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To the Members, Deacons, and Elders
of Midway Presbyterian Church
Jonesborough, Tennessee

Dear Friends,

After being part of the Midway congregation for five and a half years, and an Elder for three, I have decided to resign from the Session, and my entire family is resigning as members of Midway Presbyterian Church, effective this date.

This action is not taken lightly, but after much thought and prayer. A decent respect for you and your opinion requires me to inform you of the reasons for these decisions. I have decided to state these reasons in writing for the sake of clarity and accuracy, rather than contributing to the rumors that have been circulating for some time. Please read this letter carefully and thoughtfully.

Simply put, my reason for resigning from the Midway Session and church is a loss of confidence in the leadership of Midway Presbyterian Church. Please allow me to explain the basis for that loss of confidence.

Five years ago when we moved to Tennessee, we were delighted to attend and join Midway. Ross was one of the best preachers we had heard, and we considered ourselves blessed to have found a good church so quickly. We have made many friends at Midway, and we hope you continue to be our friends after learning the reasons for our taking the steps we are now taking.

After I had attended Midway for two years, you elected me an Elder. I have been privileged to serve you and Christ in that role for the past three years. Thank you.

Since its beginning only 30 years ago, there have been doctrinal disputes in the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). Controversies over the length of the six creation days and the ordination of women are perhaps two of the most

prominent. But the most serious controversy by far is the current controversy over justification and salvation, for it goes to the heart of the Gospel. One can go to Heaven despite the error of thinking that the creation days were longer than 24 hours, but the doctrine of justification by faith alone is a matter of eternal life and death. In his letter to the *Galatians*, the Apostle Paul did not curse those who teach that women can be ordained (though he clearly taught that they were not to be ordained); he cursed those who teach a different gospel. Paul argued in *Romans* and *Galatians*, and Martin Luther and John Calvin agreed, that the hinge upon which Christianity turns, and the article of faith by which a church stands or falls, is justification by faith alone.

With this in mind, two years ago I called the Midway Session's attention to an essay on the covenant, election, and salvation written by Steven Schlissel (who has spoken at Midway Church and other churches in Westminster Presbytery, and lectures at the Worldview Conferences the Session encourages Midway children to attend, as well at the Pastors Conferences Ross attends). Mr. Schlissel was teaching a false doctrine of covenant and salvation, but my concern was dismissed by four of the seven Elders.

The Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America in Monroe, Louisiana, whose Teaching Elder is Steven Wilkins, had published Mr. Schlissel's essay, "Covenant: Keeping It Simple," in the May 1, 2001 issue of its nationally distributed church newsletter, *The Auburn Analecta*. Ross assured the Session that he knew both men and that both Mr. Wilkins and Mr. Schlissel were "good men." So Midway Session refused my request that the Session write to Mr. Schlissel about his essay.

One Midway Elder, Joe Neumann, as an individual, but with the knowledge and consent of the Session, did write a brief letter to Mr. Schlissel to ask him to clarify some of the troublesome statements in his essay. Mr. Schlissel sent Joe a reply, confirming our suspicions about his doctrine. But the majority of the Elders, still unpersuaded that there was any problem worth bothering about, refused to address Mr. Schlissel, either to inquire about or to express concern over what he was teaching. Six months after I had initially called Mr. Schlissel's essay to the attention of the Session, three Elders—Neil Smith, Joe Neumann, and John Robbins, as individuals, but with the knowledge and consent of Midway Session—wrote to Mr. Schlissel about the essay, pointing out his errors, particularly with regard to the doctrine of justification, and asking him to repent. Mr. Schlissel did not reply, nor did he change his mind.

At the time I was very disappointed that most Midway Elders did not seem to understand Mr. Schlissel's views and why those views were opposed to the

Gospel. Out of charity, I thought that their reluctance even to inquire of Mr. Schlissel about his views was simply a result of misguided loyalty and friendship, since some Midway Elders have been friends with Mr. Schlissel for years. But in the past year, after seeing roughly the same pattern of behavior with regard to other men teaching errors on salvation and the Gospel, men such as Steve Wilkins and Peter Leithart, both PCA ministers, I have reluctantly and sadly come to the conclusion that friendship is not the whole explanation.

