

Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Evangelicals in the PC(USA)

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LOOKING BACK

Presbyterians in America have a rich heritage that we do well to remember. Our roots deeply embedded in the Bible, articulated powerfully by Augustine, Calvin and the various Reformed confessions are decidedly distinguished. Then of course, there is the Westminster Confession of Faith, written in the 1640's with a strong ecumenical purpose. During the 1600's many believers with reformed convictions migrated to America. In 1706, the first Presbytery was established in Philadelphia and Presbyterianism flourished on American soil. Presbyterians soon played a large role in The Great Awakening, a spiritual movement that left a lasting imprint on this country, so much so that G K Chesterton referred to America as the "Nation with the Soul of a Church." Presbyterians also led the way to independence; the only minister signing the Declaration of Independence was John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister. And, as you may know, Horace Walpole announced to the British Parliament, "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson."

By the end of the 18th century, the General Assembly had been formed and Presbyterians were already the second largest and fastest growing denomination in the country. They were educated, theologically aware, and a major cultural influence. But they were also aggressively evangelistic, especially in the frontier areas, and given to prolific church planting.

Presbyterians had a significant role in The Second Great Awakening at the beginning of the 19th century, fueled initially by Presbyterian ministers. However, internal strife and controversies slowed development during the remainder of the 19th century. Early in the 20th century, the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, of which the Auburn Affirmation (a denial of five major doctrines) was a major source of contention, created additional tensions and sparked a pattern of confessional decline.

Nevertheless, by the mid-1950's there were more than 4 million Presbyterians in this country, the fifth largest Protestant denomination. Presbyterians were highly esteemed and had an influence far beyond what membership figures would suggest. During the late 1950's, research on religion in American uncovered the fact that twice as many people wished to be Presbyterian than were already members. Given the fact that our population doubled since that time, we would have expected a golden age of Presbyterianism with at least 10 million or more members by now.

ERA OF DECLINE

Instead, there has been an unrelenting hemorrhage of members that threatens to become an irreversible slide into extinction. Why? Primarily, because liberal, revisionists leaders have gained control of the denomination power structure and adroitly maneuvered to achieve their goals. Eviscerating Biblical authority, pursuing a left-leaning social-political agenda rather than evangelism and spiritual moral goals, they assured a very different kind of Presbyterianism would predominate. During the turbulent social upheaval of the

1960's, Angela Davis and others like her were in favor with the hierarchy. During this same decade the Christian world view that had prevailed since the colonial period as the principal influence on American values and culture was smashed. In its aftermath, Presbyterians made a major shift to accommodate. The Confession of '67 and a trail of other tragic developments soon followed and Presbyterians who were evangelical and orthodox found themselves marginalized, ideologically displaced, and culturally homeless. Conflict between evangelical and liberal Presbyterians was rife, with hostility and distrust mounting steadily.

Of course, Presbyterians are not alone in this downward spiral. Having, with other mainline churches, relegated themselves to become sideline denominations, while new evangelical congregations and denominations have multiplied rapidly. Most recently we have observed the trauma among Episcopalians, especially during 2006. Robert Wuthnow, professor at Princeton University, noted this pattern in his book, *The Struggle for America's Soul*, observing this pattern.

Presbyterianism in the United States has from the beginning been one of our flagship denominations. It is now faced with a world far different and more complex than any world it has faced before. The turmoil it has experienced within its ranks during the past several decades is by no means unique. Indeed this turmoil can be found in nearly all the major American denominations and faiths. And yet, it is hard to find another denomination in which the turmoil has been as notable in its magnitude or as profound in its consequences (p. 68, 69).

He also calls attention to the fact that, "The more each side came into contact with the other, and the more knowledge it gained about the other, the less it liked the other" (p. 24). So Wuthnow does not envision ready

reconciliation, rather predicting that the evidence points to a continuation of hostile estrangement.

So, evangelicals within the PC(USA) continue a losing struggle and with each new shift or escalation of the liberal agenda ask, “How much more can we endure?”, for we are in the firm grip of the cultural captivity of the church and the endgame is apparent.

