

The Reformed Institute is offering a series of essays over the summer months to consider the state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Whither the PC(USA)?

FAITH FIRST

During the last several years the Presbyterian Church in the United States has appeared to be in a state of almost perpetual crisis. Membership and contributions have steadily dropped. The church has been unable to hold much of the youth who have grown up under our tutelage. Most recently, removal from the Book of Order of the prohibition against ordination of non-celibate homosexuals has produced a virtual firestorm that threatens to take some more conservative churches and even parts of presbyteries out of the denomination. Even apart from the ordination controversy, pastors of some major churches have proposed formation of presbyteries defined not by geography but by shared beliefs and values.

Confronting this advancing sea of troubles, the leadership of National Capital Presbytery proposed to strengthen and transform member congregations to be “Missional, Pastoral, and Prophetic.” The first two of these guiding themes could hardly be better: Missional—of course! Pastoral—absolutely!

The term Prophetic is more problematic. It seems to urge churches to become active in political and social causes, often involving complex economic, foreign policy, or constitutional issues on which their technical expertise usually is not great and on which many congregations are divided. It may well be that from the standpoint of serving the long term public good the most constructive way for the church to be politically prophetic at the present time would be to urge the President and Congress to make major cuts in federal spending and reform entitlements, while at the same time making prudent tax increases and enacting other revenue raising measures, as a means of fending off the fiscal disaster with which we are now threatened. But that is not going to happen. And in any case it is the kind of mega-issue on which the church with its existing constituency and the limits of its knowledge is probably wise not to become deeply involved.

This does not mean that the church should never take positions on public issues. But these are best focused in areas with high levels of moral content and intra-church consensus, such as civil rights, religious freedom both at home abroad, environmental concerns, and protection of children. Also, in an era of economic hard times and necessary cuts in government spending, the church has a responsibility to defend the interests of the most vulnerable.

My larger concern with the above list of goals, however, is not that it may include too much but that it leaves out the essential goal on which all the others ultimately depend: the strengthening of underlying Christian faith by proclaiming the glory and transcendent love of our risen Lord, and the miracle by which Jesus through the Holy Spirit made us prospective heirs, begotten not made, to eternal salvation.

It seems to me that it is in this core role of affirming our Biblical faith in word and deed, more than in pastoral care, mission support, or cause-oriented social action, that we have most often fallen short. As a result, as Christian Smith in his studies of church-reared youth has found, our young people have come to regard Christianity as a form of “therapeutic, moralistic deism”—neither a life-shaping imperative nor a challenging source of spiritual renewal.

For a variety of reasons we have often hesitated to affirm the basic truth claims of our Reformed faith, or to maintain our commitment to Jesus’s declaration that he is, now and always, “the way, the truth, and the life.” We have not wanted to offend our friends in other faiths or no faith; we have turned in horror from the kind of religious absolutism that helped feed the anti-Semitic sources of the Holocaust; we have sought to avoid intellectual conflict with modern science; we have rejected views of current history that pit Christianity against Islam as combatants in a kind of final Armageddon for world domination. Or we have simply been too lazy to make ourselves literate in the articles and teachings of our faith.

All of these except the last are legitimate and proper concerns that need to be considered in planning personal and collective strategies for dealing with the increasingly non-Christian culture in which we live. But not one of them, nor all together, are worth giving up our commitment to Jesus as the unique savior of humankind.

I think an important step in faith renewal among Presbyterians and other participants in the Reformed tradition would be to reclaim our affiliation with the term “evangelical,” which we have foolishly allowed our fundamentalist brothers and sisters to identify in the public mind almost exclusively with their form of Christianity. Evangelical used to be a virtual synonym for Protestant. It still is in Germany. Within the history of the Reformed tradition in America, evangelical preachers like the Puritan Jonathan Edwards, the Calvinist revivalist George Whitefield, the Presbyterians John Witherspoon, and Lyman Beecher played major roles.

During the nineteenth century Methodists and Baptists stole some of the spiritual fire from more staid and formal Presbyterians. But many Presbyterians continued to participate enthusiastically in the periodic awakenings and reawakenings that recharged the nation’s religious and moral vitality.

It was only in the 1950s that sociologists created an influential new classification of Protestant denominations, grouping “Mainline Protestants,” including Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and a few others in one category, and “Evangelicals,” including Baptists and a wide variety of sects emphasizing scriptural inerrancy and the “born again” experience in

another. All kinds of African-American Protestant denominations were placed in a third category of their own. Presbyterians have generally welcomed being identified as “Mainline,” perhaps flattered by the suggestion of genealogical purity. (The label seems to have originated as a designation of some socially elite Protestant churches on the Philadelphia Main Line.)

During all of this time, however, a substantial number of Presbyterians, generally with more conservative theological and moral outlooks, have continued to think of themselves as evangelical. It was among these that change in the Book of Order to permit ordination of homosexuals was most vigorously resisted.

In the June issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook* more than a hundred prominent Presbyterian pastors, including several from National Capital Presbytery, all of whom had been on the winning side in the ordination controversy, addressed an open letter to the losers, urging them to stay within the denomination and promising to work “to protect the freedom of congregations and Presbyteries to make decisions that reflect an interpretation of scripture that may differ from ours.”

It seems to me that this work of reconciliation would be significantly advanced by public avowal of the continued relevance and value of the evangelical part of our heritage.

In any event, returning to the theme words adopted for National Capital Presbytery: MISSIONAL, PASTORAL, PROPHETIC (with caution)—but above all: FAITHFUL!

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