

UNIT FIVE: WHO WE ARE AS THE CHURCH

SESSION TWENTY-TWO: WE ARE PRESBYTERIAN, CONTINUED

Summary of the Twenty-second and Final Session of the Course

Before moving to the topics for this final session, we discussed two more components of the session on worship and the sacraments: the Marriage Service and the Service of Witness to the Resurrection.

The Marriage Service

We began by looking at two statements from the *Directory of Worship* in the *Book of Order*, the second book of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publically witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith. [*Directory for Worship*, W-4.9001, Christian Marriage]

Christian marriage should be celebrated in the place where the community gathers for worship. As a service of Christian worship, the marriage service is under the direction of the minister and the supervision of the session. [*Directory for Worship*, from W-4.9003, Time and Place of the Service]

We looked first at the purpose and significance of the Marriage Service as summarized in the first statement from the *Directory for Worship*. Here we have the only worship service in which the minister acts as an agent of the state. This service is unique because it establishes a human relationship recognized and regulated by law. Other acts of worship, including Baptism and the Service of Ordination and Installation, establish relationships, but not relationships bound by law. "Marriage is a civil contract." We believe, however, that marriage is much more than a civil contract. It is a gift of God for the benefit of the whole human family and, for us within the church, a covenant engaging husband and wife in lives of discipleship together.

The Marriage Service, therefore, is not just the religious or proper way to get hitched. The service seeks to put marriage into a context unrecognized by the world: the context of discipleship,

mission, and ministry as Christ's church. The society thinks a church wedding is nice because it gets the marriage "blessed," whatever that concept may mean to people. In our Marriage Service, however, husband and wife commit themselves to each other within the context of their commitment to Jesus Christ and his mission in the world.

The second quotation from the *Directory for Worship* led us into a brief discussion of the contrast between the church's idea of marriage and the multi-billion dollar business of fabricating the "dream wedding." A wedding is simply a worship service, under the direction of the minister and the supervision of the session. Limos are not required.

Next, we looked briefly at our own local church's commitment to offering the Marriage Service. By action of the session, we normally have marriage services when at least one of the couple is a member of our church family (a broader term than "church member") or at least one is a member in good standing of another recognized Christian church *and* they have a compelling reason for coming to us rather than going to that church for the service. All Presbyterian rules and considerations, of course, apply. Compelling reasons for coming to us do not include, "We don't like our minister," "Our sanctuary is ugly," or, "We don't have a minister right now." We avoid allowing ourselves to be used as pawns in other churches' conflicts. The third reason (no minister presently) may look legitimate at first glance, but churches almost always receive pastoral care from some minister when the pastorate is vacant. I have been asked and have happily agreed to officiate in a marriage service for another Presbyterian church that was without a pastor, but the service was held in their sanctuary, not ours, because it was a service of their church.

The *Book of Order* requires that at least one of the couple be a *professing Christian*, but such a loose definition leaves interpretation to the session and the minister. We have a sanctuary people consider attractive for weddings; so, if we were to make it known that we "did weddings" for anyone and everyone, we would have many, often for people with no concept of discipleship, faith, or anything else involved in the Marriage Service beyond pageantry. The reality of our society is that many young people think they need only "book" a church the way they book a hall for the reception. After thirty years of dealing with this problem and with the people involved, I have concluded that we are not helping or evangelizing anyone by simply offering weddings to the public; on the contrary, we are selling grace as cheap goods and misleading people about the call of Jesus Christ to discipleship and new life. Sometimes honest discussion of the matter leads a couple to seek more than just a wedding ceremony – to seek what the church truly has to offer. More often, the couples simply go to "book" another church.

The Service of Witness to the Resurrection (funeral or memorial service)

This service has three purposes:

1. To express for loved ones and friends of the person who has died their sorrow, loss, and grief and to offer their feelings and thoughts to God, trusting that God cares, comforts, and heals,

and to draw them together in mutual support. For others not so close to the deceased person, the service expresses their respect for him or her and/or their support for those mourning.

2. To remember the life of the person who has died and to give thanks to God for all that has been good and has been shared.
3. To reaffirm in faith and ask God to confirm for us the hope God has given us in Jesus Christ, through his coming to us, his crucifixion, and his resurrection.

Grief is the deep-down pain love feels at the radical separation death brings. The loved one is no longer present; there can be no more interaction. The loss is extreme. The future envisioned by people who cared for each other is cut short. Love must grieve, and grief is not bad faith. Even Paul, the great proponent of faith, gives priority to love (“and the greatest of these is love”). So, people need to be able to take their grief and all that goes with it to the God who loves them and willingly enters into their pain and emptiness. Death arouses a potent mixture of feelings that may include anger, guilt, resentment, fear, anxiety, shame, gratitude, relief, bewilderment, and more. The service may help people begin the process of grieving and healing.