RENEWAL EFFORTS

During the last fifty years, evangelical Presbyterians have attempted to remedy the problem through continual renewal efforts. They wanted to be a part of the solution, believing renewal was possible. They did not want disruption. They love this denomination and although they have been wounded, discouraged and estranged, they have stuck with it. They have been unhappy with the actions and direction of the denomination, but in general they have remained loyal. Meanwhile, many disenchanted laity relocated to various kinds of evangelical churches that take the Bible seriously, have vibrant worship, and provide spiritual nurture. Two divisions ensued in the 70's and 80's. Consequently, evangelical Presbyterian congregations and influence within the PC(USA) have steadily declined and now there is frequent mention of a dying church. I have no doubt that the leaders who have inflicted us with these plagues are sincere, but they are sincerely wrong and they are taking a great denomination down with them.

The die is cast; the noose is slowly tightening and if the trend continues, the once great PC(USA) will fall into utter ruin.

LOOKING AHEAD

Is this what you want? Are you willing to live with this? What can you do about it? Instead of these ongoing wars of attrition that are difficult for everyone, discouraging and sapping energy that could be expended on constructive matters, it is time for an alternative strategy. It is time to stop the unprofitable quarreling and put hearts and resources into developing something positive and visionary– a new mission-driven, ministry-focused Presbyterianism. It is high time we committed ourselves to emphasizing and experiencing the spiritual mission of the church so that our hearts may burn joyfully with passion as we serve the Lord together, share the Gospel and provide spiritual nurture to His people. After all, that is why the church exists. This is the most important thing, for without it the church finds no justification. We need to make the main thing become the main thing again. It is time to put first things first.

A NEW MISSION- DRIVEN PRESBYTERIANISM

I have had numerous opportunities to mention the possibility of a new mission-driven Presbyterianism to others and the response is always the same. First, raised eyebrows and then enthusiastic support. At first people ask, “Do you think this is really possible?” and then once I say, “It is possible and the number of people who desire to do this is increasing rapidly,” they contemplate that say, “That is exciting. We would love to be a part of such an effort.” And in many instances this response is from people who are not currently Presbyterians.

Let's restore joy and hope to Presbyterians so that our people will look forward to worshipping together and talking about the Lord wherever they are, as Tony Dungy, head coach of the Colts, has done and as he so graciously did following the Super Bowl victory. Recently, Wayne Huizenga Jr. described his conversion experience to me and then that of his family. I listened to him recount a church experience in which he had a spiritual encounter with the Lord. His heart pounded and he was scarcely aware of what was happening except that he knew God was calling him and that he had to commit his life to Christ and did so. As he explained this to me, his glowing face and devotion to the Lord were convicting. I am so grateful for what God is doing in his life but the tragedy is that this experience did not occur in a Presbyterian church, the church in which he grew up. But if we recapture the essence of our heritage, this could occur frequently.

Let me give you another example. Years ago, no one expected anything evangelical to be successful in New York City, except for David Wilkerson. Evangelical ministry there appeared to be about as difficult as growing begonias in the desert, but consider the ministry of Tim Keller at Redeemer Presbyterian Church as a prime example of what can happen. Thousands are now part of that congregation and many new churches have been planted in the area. There are other thriving evangelical ministries in New York City, but this one is distinctively Presbyterian. This is what we need to recapture and multiply. With God, much more is possible than you may be willing to dream.

A new mission-driven Presbyterianism will be the most exciting development among Presbyterians in at least 100 years. It certainly has the possibility of creating a new movement that will capture the attention of people everywhere. Moreover, this will probably be the last opportunity Presbyterians will have to do so and the window of opportunity will not remain open very long. Ironically, it occurs at a time when it is more popular than it has been in many years to be Reformed, as recently mentioned in *Christianity Today*. The beauty and grandeur of Reformed Theology and its compelling world view is needed more than ever. We can and must strive to fill this land with Presbyterian churches that will make a difference.

SEPARATION

Separation is necessary. Yet separation is a major barrier because of the emotions and memories that are involved. We love this denomination and hate to leave it. There is usually a sense of failure and guilt that accompanies the thought of separation. But the PC(USA) is not the whole church; it is only one facet of it. The church is the body of believers wherever they may be. The PC(USA) is merely a denomination. And we must remember that it is a denomination that has willfully rejected the authority of Scripture and the essence of the Gospel. The PC(USA) no longer embraces the historic Christian faith that binds all believers together. By its repetitive decisions, it has separated itself from the historic Christian faith, so it is now essential for those of us who are evangelical to realign with others who are like-minded and share our desire to

trust and obey the Lord according to the Scriptures. The hierarchy needs to hear the message God sent to Pharaoh through Moses, “Let my people go.”

