

“PRESBYTERIAN MIXTURE”
First Presbyterian Church
Spartanburg, South Carolina
January 22, 2012

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

One of the things that many people find perplexing about the Christian church is the many different branches or denominations that compose the Christian family. Of course, there are the three major branches of Christianity – Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic. But even within the Protestant family there are branches as well – Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, and Baptist. People often wonder what the difference between these groups really is – and does it really matter?

Someone shared with me a written piece that may shed some light upon this issue. It is entitled “How Many Christians Does it Take to Change a light bulb?” and it goes like this:

Charismatics: Only one. Their hands are already in the air.

Presbyterians: None. The lights will go on and off at predestined times.

Episcopalians: Three. One to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks, and one to talk about how much better the old light bulb was.

Unitarians: We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions including incandescent, fluorescence, three-way, long-life and tinted – all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

Amish: What’s a light bulb?

I.

This morning I want to speak to the issue of what is distinctive about the Presbyterian or Reformed faith. Several years ago, when I was in Edinburg, Scotland, I walked the so called “Royal Mile” which begins at the Old Castle and meanders through the business district until it ends at Holyroodhouse, the Palace, which is the residence of the Queen of England when she visits Edinburgh. Along this meandering street are a number of shops, restaurants, pubs, and other small businesses. At one point our group went into a small tobacco store. There were a number of pipe tobaccos on display there, but the one that caught my attention was named “Presbyterian Mixture”. As I later found out, this particular blend was originated by the Very Reverend Doctor John White, a minister in Glasgow, who was also a moderator of the Church of Scotland. Since I don’t smoke a pipe, I could not comment on this particular blend of pipe tobacco but it did lead me to wonder about the unique flavor of theology, polity, and governance that makes us Presbyterian.

II.

The heritage of the Presbyterian Church in North Carolina and in South Carolina is quite remarkable. When James Andrews, a former Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (US) visited in Charlotte a few years ago, he remarked that “Presbyterians were densest in Pennsylvania and in the Carolinas” (and by that I hope he meant demographics). A great migration of Presbyterians occurred in the 18th and 19th Century from Scotland. These Scottish Presbyterians moved down from Pennsylvania to the Piedmont of North and South Carolina. Along the way they established towns and churches, many of whom remain today.

But they did more than establish churches. They built colleges: Davidson, Queens, Johnson C. Smith, and Presbyterian College. They also built hospitals and homes for children – such as the Thornwell Home for Children in Clinton.

They also brought with them not only a love of education but a work ethic that allowed them not only to survive, but to prosper as well. They not only worked hard but they were famously thrifty – which served them well. Dr. Frontis Johnson, who taught history at Davidson College, once remarked that the Scot-Irish who settled in North and South Carolina 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 local church is governed by a group of elders which constitutes a session or council.

The Presbyterian Church is a connectional church by which our churches are related to each other through a system of governing bodies or councils that includes Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods and a General Assembly. This way of organizing the church is a legacy of John Calvin, the Sixteenth Century Reformer in Geneva, 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 laypersons, local church and national church.

III.

This Presbyterian mixture also contains an orderly system of discipline along with a strong element and respect for the individual conscience. Presbyterians have generally been a hardheaded, highly individualistic group of people. As one 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 North and South Carolina that stood against King George III of England and the hated British rule, the Confessing 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 to her castle in Edinburgh 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 answered, “A subject born within the same, Madam.” It has been said that with these words, democracy was born. Or when a Scottish woman by the name of Jenney Geddes let out a scream during a worship service in St. Giles Church 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 on Scotland, we get a flavor of this Presbyterian mixture of which I am speaking.

IV.

The 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 the Jews, but to the 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, Chapter 11, that it was in Antioch of Syrian 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 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 for 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 at their best have lived by the Scriptural revelation of the Sovereignty of God 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 part of our tradition.

V.

But, what about today? As we begin a New Year, we are no doubt facing some very great challenges. This past week in Orlando, Florida over 2000 Presbyterians gathered to consider the beginning of a new denomination – or at least a different way of being Presbyterian than what we have experienced in recent years.

Over the past four and a half decades the Presbyterian Church has experienced a massive decline in membership, slipping from a church of 4.2 million members to a church today of just 2.0 million members.

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 say with Peter, boldly, unequivocally, and unapologetically, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.”

Two of the challenges that we face are evangelism and mission. Through the years, Presbyterians have understood evangelism as building up existing churches and building new churches. Today, both of these tasks need our strongest attention.

Another challenge we face is mission. For almost two hundred years Presbyterians have sent missionaries throughout the world: Africa, Asia, and South America. Because of these efforts, there are now 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 Mission of the church, this particular church has for many decades carried on a ministry to the broader community of Spartanburg – feeding the hungry through Mobile Meals, providing winter warmth to children, and caring for the poor in many important ways.

The heritage of the Presbyterian Church in this community and in our nation is one that is unmatched by any other religious group in this country. We have produced leaders in business, churches, in professions, and in our national life.

That tradition must be reclaimed and strengthened. Someone told me last week after church that someone once asked them concerning their religious affiliation, “What would you be if you were not a Presbyterian?” And this person answered, “Ashamed”.

I don’t know if I would put it exactly like that but I do know that if the Presbyterian Church ceased to exist, it would be a staggering loss to this community and to the United States.

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 a name for them. They called them “Chistianoi” 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 Spartanburg, South Carolina?

Amen.