Let me provide some further details. I shall mention one issue that may seem minor to some of you, but because it is part of a pattern of behavior, it illustrates a serious theological problem.

A couple years ago, the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (AAPC), pastored by Steve Wilkins, installed kneelers in its auditorium. Last year, while teaching Sunday School at Midway, Ross defended the installation and use of kneelers, on the grounds that kneeling is an acceptable posture for prayer. True, kneeling is an acceptable posture for prayer, but the propriety of *kneelers*, not the propriety of *kneeling*, is the issue. If a congregation wishes to kneel for prayer, it can do so without kneelers, and many do. I grew up in a church in which the congregation frequently kneeled for prayer—without kneelers, simply by kneeling at their seats or pews.

There are good reasons why our Reformed forefathers removed kneelers from, or refused to install kneelers in, Reformed church buildings: The purpose and effect of kneelers are not to enable the congregation to kneel in prayer (they can do that anyway, if they wish), but to kneel before the wine and the bread, the “altar,” the cross, and the priest officiating up front, in violation of the Second Commandment. That is why kneelers are commonly found in Catholic, Anglican, and similar church buildings, and absent from Reformed church buildings.

Installing kneelers is merely one outworking of the doctrines of the AAPC Pastor and Session: They have also taken to wearing distinctive clothing; celebrating feast days of “saints” (their latest church newsletter, dated August 1, 2003, says: “Mark your calendars now the Feast Day of St. Augustine, to be held August 30, 2003 at the home of Andy and Janie Barham from 5:00-8:00 p.m.”); publishing (and thereby endorsing) essays by Roman Catholics and Anglicans in their church newsletter, *The Auburn Analecta*, without disclaimers; and promoting false doctrine through their meetings and conferences.

The essays written by Roman Catholics and Anglicans that the AAPC Session has published include excerpts from a lecture by N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham (England) in the apostate Anglican Church, titled “Paul’s Gospel and

Caesar's Empire." (At the time of his lecture, Bishop Wright was a "Dean" in the Anglican Church; he recently was named Bishop by the Queen, who is the head of the Church of England.) In this lecture Bishop Wright maintained—and the Auburn Avenue Session thought so highly of his statements on the Gospel that they excerpted them from a longer lecture and republished them in their church newsletter—that “when [the Apostle Paul] referred to ‘the gospel,’ he was not talking about a scheme of soteriology.”

Now soteriology, of course, is that branch of theology that concerns the doctrine of salvation. According to Bishop Wright and *The Auburn Analecta*, when the Apostle Paul speaks in Scripture of “the gospel,” he is not referring to a plan of salvation, as Christians have always understood Paul to mean. Rather than salvation from sin and Hell, Paul had something else in mind, Bishop Wright says. (This explains why Bishop Wright titled one of his books *What Saint Paul Really Said*.)

Furthermore, according to Bishop Wright, as published in *The Auburn Analecta*, the phrase “the gospel” never denotes justification by faith: “despite the way Protestantism has used the phrase [“the gospel”] (making it denote, as it never does in Paul, the doctrine of justification by faith....”

Now, if Protestantism is in error, and the Gospel is not about a plan of salvation and justification by faith, what do Bishop Wright and his publishers, the AAPC Session, think the Gospel is about? Bishop Wright answered that question in *The Auburn Analecta*, October 1, 2002: “Paul’s proclamation clearly carried a political message at its heart, not merely as one ‘implication’ among many.” Paul’s Gospel, according to Bishop Wright writing in *The Auburn Analecta*, is not about a plan of salvation, never means justification by faith, and is, in fact, a political message.

