

“Presbyterian Mixture”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

January 11, 2009

**Text: “....and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians.’”
(Acts 11:26b)**

This past year, when I was on study leave at Princeton Seminary, I had the occasion to visit with Dr. Iain Torrance, the President of the Seminary. Dr. Torrance served the Church of Scotland as a parish minister and as Moderator of the General Assembly. He also serves as one of the Chaplains to the Royal Family of Great Britain and maintains a close relationship with the Queen and members of her family. He explained to me that when the Queen is in Scotland, she worships at St. Giles in Edinburgh, and a member of the Royal family attends every meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

One of the things that Dr. Torrance shared with me was some of the differences between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. This is particularly evident in official state occasions. In England, at every state occasion the Queen leads the procession, because she is head of the Church of England. She is followed by the Prime Minister and then the Archbishop of Canterbury. In Scotland, Dr. Torrance pointed out, there is a different order of procedure. State processions in Scotland are led by the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, then the Queen, and then the Prime Minister. When I asked him why there was this difference, he replied with a very stern look and said, “Because in Scotland, Jesus Christ is head of the church.”

Several years ago, I remember being in Edinburgh and visited a tobacco shop. One of the things that caught my attention was a brand of tobacco called “Presbyterian Mixture,” which apparently was a brand of tobacco that was blended by the Very Reverend Dr. John White, a minister in Glasgow who was also a moderator of the Church of Scotland. I don’t smoke a pipe, so I could not comment on this mixture, but it did lead me to wonder about the unique flavor of theology, polity, and governance that makes us Presbyterian.

I.

This morning we will set aside those individuals to be ordained and installed as elders and deacons in this church. This act of the “laying on of hands” represents the apostolic nature of the church. It is passed from generation to generation.

Now, for many people, belonging to a particular denomination is not a major factor in their religious life. Many people who join our church come from different religious traditions: Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, Lutherans, and some Roman Catholics.

As I talk to new members, many seem drawn to a church not so much for the theology on which it stands, but more by practical issues: worship, parking, youth and children programs—not to mention location.

And yet, there is something to this notion of a “Presbyterian Mixture” that is extremely important. We are the inheritors of a tradition that has not only shaped the city of Charlotte. It has had a profound impact on the history of our nation as well. So, this morning I want to explore with you some of the aspects of this special blend we call “Presbyterian.”

II.

The heritage of the Presbyterian Church in Charlotte is quite remarkable. When James Andrews, a former stated clerk of our denomination, was in Charlotte some years ago, he stated that “Presbyterians were densest” in Pittsburg and Charlotte (and by that I hope he was speaking of demographics). A great migration of Presbyterians occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries from Scotland. These Scottish Presbyterians moved down from Pennsylvania and Virginia to the Piedmont of North and South Carolina. Along the way they established towns and churches, many of which remain today.

But they did more than establish churches. They built colleges: Davidson, Queens, Johnson C. Smith, and Barber Scotia. They built Presbyterian Hospital, and homes for children such as Barium Springs and Alexander Children’s home. They brought with them a love of education and a work ethic that allowed them not only to survive, but to prosper as well. Dr. Frontis Johnson, who for many years taught at Davidson College once remarked that the “Scots-Irish who settled Mecklenburg County kept the Ten Commandments and everything else they could get their hands on.” And that is true.

As Presbyterians, we are an ecumenical church. By that we mean that we share with all Christians a belief in God as Creator Father, Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and the Holy Spirit as the Lord and Giver of Life. The word “Presbyterian” means “elder,” so that each church is governed by a group of elders, which constitutes a session or governing body of a local church.

The Presbyterian Church is a connectional church by which our churches are related to each other through a system of governing bodies that includes the Session, Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly. This way of organizing the church is a legacy of John Calvin, the 16th Century reformer in Switzerland, who saw in the New Testament this pattern of church government. Presbyterians have always placed a great deal of emphasis on polity or government. We have also tried to maintain a balance of power between ministers and laypeople, local church and national church.

III.

This Presbyterian Mixture also contains an orderly system of discipline along with a strong element of freedom and respect for the individual conscience. Presbyterians have

generally been a hardheaded, highly individualistic group of people. As a reigning medieval Pope once put it, “I would rather face an army of 10,000 soldiers than one Calvinist who was convinced he knew the will of God.”

The “Covenanters” in Scotland, the Huguenots in France, the citizens of Mecklenburg County who stood against King George III of England and the hated British rule, the Confessional Church in Germany—all of these people stand in a tradition that values the freedom of the church from government imposition, and the right of the individual Christian to the liberty of conscience.

