The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

There is a very old doctrine that goes back to the early Greek Fathers, but which I think also is deeply embedded in Calvin, namely, wherever Christ is, there is the church (ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia). Understood in a Protestant context, it means, negatively, that the church is not constituted by the presence of Pope or bishop or by General Assembly or Presbytery or session, or even by the faith of the people; understood positively, it means that the church is constituted by the presence of the living, acting, reigning Lord Jesus Christ. This is what Calvin intends when he says that the marks of the church are Word and sacraments. In either case, negatively or positively, it is not the church which self-determines her identity or reality; the church is determined by Jesus Christ, who, in the power of the Spirit, and in the freedom of his love, graciously comes to be present among his people. He, as it were, mediates the church; the church – not its faith, doctrine, worship, or ministry - does not mediate him. That, in part, is what it means when we say he is Lord, and in particular that he is Lord over the church. Largely the PCUSA in any of its theological expressions fails to understand the basic ecclesiology of the formative theologians of the early church or of the Reformation, and that is part of our problem. We have substituted an church centered ecclesiology for a Christ centered ecclesiology, and that observation applies every bit as much to the evangelical as to the liberal wings of the church.
Has Jesus Christ abandoned the PCUSA? We are no longer the church if that is the case. But that is a terrifying conclusion to insist upon, and not one to which I can in any manner give consent. I have three brief points which in some manner develop the import of the ecclesiology and a concluding observation. I could say much more, but this will do for tonight.

Wherever Christ is, there is the church. First, among the wheat and tares that is the PCUSA, I believe the following are true and bear eloquent witness to him:

“We believe in one God, the Father… We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father… of one being with the Father… We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.” (Nicene Creed)

“When the fullness of time came God sent his Son, his eternal wisdom, the substance of his own glory, into the world, who took the nature of humanity from the substance of a woman, a virgin, by means of the Holy Ghost.” (Scot’s Confession)

Q. “Who is (the) mediator who is at the same time true God and a true and perfectly righteous man? A. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is freely given to us for complete redemption and righteousness.” (The Heidelberg Catechism)

“We believe and teach that the same immense, one and indivisible God is in person inseparably and without confusion distinguished as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (2nd Helvetic Confession)

These are not my parading of my orthodoxy; these are the affirmation of the faith of the PCUSA.

Nevertheless, I will parade my own orthodoxy. Among the wheat and tares that is the PCUSA, every day I teach this at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; when I preach,
this is my theme – that Jesus Christ is singularly and solely savior and Lord, and that God is one being, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and every now and then I write a book arguing for this. I am nowhere censored nor silenced. On the contrary, whether in classroom or as I travel across the country on a monthly basis, preaching and teaching, I experience a passionate thankfulness among so many of my students and from our congregations for the proclamation of the classical faith of the church. Among the wheat and tares of the PCUSA, it is a good time to bear witness to Jesus Christ as he is interpreted through the great creeds of the church.

Wherever Christ is, there is the church. For me that means, secondly, that among the wheat and tares that is the PCUSA, men and women share equally and fully in the life and ministry of the living, reigning and acting Lord Jesus Christ, to the glory of the Father, for the sake of the world. Calvin’s central doctrine of union with Christ is at stake here. Through union with Christ, this equality of participation in the life and mission of the Lord Jesus is the corollary of the incarnation, in which in his humanity he assumed all persons, men and women, into to his eternal Sonship. Through union with Christ, men and women in Christ share fully and equally in his communion with the Father, and in his mission from the Father. To consider affiliating with a denomination (EPC) in which the ordination of women is a local option and not an essential of the faith is, to my mind, to put on the table the possibility of women becoming disenfranchised from their full participation in the life and mission of Jesus Christ. In this regard, among the wheat and tares that is the PCUSA, I am proud to be a minister in a denomination that faithfully upholds the full participation of women in the life of Jesus Christ. The full and equal inclusion of men and women in the life of the living, reigning and acting Lord
Jesus, in my view, is the acceptable and faithful theological position, the consequence of our union with Christ.

Wherever Christ is, there is the church. For me that means, thirdly, that among the wheat and tares that is the PCUSA, I have found life here. Let me explain what I mean. Cathy and I were married through the office of this church. Two of my children were baptized through the office of this church. Cathy and I were ordained through the office of this church. Over four years ago, when I was sick with cancer, and nigh unto death, the congregations and ministers of this church, in their thousands, consistently, faithfully, and firmly prayed for me – some of you are in this room! I reach out to you with gratitude. Thank you! You are my family in Christ Jesus our Lord. You may leave me, but I will not leave or forget you.

Now my closing observation: I suspect that we are passed arguments, so let me continue in a personal way. My wife Cathy is here with me tonight. Just last evening she returned exhausted from Camp Hill where she, with Jim Belliveau, your Clerk of Session, on behalf of Pittsburgh Presbytery, defended the denomination’s ordination vows in a grueling trial before the Synod PJC. We are here as friends and allies, not as enemies. Yet it is my hunch that you have fallen out of love with us. I remind you that the church is like marriage – it is a covenant community; the exercise of a covenant is faithfulness. In covenant faithfulness I have this to say to you, if I may be so bold, and claiming an authority I may not posses (but in Christ I will be bold): speaking in the name of Pittsburgh Presbytery, in the name of the PCUSA, and most certainly speaking in the power of the name of Jesus Christ: I love you, and I forgive those among you who work to break communion. I ask that you forgive me, for my anger towards your intent, and if
I have here spoken unkindly. And when we, the PCUSA, have hurt or disappointed or offended you, may you forgive us, through whose services you too have been baptized, married, and ordained, and through whose services your loved ones have been buried. And I pray that in covenant faithfulness, among the wheat and tares that is the PCUSA, you will remain in fellowship with us, and in God’s mercy, learn to love us again.

I close where I began: the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all.

The Reverend Andrew Purves, Ph. D.
Minister Member of Pittsburgh Presbytery
Hugh Thomson Kerr Professor of Pastoral Theology, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary