it.

Around that same time, we also made some fairly extensive liturgical reforms. These changes were by no means revolutionary, since so many good things were already in place, but we wanted a more robust covenant renewal pattern of worship. The new liturgy moves on the same trajectory, but we’re further along the arc, so to speak. The philosophy of worship and music haven’t changed, but we’ve matured a bit in these areas. We’ve expanded our hymn base, increased congregational participation, started to make use of the church calendar, enhanced the absolution, beautified communion, and made our bulletin format more worshipper-friendly. We’re still not finished with liturgical reforms, though I don’t expect any more significant changes in the short term.

In all of these changes, you all have handled yourselves with wisdom and humility. Often, congregations chafe at transitions of these sorts, but you all have been patient, thoughtful, and helpful through the whole process. I think all our elders would agree with me that you have made our work a joy (see Hebrews 13:17).

God continues to guide us as a local body. We are still very much in a transitional phase, as we continue to cast our vision and develop ways to embody it. We continue to grow by adding new families and new officers. In the not too distant future, we hope to sell our old property on Highway 31 in Vestavia and begin the search for a new location. Our desire is to be in an

accessible area that will maximize our prospects and possibilities for growth and ministry in the city. We're working on getting more organized, especially on Sunday mornings, so that operations run with more efficiency. We also hope to begin building up our mercy ministries, so that we are more faithfully combining deeds of love with words of truth. Care for the alienated and impoverished is central to our vision, as we are constantly asking not only, "What kind of church does God want us to be?" but also, "What kind of church does Birmingham need us to be?" (Of course, we keep finding those two questions have identical answers!) We are learning not only to love one another as brothers and sisters in God's family, but also to love our city in Christ's way.

Of course, to make all of this happen, we need you to continue growing in faith and grace. We need your continued willingness to work and sacrifice. As I've emphasized from time to time, we hope God will continue to lead many of you to take initiative in developing ministries, building friendships, and sharing the gospel with those who do not know our Savior. The life of cruciform service can only be learned in concert with one another, as we strive to embody Christ's sacrificial love in the church and the world. This is our single passion and goal as a covenant community.

My family has been blessed beyond words by our relationship with TPC. You have already proven to be a wonderful community for us. We are grateful for all God has accomplished already, and we are very hopeful about the future. Let us continue to work together on this glorious project of building God's kingdom in Birmingham and beyond!

Grace and peace,
Pastor Rich Lusk