



2 September 2011

The Gathering – Fellowship of Presbyterians

Minneapolis, MN – 8/25-8/26

On Wednesday night, August 24th, 1900 Presbyterians from all 50 states, Mexico and South Korea met to discuss the future of the Presbyterian Church and also the possibility of a new denomination. The meeting opened with prayer and with the focus of moving in a direction directed by God and founded on scripture. The following is a summary of my notes and my opinion of the event.

As the meeting began there was a lot of discussion between churches regarding the current state of the PC (USA). The leaders of the conference coined the phrase that the Presbyterian Church was “Deathly Ill”. There was a discussion that while being deathly ill did not mean you would die, it was time for drastic treatment to prevent death. The root of this discussion lied in the fact that the PC (USA) has wandered from scripture and sound theology. Because of this wandering, there have been significant changes that are not based on scripture and these issues are causing many to question where the church is headed. There was a clear point that the movement forward had to make changes. These changes were summarized in five points:

1. Theological Clarity
2. Missional Passion
3. More Council – Less Regulatory
4. Connect Globally
5. Redefine Leadership.

These came from the acknowledgment that:

1. The Church has been here before,
2. The Church is dying in its current state. The PC (USA) has not grown since 1968.

From these discussions there arose a definite Desire to affiliate with other reformed bodies including the PC (USA) in any change that is made. Many questions were raised as to why there was a desire to affiliate with the church, and there were several reasons that seemed to come to light. The first is a desire to be able to work with the resources of the PC (USA) in the areas of missions, personnel, and pensions. The first is a desire to work with world missions and



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set goals to grow the church through evangelism. There is a realization that it takes a large backing to fund world missions, and that PC (USA) has a good organization for this. This may or may not be something that every church is concerned with; however the basis for the desire to continue in missions seemed genuine. Secondly, they want an organization that allows pastors to move freely if they desire. There will be more discussion about this later as it pertains to the Tier 4 option; however, they are more concerned with Pastors being able to go back to the PC (USA) and for conservative pastors to leave the PC (USA) than for an open door policy. Finally, it was agreed that PC (USA) has a tremendous pension board and it would be beneficial, not necessary, if Ordained Ministers would have access to this program. Again, I can see the desire and the reason behind this and in theory do not disagree. I do question if these things can be done and still maintain a differential where it is needed.

Because of this desire to have a working relationship, the Fellowship of Presbyterians was created. This organization was created to be a resource for churches to work with and through as conservative congregations. The Fellowship was described as an umbrella for reformed bodies to meet and co-exist. Through this body, it seemed the hope was to allow all of our churches in The PC (USA), EPC, PCA, and the new body to share resources, work together in missions and spread the gospel. This body itself is not the new reformed body, and it is not something we would go to. Rather, it is an organization for guidance and prayer.

Through the Fellowship's desire to help congregations spread the gospel and stand firm on their beliefs. Because of this, the fellowship has been working with the PC (USA) to find a forum for congregations to operate without jeopardizing their core values. This has resulted in the Fellowship developing three Tiers for congregations to consider within the PC (USA). The first Tier is to form a missional alliance between presbyteries. This allows likeminded churches to work together and to share missional vision between them. The Second Tier is to form conservative presbyteries within the existing presbyteries. This allows conservative churches to come together and work toward a common ministry with common rules and beliefs. The shortcoming is that these presbyteries would still be under the rule of the more liberal presbytery and ultimately the GA. Finally, the Third Tier is to Stay in the presbytery but form multiple COM's, CPM's, Council's, etc... This would allow the conservative churches to ordain their own ministers, work to a more conservative goal, and worship with conservative principles, much like tier 2, this all still falls under the final decision of GA.



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From the discussions leading up to the gathering which showed a desire to move away from the PC (USA) the Fellowship began working on Tier 4, a new reformed body. This tier would create separation from PC (USA) and the GA. This new reformed body will be a standalone conservative reformed organization for churches to belong. The New Body is not yet completed, but in a very conceptual stage. From the onset, there are some principals that will be critical to this organization.

1. The Body will be based on the person and work of Jesus Christ.
2. Scripture is the foundation.
3. There will be Essentials of Faith, Core biblical points that must be followed.

This body will have some significant differences. There will be larger Presbyteries and they will most likely NOT be funded bodies, rather groups to meet and share ideas. The church will own its property in full. Finally, there is a formal push to encourage churches to grow and bring people to Christ. While this body is new and the vision is still being finalized, the bylaws are to be published in rough draft form this October. These by-laws are to be reviewed by congregations and through regional meetings prior to a constitutional gathering in January where churches will be able to sign up for this new body and begin the departure process from PC (USA).

My personal Thoughts follow that tier 4 appears to be a good option for our congregations that feel they cannot stay associated with the PC (USA). The New Body will be based on Scripture and will have firm tenants of the faith that cannot be changed by a majority vote. It also seems that local congregations will be able to work together to share mission and evangelize to the community. My hesitations are that this body is being formed from the PC (USA) and it is going to be hard to break ties in a meaningful manner. There is a desire to stay in close concert with our PC (USA) brothers and sisters that may inhibit this new body doing all that it can. I do however, encourage our churches to prayerfully consider this option and take time to research it and look into it as passionately as we have looked at other options prior to making any choices.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jason Schepp, CLP East Brook Presbyterian Church.