

“Can the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) Be Transformed?”

a sermon by

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Text: “Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you” (II Corinthians 6:17).

This weekend 800 Presbyterians have gathered in Charlotte for a conference on the “Transformation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)”. Some of these fellow Presbyterians are with us today. When I found out that the conference was going to be in Charlotte, I was delighted that so many people would gather here for such an important topic.

The subject is a timely one. The research arm of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recently completed its annual report on “Comparative Statistics: Information about the membership, ministers, and finances of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)”.

The news is not good.

Notably, according to Jack Marcum, Director of Research Services, the Presbyterian Church is dwindling into small churches that have trouble raising enough money to hire ministers, conduct programs, and support missionaries.

The problem is not that we do not have enough ministers. Marcum notes that there are more than enough active Presbyterian ministers to fill the pulpits and sending more men and women to seminary is not the answer. The problem in the Presbyterian Church today is not that we need more ministers; we need more members.

The membership loss is not news to most Presbyterians. In 2002 the Presbyterian Church lost 41,182 members. For almost 200 years the Presbyterian Church in this country grew, as did most of the so-called mainline denominations. In 1965, however, a decline set in that has greatly eroded the membership of our church. In 1965 there were 4.2 million Presbyterians in what is the now the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Today there are less than 2.5 million. Since 1965 the Presbyterian Church has lost 42.4 percent of its members. If the trend continues, according to some of the mathematical projections, the Presbyterian Church will cease to exist at approximately 12:00 noon on March 6, 2039.

I.

Throughout much of the Twentieth Century the mainline Protestant churches sought to accommodate themselves to Enlightenment of the Nineteenth Century, particularly to the writings of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin. In addition, the last fifty years have brought enormous struggles in the Civil Rights Movement, the Viet Nam War, the Women's movement, and other social and political upheaval to the churches.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth, he said that he had become a Jew to the Jews that he might win the Jews, and he intimated that he had become a Greek to the Greeks that he might win the Greeks. "I have become," he wrote, "all things to all people that I might win some to Christ." That is a modern statement. It is a statement of adjustment and accommodation. But that is not all Paul said. Had it been, Paul would have disappeared from sight in an indistinguishable blend with the Greco-Roman culture of his day and we should have never heard of him again.

In II Corinthians we read a very different statement from the Apostle Paul: "Come out from them, and be separate from them," says the Lord, "and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you..." (II Corinthians 6:17).

That is a word we desperately need to hear today. The call of the church is not to accommodate itself to a secular, pagan, and materialistic culture, it is called to transform that culture in the name of the one who came to save the world. So, how do we transform the church to which we are called to serve?

II.

If the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is to be transformed, it will first of all have to recover the notion that the church is a community of faith. Thomas Oden in his book, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*, speaks of a new phenomenon in American churches today, the rebirth of churches that have reclaimed the classic spiritual practices: the close study of scripture, daily prayer, regular observance of worship, doctrinal integrity, and moral accountability. In addition these churches have laid claim to the historic faith of the church, what the ancient fathers and mothers of the church claimed: "What has been believed always, everywhere, and by all."

There are many things that churches do today that are worthwhile. This church provides preschool child care programs for over 350 children each day through the Weekday School and Child Development Center. It provides 35 outreach programs to an entire community: Room in the Inn, Loaves and Fishes, The Urban Ministry Center and a host of other worthwhile programs. It has an extensive education ministry, music ministry, and pastoral care program, including a parish nurse. But as important as all of these programs are to the church, they are not what define the church. The church is a believing fellowship of people who are held together by a living faith in a living God.

As the minister of the church, part of my job is to remind young people who join this church that the biggest problems that face them are not succeeding in their jobs, buying a house in Eastover or Myers Park, and sending their children to private schools. The biggest problems facing them are the problems of sin and death. The message of the church is that the only effective remedy to the self-centeredness and self-absorption that engulf our lives and our culture is the grace of Jesus Christ, which alone has the power to cleanse us of our sins and empower us to live better lives. Many of the problems that infect our marriages and poor family relationships are rooted in our inability to acknowledge our own sinfulness and to ask and receive God's forgiveness and healing grace.

