

Reflections on General

FUN

It is always a joy for me to attend General Assembly, for it allows me to reconnect with friends from all across the country and the globe. I am able to interact with some of the missionaries we support. I connected with friends from Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Vermont. And of course, I was able to see many of my brothers and sisters from Florida.

I was also able to spend some time catching up with Patrick and Regina Lennox, who are teaming up with Third Mill to expand their reach to Native Americans. I have invited them to come down this fall and share about this new direction.

I was also able to spend a long time with Clay Quartermann, who has served in Kiev, Ukraine for about 30 years with MTW. He has overseen theological education at the seminary there, and this will be the training ground for the new pastors God is raising up in Belarus. This was a most helpful connection that we can build upon going forward.

FANTASTIC

I know that many of you have had the privilege of worshiping with thousands of people at various conferences. One thing that makes our worship services different is that the word preached is always timely and prescient for the hearers. It truly is a taste of heaven. Wednesday's service had a full orchestra, soaring hymns, and stirring choir pieces (one of the soloists, who was blind, was perhaps the best choir anthem I have ever heard).

Outgoing moderator, Dr. Irwin Ince, Director of Grace DC Institute for Cross-Cultural Mission, Washington, DC, then preached a powerful sermon calling believers to "Grind on for Glory" from 2 Cor. 4:1-6. In the course of his sermon Dr. Ince reminded the Assembly of the first question of Abaddon's Catechism: "What is the chief end of Satan? The chief end of Satan is to deny God of His rightful glory by preventing people from enjoying Him forever." Dr. Ince urged that the great work of the Church is to bring the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ to overcome this darkness. I truly wept through most of the 2+ hours.

Thursday's worship was quite different. Before the service Sandra McCracken led in song – she is involved with Indelible Grace, a group that takes old hymns and writes new tunes to them. We'll be singing some of them in the future. The service was led by a joint choir

made up of singers from Park Cities Presbyterian Church and an African-American Baptist Church. It was soulful and different. What we sang was substantial – hymns with rich lyrics. It was certainly not my cup of tea – but that really didn't matter. It was a bit loud (my ears hurt), but that may just mean that I am getting old. We need to reflect who the PCA is – and thankfully it is becoming a much broader, diverse church filled with Anglos, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Koreans. My ears won't hurt in heaven, and I'm sure we'll be singing many of these songs as well.

TE David Cassidy, Lead Pastor of Christ Community Church, Franklin, TN, preached on the theme "A Brief History of the Future" from Psalm 145:1-13. It was timely to the issues we are facing as Christians and as a church. It was filled with amazing exegesis, humor, and delivered with an impassioned, winsome tone. One story he told: he was driving in the car with his daughter, who turned to him and asked: "Why do you pray before you preach?" David said that he prayed so that God would make what he said powerful and meaningful in the ears of the congregation. His daughter then asked, "Why doesn't he answer your prayer?"

Friday morning's service was led by a simple string trio, with a sermon preached by TE Ryan Anderson, RUF Campus Minister, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, on the theme, "Delusions, Meet Grace" from Rev. 3:14-22.

FRUSTRATING AND FULFILLING

I use the word frustrating not because I left the meeting exasperated. The exact opposite is true. I am thrilled that we are a part of the PCA, that we hold to the inerrant, infallible Word of God, and that we do not argue about issues, but we debate with charity and grace, even as we disagree. I use the word frustrating because there were times when charity and grace were not exercised. I'll highlight those as I deal with the issues.

1. Our stated clerk, Roy Taylor, announced his retirement after serving in that capacity for 22 years. In the 46-year history of the PCA, we have only had three men serve in that role. All three of them also were part of the founders. Our new moderator will usher in a new era for the PCA. We truly need a centrist who can bring the various "tribes" in the PCA together. Please be praying that God would raise up the right man.
2. There was an Overture that requested that the PCA resign its membership in the National Association of Evangelicals. The sentiment expressed in the overture was that the NAE is making statements that we, as a denomination, cannot in good faith subscribe. After a very lengthy debate, the assembly voted to answer the overture in the negative, thus denying its action. We will remain in the NAE.