The service is not held, however, only because someone has died, but also because that person has lived. So, we remember the person’s life and our own sharing in it. In the Presbyterian tradition, we do not eulogize because all praise (the meaning of eulogy) is given to God alone. We do, however, give God thanks for all that is good in life and for all that has been good in the life we have shared with the one who has died. Remembering is an important part of grieving and healing, and it is a significant act of worship.

Our latest *Directory for Worship* seems no longer to call the funeral or memorial service the Service of Witness to the Resurrection, but I still do. We need that resurrection hope reaffirmed, not as a denial of grief, but as an affirmation of hope and life within the context of grief. Jesus’ “because I live, you shall live also,” needs to be affirmed and believed. We do not commit our loved ones to the earth, to death, or even to memory alone (important as the memories are); we commit them to Jesus Christ and so to the God who loves them and whose love is greater than life and stronger than death.

THE LIFE OF FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST THE INDIVIDUAL BELIEVER AND THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

We discussed four excerpts from the *Book of Order: the Great Ends of the Church, the Meaning of Membership, Inclusiveness, and Review of Membership*.

The Great Ends of the Church (From the *Book of Order*): purposes and goals of the church

1. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.
2. The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.
3. The maintenance of divine worship.
4. The preservation of the truth.
5. The promotion of social righteousness.
6. The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

The first “great end” of the church turns us outward to the world, which is right. The second turns us inward to each other and to our own spiritual development, which is also right but which should be second, not first as we are tempted to put it. Jesus calls us, individually and collectively, to follow him in his ministry and mission to the world. Like him, we are called primarily to serve, not to be served, and to give ourselves for the sake of others.

“Divine worship” is the worship of God. Our services are not divine; God is. Worship is the heart of our life as Jesus’ church, and we probably cannot conceive of a church without it.

The “preservation of the truth” is the first of what I consider the dangerous “great ends” of the church. This one is easily and readily misunderstood by Christians who focus legalistically on the church’s purity. Biblically, God’s truth is faithfulness and steadfast love, not doctrine. True, in biblical terms, means reliable, solid, dependable. From it we take our word of affirmation and commitment, “amen.” The preservation of the truth of God does not mean the burning of heretics, whether burning them is accomplished literally or in other ways. Jesus came to suffer for us, not to make us suffer. Likewise, his church is sent into the world to suffer for and with the world’s people, not to make them suffer for the sake of the church’s “truth” or purity. To preserve the truth, we must spend more time and effort serving people and sharing God’s grace with them than protecting the sanctity of our doctrines against them.

“The promotion of social righteousness” means bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to bear upon the life of society. Jesus leads us to respect people and to love freedom and justice in all parts of life. The goal is not social self-righteousness, as though we were to be the judges of the society and its people. Righteousness is a relational term. It is not virtue, but right dealing within right relationships. Social righteousness is not stringent legalism or moralism but, rather, a love for justice, freedom, and human dignity that comes from God’s gracious love for us and for the world.

“The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” I would have preferred to use “kingdom of God” as we find it in Mark and Luke rather than “kingdom of heaven” as we find it

(following Jewish piety) in Matthew, because I think the word “heaven” confuses the issue. Modern people think of heaven as the place we hope to go after we have died. This goal of the church is to show the kingdom of God in our own way of life. Even so, this “great end” is another I consider dangerous. The goal is not showing off our virtue or thinking we can make the world’s people feel jealous or guilty when they see how wonderful we are (or think we are). We are not called to set a good example so much as to show God’s grace in our dealings with people. Grace is all we have. Virtue is not our commodity. We have no merit to parade before the world. All we have or need is grace. So, practicing what we preach means being gracious – mediating God’s grace to people.

The Meaning of Membership (Also from the *Book of Order*)

“A faithful member accepts Christ’s call to be involved responsibly in the ministry of his church. Such involvement includes:”

- Proclaiming the good news.
- Taking part in the common life and worship of a particular church.
- Praying and studying Scripture and the faith of the Christian church.
- Supporting the work of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents.
- Participating in the governing responsibilities of the church.
- Demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church.
- Responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others.
- Living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life.
- Working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.

This time, I asked the participants to read through the involvements of church membership and pick any they wished to discuss. One person asked about our participating in governing responsibilities of the church, and we talked about involving members who are not officers in the life and ministry of the church. We noted that, while meetings are the way people work out matters together democratically, people do not come to the church for training in running meetings. They come seeking God and hope, not meeting skills. Nevertheless, a Presbyterian church is a democracy, and we the people of the church must share in the processes of making and carrying out decisions.

