

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)?

Eight years ago I was on my way to Scotland for a year of study. Apart from my studies, I very much wanted to connect with a Presbyterian church in Scotland, the ancestral land of our PC(USA). My university provided a helpful website with a list of local churches, but as I scrolled through, there was - - astonishingly -- not a single Presbyterian church in the entire town. Instead, I saw Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and lots and lots of Churches of Scotland. Of course, I had forgotten that what we call Presbyterian is historically the Church of Scotland.

Before we answer, "Whither the PC(USA)?", we ought be clear what it means to be the PC(USA). Consider for a moment the deep strangeness that we belong to a denomination which traces its heredity to the official church of another country. Nor are we the only such church in the United States, with the curious consequence that our denominational bounds trace the fault lines of late medieval Europe.

As I write this for the Reformed Institute, I might point out there are other Reformed denominations in the US -- the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church, et cetera. Each of these churches can be traced back through strands and webs to national origins, to German and English and Dutch understandings of Calvinist doctrine. Then there are the Lutheran churches (the Nordic countries, and Germany again), the Episcopalian (England again), Greek, Eastern, and Russian Orthodoxies, and of course the Roman Catholics. All of these churches took root here, grew, changed, and are now different -- and separated -- in many ways from their ancestral trunks.

Yet Scripture is rather clear: there is to be one church, united in Christ. I do not see that the Gospel admits any other conclusion, nor any other explanation, but that we humans are so broken we can only realize God's church in fragments. God created the church, but we humans create denominations. Meanwhile, I suspect God cares very little for the lines we draw against one another. Where they are visible to God, they can only be a source of sadness.

There is to be one church. Rather than being the one church, we have spent too many centuries trying to build by partition our perfect churches. We celebrate the Reformation, when in fact it moved the church from one sort of brokenness to another. We worry about how to sustain our denomination, as if intent those wounds should never heal. But any denomination -- any human church -- will be imperfect, and the conflicts of doctrine that create the boundaries between denominations are, in the usual perverse way, unwinnable. Anything that cleaves the church, anything that separates Christians from one another, is ultimately contrary to the vision of the church described in the Gospels. Denominations may be intrinsic to our broken humanity, but should not be taken for the real, ideal church of God. We are going to have denominations and we are going to have to choose our denominations, but let us not mistake the shadow for the thing itself.

So: whither the PC(USA)? I can think of two reasons why our denomination might be diminishing lately. First, that in an era so-called 'globalization', some people are less and less comfortable drawing further lines between themselves and others, even or especially lines drawn in the name of God. These people are looking to further their connections to the rest of the people on this planet, but rightly note the PC(USA) has nothing like universal connection to humanity; as I have said, this is intrinsic to the very idea of a denomination. Second, in reaction to that era, some people are drawing those lines nearer and nearer themselves, severing even further the sinews binding them to fellow humans. I suspect that a great many of the 'non-denominational' churches sprung up in this country lately which advertise as the former in fact sell the latter.

Our response as a church should not be to insist that we have just the right demarcations and distinctions to make Christian practice worthwhile. Rather, we should look up and look down, and decide which path we wish to follow. We could become smaller, compacted, stripped of the disagreements which rile us presently. We could say this reduced version of the PC(USA) would be more focused -- pruned, is the term of art -- but I am aware of no Christian vision which has ever been realized by inward attention.

We should instead take the high road, laboring to make our church more connected with sister churches and the whole of humanity. This means a program of ambitious and enthusiastic ecumenism, an effort to heal the wounds of ancestral sectarian strife. I should mention that the church I attended in Scotland was in fact the University chapel, and nominally Anglican. What made this church fruitful to me was that each week a different preacher took the pulpit, so I was exposed to interpretations of the Scriptures ranging from convicting to idiosyncratic to ludicrous. But even those I disagreed vehemently with gave me a better sense of my own faith.

Where our concern is the shape of our denomination, we should not seek to make rigid that shape, but rather more fluid. This does not mean we must abandon our traditions and institutions. Some are necessary: the election of elders and deacons, for example. But even those which we hold defensible under Scripture should be viewed through the glass of human fallibility. We might in fact be right on a point, but we should also be ever faithful in our refusal to fight over those differences.

We should direct more energy and effort toward building the Church -- not building 'churches', but the Church, a whole body, united in Christ. We can see tendrils of this in our denomination's work in Latin America, a great deal of which is done in cooperation with our Catholic and Evangelical brothers and sisters. The Frontera de Cristo mission project in Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta, Mexico, is a sterling example, involving Presbyterians, Catholics, and others in work to heal the wounds caused by American border policy. One cannot dress those wounds without recognizing that the boundaries we draw among denominations are also injuries to the body of Christ.

Whither the PC(USA)? These are, as I see them, our choices: reach towards the larger Church, or grasp at our own fragment thereof. I believe we should reach.

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