3. By far the largest issue facing us as a denomination surrounds same-sex attraction, the homosexual agenda, and the pastoral implications of dealing with our congregations as we swim in these waters.

There were multiple Overtures requesting that we establish a study committee to formulate a pastoral response and a declarative statement as a denomination. The Overtures Committee determined that we should first take up an overture that wanted us to affirm the Nashville Statement, a document put out by the Center for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.

There was heated and impassioned speeches for and against such a statement. It would be easy to simply chalk up those opposed the making the statement as drinking the cultural Kool-Aid and capitulating to the pernicious agenda being shoved down our throats. That would be a sad mistake, however.

I have spent the past week reading hundreds of blogs and articles from both sides of this issue in the PCA. Ultimately, we voted to commend the statement to our churches by a 60-40 vote.

Let me read something shared by someone in the 40% category.

One convincing argument in favor of affirming the Nashville Statement came from Kevin DeYoung, who pointed out that the original signers of the Statement are not extremists. They include some of the foremost leaders in evangelicalism today, including Russell Moore, D.A. Carson, John Piper, John Frame, Michael Horton, R.C. Sproul, Alistair Begg, and DeYoung himself, as well as same-sex attracted men and women like Sam Alberry, Vaughn Roberts, Rosaria Butterfield, and Jackie Hill Perry.

Among these and the other signers, with whom I disagree on the usefulness of the Nashville Statement but not on much else, are many of my own good friends.

On the “against” side of the debate, there were also many of us who did not sign the Nashville Statement. We, too, are not extremists. We, too, love the Bible and Jesus and biblical doctrine and ethics with all of our hearts.

Curiously, not many ministry leaders who specialize in sexual brokenness signed the Nashville Statement either. Examples include Tim Geiger and John Freeman from Harvest USA, Nate Collins and Stephen Moss from

Revoice, Sean Maney from First Light, Pieter Valk from Equip, Caleb Kaltenbach from Messy Grace, Preston Sprinkle from the Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, and Wheaton psychologist and expert in sexual brokenness, Mark Yarhouse (Yarhouse shares his misgivings about the Nashville Statement [here](#)). These are all evangelical leaders, thinkers, and practitioners who are committed to the historic, biblical teaching on sex and marriage who did not sign the Nashville Statement.

Well-known thought leaders in the PCA like Tim Keller, Bryan Chappell, Scotty Smith, Stephen Um, Dan Doriani, Jerram Barrs, Charles McGowan, and Sandy Willson also did not sign the Nashville Statement.

“Mortification of Spin” podcast hosts Carl Trueman and Todd Pruitt also did not sign and wrote about why.

Many other reformed thinkers and leaders did not sign the Nashville Statement, including Thabiti Anyabwile, Sinclair Ferguson, Paul Tripp, David Powlison, Philip Ryken, Crawford Loritts, Jeremy Treat, Tom Nelson, Richard Winter, and Richard Pratt.

Both inside and outside of the PCA, it is quite clear that there are good, godly, biblically serious, reformed thinkers who have said both “yes” and “no” to the Nashville Statement.

One of the voices we heard was Greg Johnson, a TE in St. Louis, and the pastor of the church that held the Revoice Conference last summer. I do not agree with everything that he said, but I was moved by the courage it took to stand before 1,200+ delegates and talk about his ongoing battle to mortify his flesh as he deals with same-sex attraction. Greg is committed to the biblical view of marriage and chastity, but his perspective was a reminder that we aren’t just talking about issues – we’re talking about human beings made in the image of God, broken by the fall, who can, and are, being redeemed by the sovereign grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Just an aside, as I said earlier, there has been much written over the past week – but men on both sides are talking, listening, and seeking a way forward. We want to be a church who is declarative in our statements, but winsome and compassionate as we take the gospel of Jesus Christ to a fallen world.

One frustrating part of this was a minority report brought regarding an Overture from Westminster Presbytery. It sought to establish a statement similar to the

Nashville Statement, but in much harsher tones. On several occasions the speaker referred to “those people,” the same-sex attracted folks, which I must admit caused my blood to boil. Thankfully this was rejected resoundingly.

