

XLIII. Conversations with Harry and Bruce  
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We are using this time of *Conversations with Harry and Bruce* to prepare for our prayer time for the upcoming General Assembly this coming week. I have been in a series on *Historic Biblical Christianity and Contemporary Progressive Christianity* and it is important we understand this. I would like to wrap up some from the opening four studies we have already done on this series with about three to four more left. My concern is what happened to mainline protestant churches in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century that sent them into spiritual oblivion for they are just a shell. It was all done in the name of saving them with the movement of liberal Christianity which led to a wrong mission, that led to a wrong message and then the Lord takes the lampstand away. I believe the same thing is happening today with progressive Christianity at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Again, to save Christianity, progressive Christianity has offered itself and I believe it has come from the same bolt of cloth, like liberal Christianity led to liberal theology, progressive Christianity is going to go to progressive theology and we're in this real sifting and shifting time in the evangelical church. Those that buy into it will be on the same trajectory as the mainline protestant churches were on after they embraced, were penetrated and permeated by the liberal Christianity movement.

I'd like to share this statement from I Timothy 3, before we get into the questions. This is where Paul has sent Timothy on a ministry of church revitalization back to Ephesus and gives him this handbook, so to speak. Paul had given three years of his life to plant this church at Ephesus and had warned them that false teachers and leaders were going to infiltrate their midst which they had. Now the church is being decimated by it and Paul has a heart for them so he sends his best man, Timothy, to get them back on track. Paul says to Timothy in I Timothy 3:14–16a says [14] *I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, [15] if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. [16a] Great indeed, we confess...*

Christ's church is a confessional church. The following is one of the earliest confessions in the Christian church. I Timothy 3:16 says [16] *Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:*

*He was manifested in the flesh, (The Incarnation)*

*vindicated by the Spirit, (The resurrection)*

*seen by angels, (The Ascension)*

*proclaimed among the nations, (The Great Commission)*

*believed on in the world,*

*taken up in glory. (This will be His people taken up to glory to be with Him forever)*

I want you to see something that Paul says here, that unless the church is the pillar and buttress of the truth (I Timothy 3:15), it will not remain faithful with its confession. Those two things are inseparably tied. In other words, we are built on the truth and we are to uphold and proclaim the truth, thus our confessions must be a faithful representation of God's truth and thus our behavior must manifest our confession – how one ought to behave. You can have a faithful confession but, if you refuse to apply it in the life of the church, the discipline of the church, then the confession has lost its value to the church. At this point some say 'we still have a faithful confession' but are you faithful to the confession? That is a crucial issue.

Bruce: In order to embrace how we pray for the General Assembly, Pastor Reeder has created seven topics but there are 48 overtures and other decisions before the General Assembly so it can get somewhat complicated but we wanted to bring down to more focused areas. We are going to go through those topics at this time so that you will know how to pray for this upcoming Assembly. This is our 40<sup>th</sup> Q & A. The first topic is progressive Christianity and the statement you make is that it be exposed and eradicated, so why is there a need for this to be exposed and eradicated?

Harry: I think progressive Christianity has an unbiblical motivation and therefore it has led to an unbiblical mission so inevitably it will promote an unbiblical message i.e., an adulterated and eventually apostate message confession of the church. I do not believe everyone who opposes progressive Christianity or aspects of it are wolves in sheep's clothing. I think in many cases it's well-meaning believers looking at crucial issues and progressive Christianity is offering an insight of 'maybe this is what we've always needed.' So, in order to address the issues and reach the next generation, all the appeals are there. I think even well-meaning churches get caught up in it and I call that sheep in wolves clothing. It may not be wolves in sheep's clothing or wolves in wolves clothing but the wolves clothing has to be stripped away, eradicated, eviscerated.

We, I speak of myself, and others have studiously avoided dealing with personalities. We're trying to deal with issues of theology and philosophy of ministry that it would be faithful to our confessional position. I believe progressive Christianity is the gateway that allows theological error into the church that will eventually led to theological apostasy and it has already allowed errors of what I call the first order, those that are of foundational issues. It's not like liberal Christianity that went after order to be accepted by the modern mind in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. It's not going after the fundamentals of the faith – virgin birth, resurrection of Christ, its exclusivity – but it's going after what the Gospel is and it's promoting another gospel, a half gospel, which will lead to other theological errors as well, like how we identify as a Christian in the world – what is our identity, etc. This is why I think progressive Christianity has to be confronted, dismantled and dismissed.

Bruce: So, at this point you would say your concern is that we're on the front side of that currently and that people aren't intending to distort the Gospel, but at this point what they are doing is going to lead to a distortion of the Gospel, inevitably, is that correct?