Contrary to what Bishop Wright says in *The Auburn Analecta*, Paul quite clearly did use the phrase “the Gospel” to refer to soteriology and justification by faith: “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith: As it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith’ ” (*Romans* 1:16-17). Paul clearly says the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about soteriology, salvation, and justification by faith. The Gospel is not a “political message at its heart.” Protestantism is not in error on this point.

By denying what the Apostle Paul clearly says about the Gospel, and by substituting for the Gospel of Christ a political message, both Bishop Wright and his publishers, the AAPC Session, led by Steve Wilkins, are preaching a false gospel.

When I said this publicly in October 2002, the AAPC Session wrote to the Midway Session asking that the Midway Session admonish me for my criticism of them and their statements, and require me to publish a retraction and apologize for “slandering” them. The Midway Session refused to do so, by a vote of 4-2, despite Ross’ defense of the AAPC’s publishing of Bishop Wright’s essay, his strong criticism of me, and his accusation that I had sinned by saying the AAPC Session taught a false gospel in their church newsletter. Instead of taking disciplinary action against me, as Ross, Ken, Terry, and the AAPC Session desired, the Midway Session voted to send a letter to the AAPC Session saying that it was “ill-advised” of them to publish Bishop Wright’s essay.

The AAPC Session, in keeping with its aggressive promotion of false theology, and in a continuing effort to silence criticism of its false teaching, wrote again to the Midway Session defending its publication of the views of the apostate Anglican Bishop in the AAPC newsletter. The AAPC Session refused to admit that it was wrong for doing so, insisted that Bishop Wright did not teach a false gospel, and renewed its demand that I be disciplined for accusing them of teaching a false gospel. The Midway Session refused to do so, despite a minority of three believing that such action was desirable. In fact, Ross agreed with the AAPC Session that Bishop Wright’s statements were not a false gospel, and that therefore the AAPC Session was not teaching a false gospel.

Dr. Sidney Dyer, a Professor on the faculty of Greenville (South Carolina) Presbyterian Theological Seminary, who recently preached at Midway, last year published a review in Greenville Seminary’s theological journal of *What Saint Paul Really Said*, one of Bishop Wright’s many books. Dr. Dyer had this to say about Bishop Wright’s theology:

“The most disturbing material in Wright’s book is that which sets forth his view of justification. His effort to take the doctrine out of the realm of soteriology and to put it in the realm of ecclesiology is undoubtedly motivated by his desire to tear down what divides Evangelicals and Roman Catholics.

“His view of justification is an attack on the very heart of the Gospel. Paul warned of the danger of preaching another gospel in *Galatians* 1:8, ‘But if we, or an angel from Heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached, let him be accursed.’ Paul, by using the words ‘*any* other gospel’ (emphasis added), shows that he is attacking all other forms of the Gospel....

“Wright’s view of justification is an attempt to reverse the Reformation. We must resist such attempts. The issue is one of life and death—eternal life and eternal death. When theological professors and pastors abandon the Biblical and Confessional doctrine of justification, they sacrifice the Gospel and the souls of men.”

Some men in the PCA and other Reformed denominations have recognized the Antichristian nature of Bishop Wright's views on the Gospel; but the AAPC Session has published the Bishop's views—without disclaimer, correction, retraction, or apology—and actually defended the Bishop's views against criticism. When the Midway Session mildly advised the AAPC Session that it was ill-advised to publish Bishop Wright's essay, the AAPC Session continued to defend its publication of Bishop Wright's views on the Gospel. Because I publicly rebuked the AAPC Session for teaching Bishop Wright's false gospel in *The Auburn Analecta*, some Elders at Midway accused me of "sin."