Here is the Nashville Statement:

Preamble

Evangelical Christians at the dawn of the twenty-first century find themselves living in a period of historic transition. As Western culture has become increasingly post-Christian, it has embarked upon a massive revision of what it means to be a human being. By and large the spirit of our age no longer discerns or delights in the beauty of God’s design for human life. Many deny that God created human beings for his glory, and that his good purposes for us include our personal and physical design as male and female. It is common to think that human identity as male and female is not part of God’s beautiful plan, but is, rather, an expression of an individual’s autonomous preferences. The pathway to full and lasting joy through God’s good design for his creatures is thus replaced by the path of shortsighted alternatives that, sooner or later, ruin human life and dishonor God.

This secular spirit of our age presents a great challenge to the Christian church. Will the church of the Lord Jesus Christ lose her biblical conviction, clarity, and courage, and blend into the spirit of the age? Or will she hold fast to the word of life, draw courage from Jesus, and unashamedly proclaim his way as the way of life? Will she maintain her clear, counter-cultural witness to a world that seems bent on ruin?

We are persuaded that faithfulness in our generation means declaring once again the true story of the world and of our place in it—particularly as male and female. Christian Scripture teaches that there is but one God who alone is Creator and Lord of all. To him alone, every person owes gladhearted thanksgiving, heart-felt praise, and total allegiance. This is the path not only of glorifying God, but of knowing ourselves. To forget our Creator is to forget who we are, for he made us for himself. And we cannot know ourselves truly without truly knowing him who made us. We did not make ourselves. We are not our own. Our true identity, as male and female persons, is given by God. It is not only foolish, but hopeless, to try to make ourselves what God did not create us to be.

We believe that God’s design for his creation and his way of salvation serve to bring him the greatest glory and bring us the greatest good. God’s good plan

provides us with the greatest freedom. Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it in overflowing measure. He is for us and not against us. Therefore, in the hope of serving Christ's church and witnessing publicly to the good purposes of God for human sexuality revealed in Christian Scripture, we offer the following affirmations and denials.

Article 1

WE AFFIRM that God has designed marriage to be a covenantal, sexual, procreative, lifelong union of one man and one woman, as husband and wife, and is meant to signify the covenant love between Christ and his bride the church.

WE DENY that God has designed marriage to be a homosexual, polygamous, or polyamorous relationship. We also deny that marriage is a mere human contract rather than a covenant made before God.

Article 2

WE AFFIRM that God's revealed will for all people is chastity outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage.

WE DENY that any affections, desires, or commitments ever justify sexual intercourse before or outside marriage; nor do they justify any form of sexual immorality.

Article 3

WE AFFIRM that God created Adam and Eve, the first human beings, in his own image, equal before God as persons, and distinct as male and female.

WE DENY that the divinely ordained differences between male and female render them unequal in dignity or worth.

Article 4

WE AFFIRM that divinely ordained differences between male and female reflect God's original creation design and are meant for human good and human flourishing.

WE DENY that such differences are a result of the Fall or are a tragedy to be overcome.

Article 5

WE AFFIRM that the differences between male and female reproductive structures are integral to God's design for self-conception as male or female.

WE DENY that physical anomalies or psychological conditions nullify the God-appointed link between biological sex and self-conception as male or female.

Article 6

WE AFFIRM that those born with a physical disorder of sex development are created in the image of God and have dignity and worth equal to all other image-bearers. They are acknowledged by our Lord Jesus in his words about “eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb.” With all others they are welcome as faithful followers of Jesus Christ and should embrace their biological sex insofar as it may be known.

WE DENY that ambiguities related to a person's biological sex render one incapable of living a fruitful life in joyful obedience to Christ.

Article 7

WE AFFIRM that self-conception as male or female should be defined by God's holy purposes in creation and redemption as revealed in Scripture.

WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption.