Harry: Yes, but we're not on as much of the front as you think. This really started in the 1980s and that's why I say it was at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I have watched it and tracked it. There are some very popular promoters, apologists and preachers of it and some I could name right now as many of you in this congregation are downloading their sermons. I know that because you have sent them to me. They (these promoters, apologists and preachers) first bought into a neo-evangelical theology which is a cosmetic representation of evangelical and reformed theology and now they have full out embraced it. I even hear statements like 'if we're going to win the next generation we have to disconnect from the Old Testament' and that would be by someone people find amazing if I were to say his name which I'm not going to do at this point.

Bruce: The second topic is Side B Revoice theology. When you first laid out Side B I didn't have a clue as to what you were talking about, until you preached through it. It seems to me that

that distorted theology goes far beyond homosexuality and that the ramifications of that are grave, so could you speak to the depth of that?

Harry: Yes, I believe that progressive Christianity made us open to receiving Revoice. I understand why. How do we minister to the sexually addicted, whether natural or unnatural sexual appetites? We win them to Christ so we all wanted to give an ear to this movement that was going to tell us how and it basically divided into two categories – Side A and Side B. Side A says that Christians had this thing about homosexuality wrong – you can put it in an ethical paradigm, same sex marriage, homosexual practice, it just needs to be accepted and that's the way God made us and no one needs to repent of that. The only problem with that is the Bible identifies that not as natural but unnatural so it can't be a product of creation.

Side B says it is a product of our sin nature and that the same sex orientation using psychological categories. Same sex orientation is of sin because it comes from the corruption of the sin nature, but according to Side B it is not sin for it's only when you act it out in thought, word and deed that it becomes actual sin. Therefore, Side B said you could be same sex attracted and be committed to celibacy for you are not going to act it out. So those are the two sides in a nutshell.

I tried to give this a fair hearing and I was criticized because I tried to give it a fair hearing. I wanted to deal with it theologically because I wanted to understand what was being said. Finally, I came to understand that this was a denial of the Gospel, because it is saying to people that their attractions cannot be mortified, not be killed. Words like, don't try to cure but try to care are appealing when you hear that, but the point is the Bible gives this list of those who will not inherit the Kingdom in I Corinthians 6:9–11 which says, *[9] Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, [10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. [11] And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

So, this Revoice is saying you can get the benefits of the Gospel declarations of justification and adoption where you're right with God and in the family of God, but you don't have to expect the blessings of the transforming of the Gospel, in fact, we don't believe anyone changes. I understand some of what they are reacting to which is Exodus International, Reparative theory and all of those may have been done by Christians but they were based upon psychology and behavior modification. So those things needed to be jettisoned.

What needs to be put in their place? Discipleship. I don't care where you are coming from when you're saved for the power of sin is broken. I have a remaining sin, the old man, the body of death, but I am no longer under reigning sin. It doesn't reign in my life, I can kill it. Some of it God will enable us to kill quickly, but some of it we will have to fight the rest of our life and it may not be glorious measured success, but Christ reigns, not my sin. When that call of corruption comes, it's a call to arms. Let me go to the means of grace and kill this thing.

When you go by the Revoice then it leads to a hyphenated Christianity, meaning one might label themselves as a 'gay Christian' or a 'same sex attracted Christian.' The Bible says, including that sin of homosexuality in thought, word and deed, is not to be named among us. If it's not to be named among us then why would we, for the first time in the history of the church, say that Christians ought to be named by our sins? If we did then some would say they are promiscuous Christians, alcoholic Christians, pornographic Christians, etc. Do I believe

Christians have to fight promiscuity, alcoholism, pornography, etc.? Yes, I believe that but that doesn't name us. I am named by Christ and my life is hid in Christ. Therefore I can know the power of His resurrection in the breaking of the power of sin and I can increasingly in thought, word and deed begin to mortify the practices of sin by God's grace. I think it's important to understand that Revoice Side B attacks the Gospel.

Out of my love for God's people and sinners, I want Revoice to know there is a Gospel that is not legalistic where you have to do such and such to be saved and it's not libertine where they think if you're saved by grace you can do anything you want to. We have a Gospel that allows us to pursue holiness, not for salvation but for your Savior and you have the power to do it. You can have growing in grace the rest of your life. Some sins will immediately disappear but some you will fight all of your life. Some of it you will have to pull up the weeds and some you will have to push out the weeds. Sometimes you will have to immerse yourself in the means of grace in Christ so you drown out the sin and the key is discipleship, not behavior modification. Don't sign a peace treaty with sin by giving it any place in your name as a Christian. You are Christ's and Christ is yours.

Bruce: That speaks to the third topic which is the concept of being above reproach. So is a same sex attracted minister, ruling elder, teaching elder or deacon above reproach, which you have actually answered – they are not above reproach, however you have been careful to make a differentiation in how we minister to a member, a potential member of the church who is struggling with that and how we minister to an ordained ruling or teaching elder.