This Presbyterian witness has produced an extraordinary number of leaders who are marked by a fierce independence and determination and a strong ability in public affairs.

When Mary, Queen of Scots, summoned John Knox and scolded him for his objection to her proposed marriage, she asked him, “What have you to do with my marriage?” and “Who are you within the commonwealth?” Knox allegedly replied, “A subject born within the same, Madam.” It has been said that with those words, democracy was born. Or when a Scottish woman by the name of Jenny Geddes let out a scream during a worship service in St. Giles in Edinburgh and threw the stool on which she was sitting at the head of an Anglican Bishop who was trying to impose the church of England in Scotland, we get a flavor of this Presbyterian mixture of which I am speaking.

IV.

This mixture has another dimension to it, which is a passion for the church and the common life of people. In the passage from the Book of Acts from which we read this morning, there is an important glimpse into the life of the early church. After the death of Stephen, there was a great persecution of the church, resulting in the church’s spread to Asia Minor, and specifically to Syria. There, something remarkable began to happen. The gospel was preached not only to Jews, but to gentiles as well. The church began to grow so quickly that soon it came to the attention of the church in Jerusalem. They sent Barnabas to Antioch and he recruited Paul to help him. They met with the people. They preached. They taught. When there was a famine in other parts of the world, they took up an offering to alleviate suffering. They had such a profound influence on Antioch that the people there began to search for a name to call them. So we read in Acts 11 that it was in Antioch of Syria that the disciples were for the first time called “Christians.”

Presbyterians have always had a passion for the church. But we have had another passion as well, that of building a society that reflects the values and teachings of Jesus Christ. For Martin Luther the great question was “How does a sinful person stand before a righteous God?” For John Calvin, the concern was for the Christian life. For Calvin and those who followed him the Christian life was never viewed simply as a solitary, private affair, but an impulse to live and work to conform society as a whole to the will of God. Calvin did that in the city of Geneva. He worked hard to establish a system of public schools as well as the necessary social services those who were in need.

But this flavor we call “Presbyterian Mixture” was not just a matter of church government, of the freedom of the conscience, or even a desire to serve. All of these things are

derived from a dynamic vision of the glory of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The greatest contribution of the Presbyterian Church to the church universal may be, in the long run theological. Presbyterians have, at their best, lived by the Scriptural revelation of the total sovereignty of God over all creation and the power of God's grace to overcome the inherent sinfulness of the human race. All limited and petty conceptions of the living God, all attempts to speak glibly about the "man upstairs," all sentimental piety that talks about the Lord of the Universe as though God were some kind of cozy friend, all attempts to confine religion to the private or spiritual sphere of life, all timidity in the face of rival powers that try to dominate our lives—all of these are totally foreign to the authentic Presbyterian spirit.

Therefore, in our worship, God is approached with reverence as well as confidence, and a certain dignity and restraint are a part of our tradition.

V.

But what about today? As we approach a New Year, we are undoubtedly facing some very great challenges. One of the great challenges the church faces is in the realm of evangelism. Over the past four decades, our denomination has suffered a massive decline in membership. Through the years Presbyterians have understood evangelism in two very important ways: building up existing churches and building new churches.

Dr. John Leith, in his book, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else can Say*, observed that the fundamental question the church faces today is the same one that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" The churches today that are growing, vital, and lively churches are precisely those churches that can, with Peter, say boldly, unequivocally, and unapologetically, "You are the Christ, the Son of God."

The second issue is mission. For almost two hundred years Presbyterians sent missionaries throughout the world: Africa, Asia, and South America. Because of these efforts, there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the United States. The Christian enterprise in China and Russia, once thought dead, is now alive and well.

In addition to the Global witness of the church, this particular church has for five decades carried on an important mission to the center city of Charlotte—feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, caring for children in disadvantaged homes.

The Book of Acts tells us that the church in Antioch had a profound impact on that city. A great number of people turned to the Lord. Paul and Barnabas preached and taught. And when there was a great world famine, they took up a collection to send relief to the Christians in Jerusalem.

The impact of this small group of believers was so dynamic, so far reaching—that the citizens of Antioch sought to place a name on them. There were called "Christianoī" or Christians. The Book of Acts says, "It was in Antioch of Syrian that the disciples were first called Christians."

What will they say of us in Charlotte, North Carolina?

Amen.