Article 8

WE AFFIRM that people who experience sexual attraction for the same sex may live a rich and fruitful life pleasing to God through faith in Jesus Christ, as they, like all Christians, walk in purity of life.

WE DENY that sexual attraction for the same sex is part of the natural goodness of God's original creation, or that it puts a person outside the hope of the gospel.

Article 9

WE AFFIRM that sin distorts sexual desires by directing them away from the marriage covenant and toward sexual immorality— a distortion that includes both heterosexual and homosexual immorality.

WE DENY that an enduring pattern of desire for sexual immorality justifies sexually immoral behavior.

Article 10

WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness.

WE DENY that the approval of homosexual immorality or transgenderism is a matter of moral indifference about which otherwise faithful Christians should agree to disagree.

Article 11

WE AFFIRM our duty to speak the truth in love at all times, including when we speak to or about one another as male or female.

WE DENY any obligation to speak in such ways that dishonor God's design of his imagebearers as male and female.

Article 12

WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ gives both merciful pardon and transforming power, and that this pardon and power enable a follower of Jesus to put to death sinful desires and to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ is insufficient to forgive all sexual sins and to give power for holiness to every believer who feels drawn into sexual sin.

Article 13

WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ enables sinners to forsake transgender selfconceptions and by divine forbearance to accept the God-ordained link between one's biological sex and one's self-conception as male or female.

WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ sanctions self-conceptions that are at odds with God's revealed will.

Article 14

WE AFFIRM that Christ Jesus has come into the world to save sinners and that through Christ's death and resurrection forgiveness of sins and eternal life are available to every person who repents of sin and trusts in Christ alone as Savior, Lord, and supreme treasure.

WE DENY that the Lord's arm is too short to save or that any sinner is beyond his reach.

4. The other big issue we took up came as an Overture to establish a study committee on domestic abuse and sexual assault. I had the occasion to have my hackles raised again when a man, a graduate of Yale, stood up and talked about how Yale originally stated that 25% of the women at Yale had experienced some form of sexual violence against them. He then stated that the university lowered that estimate to 15%, but that a study found that only 1.5% of the women had experienced these. He then intimated that this was an answer in search of a problem!

This was the only time that I got truly angry. It didn't help that he was speaking at the microphone right beside me. This issue is personal to me – I get that. My daughter, two young girls from a former church, and several friends, have been sexually assaulted or brutally raped – many of these by people in the church!

It is naïve to think that these things aren't happening in OUR churches. Do we want to be in the position of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Roman Catholic Church, Willow Creek, Sovereign Grace Church (I can go on and on). Just like the previous issue, we need to be declarative, but even more so, we need to be pastoral and compassionate – something the church has done very poorly. Too many times these issues are kept quiet, or worse, the victim is made to feel guilt! May it never be.

FUTURE

So, I hope that gives you a taste of what we dealt with. There were many other matters that we took up, but I don't want to bore you with much of that. I will give you the statistical report for the PCA – we are still growing (albeit much slower than in the early days), unlike most churches in America.

* total membership, 384,793 (increase of 10,057);

* churches, 1,572 (increase of 4);

* ministers, 4,951 (increase of 69); and

* presbyteries, 88 (adding 2).

Again, I am quite happy to be a part of the PCA family. It is healthy and vibrant. I'll close with this reflection.

In a healthy family, you're supposed to air your laundry...all of it. Everyone is supposed to have a voice, and everyone is supposed to listen to others, with the understanding that iron sharpens iron.

The more detailed and lengthy these kinds of discussions are, the more refined we can become in an eventual, and hopefully shared and unified, vocabulary and perspective.

This is how the great, historic statements like the Nicene and Apostles Creeds were formed, as well as the PCA's own Westminster Standards. These creeds and standards did not fall out of the sky, nor were they formed from singular perspectives or insulated echo chambers or in a nanosecond. The disagreements and debates got heated sometimes, and documents were refined and refined again and again and again over time through disagreement and debate, in multiple iterations, until they reached their final and most

universally celebrated forms. Hundreds of years later, we are among the grateful beneficiaries.

Please join with me in praying for my beloved tribe, the PCA.