Harry: I would highly commend the paper our elders did on how to pastorally minister to those who are coming out of same sex relationships. One of the points we make, on the way into membership to be a member at Briarwood you just need a credible profession of faith, where you have confessed your sins, put your trust in Christ alone but you don't have to have all your vocabulary right. Into membership – come on in. The question before the PCA is not the open door for those who are confessing their sins even though they don't have all the nomenclature right, are they welcome? Certainly, they are – let's minister, love one another and grow in grace. I look back at some of the things I said when I became a Christian and my vocabulary has changed dramatically in terms of accuracy since then. You don't have to be an expert in the vocabulary of the Westminster Confession when you become a believer, but we will go to work on you.

The ordained leadership is a different story. When you say someone is above reproach you are saying 'this is what we believe on this side of eternity, representative of walking in the triumph of Christ' and transparency yes but also a track record whereby we are willing to say to people, this is what the Gospel does. Is identifying with an addictive sin above reproach – that's the question before us. No one in the PCA is promoting the ordination of practicing homosexuals – Side A.

The issue is Side B and it's not do we receive members who are using the language of Side B, where I'm same sex attracted but committed to celibacy. Membership of how we are receiving, loving and caring for one another is another issue. The issue has to do with when we lay hands on someone, are they above reproach. People seem to think this is all nuance. When we set forth our elders they have to be able to be a statement before the community, not of perfection but of the work of sanctification. Membership is the evidence of conversion. Ordination is the evidence of being above reproach with your sanctification, which is the

question before us now. Divorce it from anyone individual – the question is, can you be an erotic, same sex attracted man, committed to celibacy and be ordained in the PCA?

Bruce: The fourth topic deals with Critical Race theory, Critical Law Theory, intersectionality, etc., isn't the greatest motivation to reject Critical Race theory that it absolutely offers no hope to deal with ethnic discrimination?

Harry: I believe progressive Christianity plays upon our heart's desire to help address valid issues and minister to people effectively. Therefore, Revoice Side B gets a hearing but once it gets its hearing and examining, it falls woefully short of the Gospel promises that Jesus makes you right and Jesus goes right to work on you and you have the power of the resurrected work of Christ in your life.

I'm going to use the language of the world as I address this. We know there is this issue of racism. We have a history of it in our country and we know it needs to be dealt with. When something proposes to be an instrument to deal with it, we look at it and see what it's all about. People kept saying you could 'eat the meat and spit out the bones' as we began to look at it. The more I looked at it, the more I didn't see any meat. On the contrary, I believe it originates confessedly from a Marxist, anti-Christian, anti-God, anti-Gospel and anti of everything God has revealed in His creation law, therefore it's not a boney fish I can get meat off of. For me it's more like if someone was thirsty and wanted to drink from the ocean. If you drink the salt water from the ocean it will kill you for you can't separate the salt from the water from the ocean so it's in the mix and therefore it has to be rejected.

I do believe progressive Christianity cracked the door because progressive Christianity uses the historic, Biblical terms but not the same dictionary, thus it creates an open door for these false gospels to come in because they are dealing with issues we all want to deal with. I don't believe Critical theory has a Gospel solution to the issues of partiality and discrimination. On the contrary, it replaces repentance with penance – there is no forgiveness, no reconciliation, no restoration and no salvation. There is only the promise that the oppressed can become the new oppressors and the oppressors now have a life of penance. It creates a polarization and there is no unity possible with it, as we have in Christ when men and women come together because of their unity in the Spirit by love based upon the truth and the power of the Gospel, so that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile.

Bruce: Topic five is good faith subscription to the Westminster standard where good faith subscription is just that simple, which is how we literally subscribe to Westminster standards when men go through ordinations in different presbyteries all across our country by good faith. The question is then, how do we stay unified in all these different presbyteries in the definition of good faith?

Harry: The question is, do we have strict subscription? That is, if you disagree with the Westminster Confession then just go find another church to be a minister in. I have opposed strict subscription, in that sense. I embrace what Dr. Samuel Miller promoted who was a great Princeton theologian, which was full subscription. The reason I don't believe in strict subscription is I don't believe the confession is inspired, inerrant and infallible. I think it's inspirational and I love it but if you're not dealing with the theology presented in the Westminster Confession, you are leaving off the table one of the greatest blessings in your life

and family. Also included in that are the shorter and larger catechisms. It is the greatest discipleship tool I know. Only the Bible is inspired, inerrant and infallible so I don't want to be in a position where I'm trying to say that I can't disagree with the Confession, but what we are saying in good faith is, do people have an exception.