VISION AND PURPOSE

On the other hand, you can separate yet accomplish little. This has been the experience of some churches. They have simply extricated themselves from an environment which was absolutely incompatible with their faith commitment. Then they became complacent. But you are called to reclaim our great Presbyterian heritage and the spiritual mission of the church. To do this requires a clear sense of purpose and vision. Without this, it is altogether too easy to become sectarian and atrophy.

A clear sense of purpose motivates people yet too few churches have it. Lloyd Perry, who for years taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, told me that of the thousands of churches he visited, no more than 10% had a clear sense of purpose. Most simply maintained what they had. Rick Warren recently reminded us to become purpose driven churches. We should also be reminded of the lessons learned by Viktor Frankl and mentioned in his volume, *Man's Search for Meaning*, as he reflected on his prison camp experience in Nazi Germany. He observed that those who survived Auschwitz were driven by the belief that they had a higher purpose- they still had something to do and that kept them going.

God is calling to a higher purpose of creating a renewed and vibrant Presbyterianism that is truly spiritual, honoring the Lord and winning people to Christ. This call – perhaps the final call – is to establish a new mission-driven

Presbyterianism. The rising generation is not interested in playing church. They want to connect with God, develop meaningful relationships and make a difference. We can give them that opportunity. What are you willing to do about it? As you contemplate that, let me share with you a stirring narrative:

The Rubicon River, near modern Ravenna in northern Italy, is as unimpressive today as it was when Julius Caesar stood on its northern bank in 49 B.C. Small and shallow, it dries up at even the hint of drought. Certainly, it presented no obstacle to the advance of an army. It was just a matter of crossing a little bridge. But as Plutarch, one of Caesar's two early biographers, tell us, the great general "became full of thought" as he approached the river. His "mind wavered," and he "began to go more slowly and then ordered a halt." Julius Caesar stood on the bank of the little river and "for a long time...weighed matters up silently in his own mind, irresolute between...two alternatives."

The Rubicon divided northern Italy— Cisalpine Gaul, the large province Caesar controlled— from Rome, which was governed by the Senate and dominated by Cnaeus Pompeius Magnus, better known as Pompey. Once Caesar's ally, Pompey was now his archrival, and he had the law on his side. The Lex Cornelia Majestatis solemnly forbade any Roman general from leading an army out of the province to which he was assigned. This meant, quite simply, that if Caesar and the six thousand men with him crossed the Rubicon, they would bring down upon themselves all the vast legions commanded by Pompey and the Senate of Rome.

To cross the Rubicon would mean civil war, maybe impossible to win and certainly tragic for the nation. But if this was a powerful reason not to cross, there was also compelling reason not to remain on the northern bank. Inaction would perpetuate a peace that had been dictated by a fatally misgoverned Rome. To remain on the far side of the river, in apparent safety, would sooner or later bring calamity. A state misruled cannot long endure.

And that was what brought Julius Caesar to the north bank of the Rubicon. To cross it would bring the wrath of Rome thundering down upon him and his men. To cross it would engulf the republic in civil war. But to remain on the northern bank would at best gain nothing and would most likely risk an end to his power. Besides, if it

did not destroy Rome, crossing the Rubicon was the best of hope of saving it.

Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, starting a great civil war that would bring him unprecedented power in the Roman world even as it advanced the frontiers of Rome both in extent and through time. Mired in corruption, Rome had been almost surely doomed. By choosing a course that ended this moribund misrule, Caesar gave to the Roman state, and therefore to Greco-Roman civilization, four more centuries of life in the West and six more in the East, bequeathing to the world a heritage that is more than history. It continues to influence and inform cultures and governments, including that of our own nation. Crossing the Rubicon was, by any measure, a great decision.

(Alan Axelrod, *Profiles in Audacity*, pp. 1,3,4)

The decisions you make in the next few months will determine how historians write about you and about Presbyterians. The decisions you make will determine our legacy and the rising generation's future. The way forward surely means hardship and sacrifice. It will require faith, courage and tenacity. The possibilities are great. So will it be a slow, painful death in the PC(USA)? Or will it be a new mission-driven, spiritually vibrant Presbyterianism?

Will you cross the Rubicon?