(At about the time the Midway Session received the first letter from the AAPC Session last Fall, a majority of Midway Elders voted to close all Midway Session meetings, barring members of the congregation from attending and observing their deliberations. One quietly observing member of the congregation was required to leave a Session meeting. By a second vote in February 2003, a majority of Elders confirmed their earlier decision to close all meetings; declared that the Midway Session was in "permanent executive session;" and barred all members of the congregation from attending and observing Session deliberations unless they specifically sought and were granted permission to do so by the Session. Midway Session meetings remained closed to the congregation for five months, until a formal Complaint dated March 1, 2003, setting forth Biblical examples of and requirements for open meetings, and signed by three Elders, Neil Smith, Joe Neumann, and John Robbins, was filed. Realizing that if the Complaint were denied by the Session, the Complainants would appeal to Presbytery, the Midway Session voted to open Session meetings to the congregation once again. But some Midway Elders made it clear that they thought there was no Scriptural objection to barring members of the congregation from any and all meetings of the Session. This opinion betrays a lack of understanding of Biblical, Presbyterian Church government, in which officers are accountable not only to other officers, but to the congregations who elected them as well.)

The Session of the AAPC, through its nationally distributed church newsletter and conferences, has been assiduously promoting a counterfeit version of Christianity that has earned the denunciation of one small denomination, the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the U.S. In the summer of 2002, the RPCUS warned its members and the church of Christ at large with these words:

"Covenant Presbytery of the RPCUS declares that teaching presented in the 2002 Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Pastors Conference involves a fundamental denial of the essence of the Christian Gospel in the denial of justification by faith alone.

“That the teaching of the various speakers, Douglas Wilson, Steve Schlissel, John Barach, and J. Steven Wilkins, has the effect of destroying the Reformed faith through the introduction of false hermeneutic principles; the infusion of sacerdotalism; and the redefinition of the doctrines of the church, the sacraments, election, effectual calling, perseverance, regeneration, justification, union with Christ, and the nature and instrumentality of faith....

“We therefore resolve that these teachings are heretical. We call these men to repentance. We call upon the church of Jesus Christ to hold these teachings in contempt. We call upon the courts of the churches that are responsible for these men to institute judicial process against them and to vindicate the honor of Christ and the truth of the Christian Gospel by bringing judgment upon them, suspending them from office, and removing them from the communion of the church, should they not repent. May God have mercy on their souls.”

Some Christian men recognize that a different gospel, a “new paradigm,” is being proclaimed in the PCA. Some Midway Elders do not.

For the past two years, since the Midway Session first refused in mid-2001 even to inquire as a Session (let alone to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort”) of those teaching falsehoods about the Gospel, and to shepherd the flock by warning them against false teaching and teachers, it has become increasingly clear to me that the current leadership of Midway is reluctant to correct false teaching about the Gospel if the false teaching is done by old friends.

Because Midway Church has so many connections to men teaching a false gospel—through the PCA, through Pastors Conferences, through Worldview Conferences, through their newsletters, books, and tapes—I have, on several occasions, brought to the attention of the Midway Session statements made by these men, only to have my concerns dismissed by some vague reassurance that “he is a good man.”

I can understand a reluctance to question or rebuke old friends, but when the Gospel is at stake, one must sometimes choose between friends and Christ, and risk offending old friends. Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (*Luke* 14:26). The views on justification and the Gospel that are now being promoted in the PCA and in other Reformed churches must be opposed with all our intelligence and might, for, as Dr. Dyer said, the issue is one of life and death. For the past two years, and despite many opportunities, the Midway Session has failed to do so.

Because the problems dividing the Midway Session seemed insoluble, last May the Session decided to seek advice from the Shepherding Committee of Westminster Presbytery. Not only was the Session at an impasse over these doctrinal issues, but Sam had come to the Session in the Summer of 2002, disclosing that he had come to believe that there is no Scriptural warrant for a Sunday Sabbath. When he disclosed his views, Sam asked that he be allowed to resign as Elder—rather than being tried, convicted, and deposed from office—if the Session were to determine that his views could not be tolerated within the parameters of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The Session agreed. The Session subsequently voted at two meetings not to allow Sam's views. But when Sam did not resign from the Session after several months had elapsed, and not being inclined to bring Sam to trial and depose him, the Session sought advice from the Shepherding Committee on this matter as well.

Last month, July, after meeting once with the Midway Session in June, the Shepherding Committee sent a Memorandum to Midway Session suggesting that both Sam Lindley and John Robbins resign as Elders. Now no one is bound by the recommendations of the Shepherding Committee, and my resignation is not for the reason the Committee suggested. The Committee's advice with regard to me was based on the Committee's opinion that "there will likely be continued disharmony as long as Mr. Robbins continues as an elder at the Midway Presbyterian Church." The Committee made it clear that they were not recommending that I resign because of any charge against me: "Our advice is not an indictment against Mr. Robbins. We are aware of his many positive contributions to the theological discussion in the reformed world." The Committee recommended that I resign in order to restore harmony to the Midway Session. In the Committee's opinion, I am the "troubler of Israel" (the phrase is from *1 Kings* 18, not from the Committee's Memorandum), and my departure will likely restore peace and harmony to the Midway Session.

On August 4, Joe Neumann submitted his letter of resignation to the Session, effective August 23. In his letter Joe stated several reasons for his resignation, including problems within the Session and the denomination. It has been a pleasure serving on the Session with Joe, for while we have not always agreed, Joe is thoughtful and fair-minded, and concerned for the proclamation of the Gospel.

Last Sunday, August 10, Neil Smith announced his resignation as Elder, effective August 6. In the years I have attended Midway, Neil has been a model of Christian integrity for us all, and the statement he read to the congregation after the worship service confirmed that impression. Neil resigned because he had

concluded that he was no longer qualified to be an Elder, not because of some doctrinal error, but based of the requirements of Scripture about an Elder's family.

But all Elders, not just Neil, must meet the same doctrinal and familial requirements. It seems to me that two other Elders do not: By their statements and actions over the past two years, ____ and ____ have taken the wrong side in the current justification controversy. Tragically, each man has a child who converted to Catholicism (one Greek Catholic and one Roman Catholic), thereby rejecting the Gospel, for which they were excommunicated.

Now God does not promise salvation to all baptized children, and any view of the covenant that suggests that he does is false. When children of Elders reject the Gospel, this affects their fathers' qualifications for holding office. Not only does the passage setting forth the requirements for Elders in *1 Timothy 3* mention children ("having his children in submission with all reverence"), but Paul in *Titus 1* makes the requirement even more clear: "having believing children, not accused of dissipation or insubordination."

These are the fundamental reasons for my loss of confidence in the leadership of Midway Church. These are the reasons I am resigning from the Session, and my family and I are resigning from the church. We do not wish to continue as members of a church in which the leadership ignores men who are teaching a false gospel, and imputes sin to those who "note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them" (*Romans 16:17-18*). Ross has made it clear that if I continue to disagree with him on these issues, and to speak out about them, that he no longer wants me at Midway. In a Session meeting last Spring he invited my family and me to leave Midway and to attend or start another church.

We intend to do exactly that.

We count many members of Midway Church as dear Christian friends, and we shall miss seeing you each week. But we cannot continue as though there were nothing seriously wrong at Midway. The controversy at Midway is part of a larger controversy about the Gospel that is now raging throughout Reformed churches. Many are departing from the faith once delivered to the saints. By refusing to note false teachers, by failing to warn members of Midway about their views, and by encouraging members of Midway to attend conferences at which they speak, the leadership of Midway has taken sides in the current justification controversy, and it has taken the wrong side.

In Christ,

John Robbins

P. S. Lest someone accuse my family and me of breaking our membership and ordination vows by resigning from the Session and the church, the *PCA Book of Church Order* recognizes and permits such resignations. Furthermore, these actions are taken in fulfillment of my vow to “strive for the purity, peace, unity, and edification of the church.” There can be no Christian purity, peace, unity, or edification except on the basis of the Gospel. Subjection to the Elders is not absolute, but limited by the phrase “in the Lord.” When Elders refuse to correct men who are teaching a false gospel; when Elders criticize those who do their duty by identifying false teaching as false; and when Elders fail to warn the sheep of danger, to remain submissive to them is to be rebellious to Christ.