The presbytery determines two things. One, does your exception strike at the vitals of the Confession? If it does, you can't be ordained. If it doesn't, then it may be semantics, as an area we all recognize we need to do some work in on sharpening the Confession. If it doesn't strike at the vitals you can still be a minister. I have two exceptions in which both have been determined as semantic exceptions. Then the presbytery has the second decision which is one of the big decisions of this general assembly, which is, does the presbytery have the authority to say to someone they let in and ordained who has exceptions and the presbytery believes it doesn't necessarily strike at the vitals but they do believe it's dangerous, therefore they take them in but say they cannot teach those exceptions from the pulpit for if you do you will be put under discipline. I believe presbyteries have the right to do this.

This is one of the big issues right now as one of our presbyteries are trying to tell someone they can't do that. This is a presbytery that believes in six day creation and there is a man there that has an exception to that. The way this man holds to it is, not threatening to the vitals but they tell him he can't teach it so that is being challenged. This will be the third general assembly where this has been challenged.

So that is good faith but, to have good faith subscription we all have to have good faith. What is supposed to happen is, once the presbytery makes its decision – yes it's okay, then you can or cannot teach – then they write down what the exception is and that has to be reviewed at the general assembly. Again, I prefer full subscription. Dr. Miller said for a Gospel minister their ordination vows is like a church members vows, for they are the profession of your faith, life and ministry so you must fully embrace them and you may ask about exceptions, but this is full subscription and is to be the profession of your life and ministry as a man of God, called of God.

You can listen to Reverend Cassidy and Reverend David Strain who did a presentation on confessional subscription at our conference here at Briarwood, I think it would be helpful in your understanding more of this.

Bruce: Progressive Christianity is not new, and two years ago the nomination study committee did work on Biblical sexuality and that report was supposed to be out last year but due to COVID we didn't have the general assembly last year, but it has been published and will be presented at this year's general assembly. I know you have read it and are you supportive of it?

Harry: It is almost as good as our elders did. It is an excellent report and I would love to see it be adopted with one amendment and then the next year I would love to see presbyteries bring overtures about ordination from that sexuality report. My concern is, it gives these affirmations and then it gives 'nevertheless' so as you hold to this, I want to give you some pastoral advice. In one of the 'nevertheless' I believe it opens the door for Side B theology. It doesn't call for it or recommend it but I think it opens the door for it and I would like to see that amended.

I was on the study committee for women in ministry in the PCA so remember a study committee is pious advice for the church. It is not at the level of the Confession or the Book of Church Order so it has no binding authority. That's why if it's adopted I would like to see it quoted and bring the overtures that will address the Confession and the Book of Church Order

from it that will deal with the issues that are before us in terms of a gracious, Biblical, Gospel-filled, hope-filled ministry to the sexually addicted that are struggling, but affirm the ordination standards of what it means to be above reproach as an ordained ruling or teaching elder.

Bruce: The last topic deals with Mission to the Word. In Mission to the Word there has been a bit of a shift that has been identified and being address from one of the overtures which our session put through our presbytery before the general assembly to correct the practice of placing unordained people in direct supervisory roles over ordained teaching elders, who are functioning in the field. This is clearly in contrary to the ecclesiastical order that is found in Scripture so how do we deal with this one?

Harry: Mission to the World began to develop a manual policy about four to five years ago and our missions pastor brought it to me which is when we began to discuss it. Our deep concern was a misuse of the study paper on women in ministry in that it began to put women in ministry and unordained men in ministry over the basic task of Mission to the World, which is to make disciples through planting and revitalizing churches and then send out evangelists. We believe that is an ecclesiastical structure and when you do that it requires oversight by ordained teaching or ruling elders. Then it was asked about diaconal mercy ministries and that is fine for you can build a team of leaders, but the line authority needs to be ordained elders. So we at Briarwood recommended an overture to our presbytery that passed and I think it's overture 14. There is another overture that is not quite as strong as ours but I believe ours ought to be passed. Mission to the World (MTW) is not Campus Crusade (Cru) or Navigators where it's not a para-church organization. It is an agency of the general assembly which is the testimony of the church called the PCA. Therefore, like we have unordained people on our missions committee which is fine but the line authority goes through ordained ruling and teaching elders who oversee it. So you can build leadership teams of men and women with extraordinary abilities but these people can't be the line authority. There was the question posed, what if we don't have someone? Then you need to get someone and they need to be ordained. So, if they are not then send them back to their church to go through the process for ordination, if there is a potential man for the job. We try to make sure that every team at Briarwood has unordained men and women on these leadership teams but the authority of the chairmanship and leadership of that team rests with a ruling elder, assisted by a teaching elder.

That concludes our Q & A time so please feel free to email us any questions you may have at [askthepastor@briarwood.org](mailto:askthepastor@briarwood.org) and we'll try our best to get to them in future Q & A times. God bless you.