The problem of death is one of the greatest problems all of us face, not just our own deaths, but the tragic deaths of young people and people who are at the very heights of their power and influence. George Kennan, who for many years was the American Ambassador to the U.S.S.R., once said that he was convinced that Marxism would never survive because it could not give an adequate answer to the problem of death. For Kennan there was nothing more depressing than a Marxist funeral. Kennan was convinced that because Marxism could not give meaning to death, it was unable to give meaning to life.

The Christian hope in the faith of death is that through the resurrection of Jesus Christ God gives us victory over death and courage to face the great difficulties of life.

III.

If the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is to be transformed, it will also have to recover a sense of mission as a critical part of the nature of the church. For many years the Presbyterian Church defined its mission activity in terms of World Missions. The Presbyterian Church sent

missionaries to Africa, Korea, China, Mexico, and a number of other places throughout the world. These missionaries had an enormous impact on these nations: building churches, hospitals, colleges, and universities. An example of that legacy is that in Korea today there are more Presbyterians than in the United States. Within the last fifty years there has been a shift in mission priority. Many churches, including this one, saw a great opportunity for mission with the decaying urban areas of America.

In recent years there is a remarkable new interest in the Global Witness of the church. Mission teams from this church have gone to Mexico, Kenya, and Venezuela. This summer a mission team will go to Russia to work with a Baptist church near Moscow.

As Christians, we have a mandate from Christ to go to the entire world and to preach, teach, baptize, and heal. Today there is a strong Christian witness to protest the terrible spread of AIDS in Africa, as well as the unconscionable slave and sex trafficking taking place in the Sudan. When President Bush spoke to a group of citizens of Great Britain in Whitehall Palace last November, he spoke of the importance of the moral nature of foreign policy. The staid British audience was in awe as the President spoke of tracing our nations' spiritual roots to the evangelical movements of the 18th and 19th century in England. The President spoke of the "tireless compassion of Lord Shaftesbury, the righteous courage of Wilberforce, and of the Good News translated by Tyndale, preached by Wesley, and lived out by William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army."

Nothing is more critical to the transformation of the church in our times than the recovery of mission as the fundamental work of the church.

IV.

Then, too, if the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is to be transformed, it will have to recover itself as a moral community that has the integrity to stand over against a secular culture that values self-fulfillment and self-satisfaction above all other values. Throughout the years the church has survived and prospered because it has accommodated itself to a changing world. Early Christianity emerged from its old Jewish setting into a new Greek culture and never would have survived had it not blending the old faith with the new philosophy.

But time and time again the church has had to challenge the culture in which it found itself. To quote from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, it had to "come out from them and separate from them." It happened in Nazi Germany when the Confessing Church said that it would not listen to the voice of National Socialism and its notion of Aryan superiority. It happened in Birmingham, Alabama, when Martin Luther King, Jr. and others went to jail because they would not obey the laws of segregation. It happened in South Africa when the church in South Africa declared that the rule of "Apartheid" was in opposition to the rule of Christ.

One of the most moving biographies I have read in recent years is *The Life of Sir Thomas More* by Peter Ackroyd. The life of Sir Thomas More was portrayed some years ago in a movie entitled "A Man For All Seasons."

Thomas More was a knight of the Royal Roundtable and friend of King Henry the VIII and one of the king's most trusted advisors. But when King Henry divorced his wife Kathryn to marry Anne Boelyn, thus breaking ties with the Roman Catholic Church, Thomas More would not swear to an oath supporting the king's action. Because in good conscience he would not swear to this oath (though he did not openly speak against it), he was eventually tried for treason, convicted, and beheaded at the Tower of London. His last words to the executioner and to those who had assembled were these: "I die, he said the King's good servant, but God's first." Sir Thomas More is the only person in the history of the English speaking language to be designated a Knight, a Saint, and a Martyr of the church. His witness to us today is not diminished by the passing of the years. He saw a moral duty that took precedent over every other allegiance.

Today, there is an urgent need for the church to heed the word of the Apostle Paul, "to come out from them, and to be separate from them."

May God give us wisdom and courage for the living of these days!
Amen