We talked a little about demonstrating a new quality of life within the church and through it to the world. Grace changes us, and faith orients all of life toward grace. So, grace and faith change us more than law ever could. Our faith will show – not show off, but show.

I find real hope and encouragement in the phrase, “responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others.” Christian service is always a *loaves and fishes* affair: we bring a little in the hope God will do a lot with it. If it were up to us to redeem the world, our service would be rendered pathetic by the enormity of the world’s needs and evils. Knowing God is at work in the world and graciously enables us to participate in that work encourages me to believe our efforts at service are not made in vain.

Inclusiveness (From the *Book of Order*):

“The congregation shall welcome all persons who respond in trust and obedience to God’s grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the membership and ministry of his church. No persons shall be denied membership because of race, ethnic origin, worldly condition, or any other reason not related to profession of faith. Each member must seek the grace of openness in extending the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the gospel.”

We discussed the phrase, “the grace of openness,” and its difficulties in practice. We all have prejudices, and the people who study the nature of prejudice tell us we can never get rid of them entirely. We learn prejudices at a deep emotional level when we are still children, too young to realize what we are learning. We can, however, say, “No,” to our prejudices in practice. We can deny them control of our speech and actions; with effort, we can even deny them authority over our minds and relationships. God’s grace can lift us above them.

I told them about one of my teachers in seminary from whom I took a course in special problems in pastoral care, including the problem of prejudice. The teacher was a black man who told us everyone has prejudices and included himself. I remember his telling those of us who were white not to get up into our pulpits and condemn the people in our congregations for being prejudiced, because so are we. Then, he added, “Besides, they’ll only take it out on me.”

Review of Membership (From the *Book of Order*):

Accepting the privilege and responsibility of membership in the church is a commitment to Jesus Christ that binds the individual to fulfillment of the obligations of membership. Members shall, when encouraged by the session, regularly review and evaluate the integrity with which they are involved in the ministry of the church and consider ways in which their participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.

We read this statement from the *Book of Order* but did not discuss it much. The group seemed satisfied that it was self-explanatory even if it is not easy to fulfill.

The Means of Grace

We know God's grace in and through Jesus the Christ, God's Word made flesh to live among us. "Grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ." (The Gospel of John, chapter 1)

The means of grace are ways through which the grace of God given in Jesus Christ is made available to us, means through which we receive and experience it and are moved by it. They include:

- The Bible – reading and studying it, privately and as the church, and using it for devotional purposes.
- Worship – participating in the worship of God with the community of faith and privately in devotions.
- Preaching – hearing the word of God explained and proclaimed within the context of our life.
- The Sacraments – receiving God's love and mercy in the sacraments, shared with the community of faith.
- Prayer – both individual, private prayer, and corporate prayer within the family and the church.

After we went through the means of grace listed above, I asked what else can become a means of grace – a means by which we experience or share God's grace. The group suggested that the way we treat each other can become a means of grace. We recalled that the New Testament says people took notice of the way the believers in the early church loved each other, and Jesus (in John 17) prays that his followers may be one so the world will know the Father sent him.

Before we finished, I wanted to remember the hope God has given us in Christ. So, I listed some phrases that reflect the promises of God that give us hope and speak our hopeful prayers to God:

- Your kingdom come
- Your will be done on earth
- Come, Lord Jesus

- Resurrection and life everlasting
- God's new creation

We talked a little about “the resurrection and the life everlasting,” reviewing together the idea that, because God loves us and our salvation is based upon God's love, we believe our personhood will be preserved in the resurrection and life everlasting. We will not be absorbed into a universal soul or dissolved into nothingness. Whatever the body in “the resurrection of the body” (Apostles' Creed) may be, the person will be knowable and lovable (not meaning cute, but able to be loved). Love holds on to its own and insists upon the particularity of the person loved.

Time was running out for the final session of our course. So, we finished by turning to First Corinthians, chapter 13 – the love chapter – to conclude with the spirit of being believers and of being Christ's church together.

In God's math, anything without love equals zero. I could understand all mysteries (which, of course, I could not) and have all knowledge, but none of it would matter without love. I could give away everything and even give myself to by martyred; without love, it would still gain me nothing – would still amount to zero.

The Presbyterian order of government works quite well, as long as we work it with respect for each other, with patience and humility, with forgiveness, with a sense of humor, and with love. The Bible's concept of love is not sentimental; it has more to do with the way we treat each other than with warm feelings. For the Bible, love is an action. But it is also a motive, and without it, all actions become false and empty.

Here we ended, and I am grateful to the people who participated in this course. For me, it was a very good experience and definitely a time of learning.