

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)?

Being able to say where the PCUSA is headed, and where it ought to be headed, all depends upon the standard one uses. If that standard is membership then we are not doing well at all, and are not headed anywhere but extinction. We are losing members and have been for several years.

Of course, once one applies this standard, one then is launched into the task of saying why this has been the case, of saying what is going on now that will continue to lose members for us if it is not remedied, and saying what new, bright transformational strategy is needed to right us.

Yet, it is not clear that one ought to go at it this way. We are losing members, but so is *every* American denomination. The two exceptions are the Roman Catholic church and the Mormons, and that is because of birth rate (both) and immigration (Catholics.)

It is helpful to recognize what this standard of membership implies. While it might be a measure of how effectively we are getting the gospel out to folks (not well), it tends to be actually a standard of importance and influence. Worrying about membership tends to be worrying about our place in American culture, about our ability to influence it, and about our relevance. We are worried about losing that place and influence. In short, the standard is worldliness itself.

What I would like to suggest is that if anything, what is needed to assess the direction of the PCUSA, is a better standard of measurement. Such as? Well, it might be the goals of the Reformation itself, and the direction of spiritual energy that led up to the Reformation. What the Reformation above all sought was a return to the life of the early church. It wanted to see all Christians live a life worthy of the gospel; the gospel's demands were not just for a few with special vocations. What did this "priesthood of all believers" mean? It was a matter of raising spiritual standards and not bringing them to a low common denominator. The chief end of *all* human beings is "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." How was this to happen?

By biblical and theological literacy, but also general literacy.

By practice for everybody, including attendance at worship, taking communion, having a personal prayer life as well as family devotions.

By charitable works, and by shaping and living public life according to biblical moral standards. By justice.

By a church life. Despite differences with the Roman church, the Reformers were catholic in the broader sense; they believed that the church was founded by Jesus

Christ, and is the means by which, through Word and Sacrament, he would transform human lives until they were Christ's own life within and without. By a holy life in communion with others. For the Reformed churches this meant a form of church life in which the governance of the church is a matter of shared callings – of the ordained laity with ordained pastors, of sessions with congregations, of shared vocations that all together built up the church. By a certain kind of reasonableness. To be sure, reason could never trump revelation and the demands of faith. But even when they were at their most rigorous, the churches of the Reformation were reasonable. They were so at least as a result of all else they did: their education, their concern for justice, and their insistence on the priesthood of all believers. How? Simply by the continual conversational back and forth that these things required. Folk, of course, were also expected to defend their faith after expressing it.

How all this worked out has varied over the course of five hundred years. But generally, these things have always been at the heart of Presbyterianism. There is a feel and look to Presbyterians when these things are embodied and balanced that is distinctive, dignified, and worthy of respect, whether in a liberal or a conservative. These are the things much more than numbers that should set the standard by which to give some sense of “whither the PCUSA?”

Using this standard, all is not wrong with the PCUSA. Every day one meets in the church people who are like this. We do have elders who understand the implications of a biblical passage, and so know when a minister has just cobbled together a few texts to support a pet idea. We do have elders who can lead people spiritually. We do have people who are interested in education, both for themselves and as an institutional *sine qua non*. Pastors will say that they meet people of faith all the time who are living well and who are dying well, and who give their pastors reason to think that somebody really is listening. One finds members who have made God's Word and Sacraments their sustenance. We have people that are giving of themselves sacrificially. We are a church that attracts people who do not want either the extremes of an irrational fundamentalism or a rationalism that sees no high calling for human life. We are a church that is concerned about justice, and we are a church that seeks the unity of all the churches. We have produced good things such as *The Book of Common Worship* and a new Presbyterian catechism. Along with other Reformed churches, we have worked out a covenant with the Lutherans that overcomes old suspicions and that signals a new day for cooperative work. We hope for more agreements like it. It would be grossly unfair and deeply cynical to suggest that all this is not so.

Still, I cannot help but think that, within the PCUSA, there have been a number of shifts that have put us off balance in such a way that it is much harder to find on the public face of the denomination and its various instantiations the sort of distinctive look and feel and sense that one used to get from Presbyterians. We have not maintained very well the various institutions needed

to form the character of our people. Our investment in higher education has vanished. The biblical and theological literacy of most of our people is pretty low. I constantly get the feeling that much of our leadership is trying to lead by slogan and management techniques. They explain *too* much and in a nervous, forced way that suggests we aren't sure of ourselves. I can't believe that there could possibly be as much joy and celebration this side of paradise as they say we should be having in whatever we do. The constant structural revisions we are undergoing, and trying to implement (and this includes the cynical attempts of the Presbyterian Fellowship group to find a new form of presbytery) will do nothing if we continue with the same sort of characters we have.

I also get the sense that the expectations of many members when they come to church are for something like Woodstock – that is, the music, the camaraderie, and a temporary inspirational high. The Reformed principles that the church, the visible church, is what Christ intended, and that our government is a matter of shared callings, and not a matter of popular democracy, are little known, and very little respected. The idea that we are to suffer with Christ is thought to be inhumanly outrageous.

In short, I am concerned that we have lost balance, that we have lost depth, and that we have lost our distinctive soul shaping institutions, without which we cannot recover either balance or depth. Where we go and how fast will depend on whether or not we can recover these things.

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