

UNIT FIVE: WHO WE ARE AS THE CHURCH

SESSION TWENTY-ONE: WE ARE PRESBYTERIAN

Summary of the Twenty-first Session of the Course

At the end of the previous session, I had distributed a summary of Presbyterian order and government including a chart showing the order of authority in the church following the promises of ordination. Because the people in the course had already had church officer training, there were no questions raised in this session about the summary, except for one concerning the *Book of Confessions*. The question asked why we have so many (eleven) confessions.

Until 1967, we looked for confessional guidance mainly to the Westminster Confession of Faith with its Larger and Shorter Catechisms. These three documents became known as the Westminster Standards.

A confession represents a stand taken in faith during a particular time in history in a particular place and situation. All human statements arise from such particular contexts, and confessions of faith are no exception. The Protestant churches recognize a standard in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments that we refuse to grant any other document. *Sola scriptura* – scripture alone has such standing. Being products of their time, place, and circumstances, confessions speak faith as it must be spoken – within the real context of human life. No confession, therefore, is timeless. Circumstances change. Language itself changes, making yesterday's clear statement today's perplexing or even misleading one. For that same reason, we continuously need new translations of the Bible. Not only the advances in biblical scholarship and language studies, but also the constantly changing nature of English or any other spoken language necessitate new, up-to-date translations.

If any one confession becomes *the* confession of faith, it has then become dangerous to the church and to people's faith. Having a book of confessions with various confessions from different times and places helps us keep perspective on the nature and force of confessions. They are not Scripture, nor may they have Scripture's authority. They guide us and even correct us, but we need to make our own confessions of faith in our life and service as the church of Jesus Christ in our own time, place, and circumstances.

I did suggest that in the final session we might talk about the spirit of Presbyterian order. For this session, we went right to the subject of worship and the sacraments.

To begin, I passed out index cards with this statement from the *Directory for Worship* in the *Book of Order*:

“Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God. In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God’s claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God’s service in the world.”

The statement did not stimulate discussion, as though it were fine but raised no immediate questions. So, I offered a few comments, as follows:

- Worship is joyful. It’s not always upbeat and happy; it can be thoughtful and even grief-stricken, but it’s not supposed to be a burden or a duty. Worship renews our hope, even in the worst times of life, because it recalls God’s promises and renews our trust in God. In worship, we are not alone.
- All worship is given to God. It has always been important to Presbyterians that our worship not make God share praise or devotion with anyone or anything else.
- When we worship God, we count on God to be present in our world and our lives. Worship is not our monologue about God or our beliefs but is offered to God in God’s presence.
- Worship changes us, even transforms us, by directing our thoughts and hopes to God. It puts our lives before God. It changes our outlook on life. It opens us to the grace of God, and we may actually receive God’s grace as we worship. In worship, we think our faith and express it in a variety of ways. Some people speak of worship as a time when they are “fed spiritually.”
- Worship equips us for service by changing our values, teaching us the way of Jesus, and renewing our faith and our sense of being God’s people. It reminds us that Jesus has called us together to send us out into the world. In worship, we bring the world’s needs to God and ask for God’s grace. We pray for those who may not even know or care to pray for themselves. God’s Spirit commits us to our own prayers. If we pray for peace and justice, we need to seek ways to make peace and justice in our world. If we pray for healing, we need to put ourselves on the side of healing and wholeness.

In our discussion of the principle that all worship is given to God, we talked about exclusiveness without giving it that name. The subject of funerals came up as an example. When I lead a Service of Witness to the Resurrection (funeral or memorial service), it is a service of our church, even if I am leading it in a funeral home or cemetery. So, I am not permitted to combine our service with that of some other group, such as the Masons who have their own rituals. The two rituals or services must occur separately. We discussed the rationale for that rule, and we began to see that worship raises issues and concerns other activities may not. Our annual Interfaith Community Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving held in the Old Broad Street Church each

Thanksgiving morning brings Christians (Catholic and Protestant) and Jews together in worship. The form and content of that service are very carefully negotiated so no one's faith is violated or denied. We refrain from doctrinal statements and evangelistic pitches (using "evangelistic" in the sense of proselytizing), but we do bring our beliefs together. The service is not generic but interfaith. We treat each other's faith with respect and with an awareness of the offenses and outrages that have occurred throughout the history of Christian-Jewish relations. We try to pray in such a way that everyone present may be able and willing to say, "Amen." Expanding an interfaith service beyond Judaism and Christianity, however, would raise many more problems.

The Sunday Service

Turning to the Sunday morning service, I handed out copies of a recent bulletin so we could look at the order of service. I asked everyone to mark on the bulletin the parts of worship which actively engaged the congregation (beyond listening and thinking), and we saw that the majority of the parts did, and so worshipers are participants not spectators. Some of the longer parts such as the sermon and the prayers did not engage the congregation in active participation. We acknowledged, however, that listening and thinking do not necessarily feel passive.

We discussed the way a service is put together, centering around the Scripture lessons from which the themes for the service and the sermon are developed. We talked about the mechanics. Mostly, sermon preparation begins with studying the lessons, although sometimes the theme is chosen first (on holidays and at other times) and the lessons are picked to develop that theme, but even then the lessons take control as soon as they are selected. Some services have more than one theme, but one generally becomes primary and is guided by the Scripture lessons.

Preaching attempts to bring the message(s) and movement of the lessons together with concerns and realities in our present world. We listen for God's word to us in our time, place, and circumstances. We also bring concerns from beyond ourselves and our immediate settings. God loves the world, and Jesus calls us to serve him in and for the world. So, preaching must try to expand our concerns as well as speak to them.

We discussed public prayer. When I was a boy in what was then called communicants' class, the minister taught us that public prayer should follow the acronym ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. These days, prayer is less formal, but it still seeks to lift to God the concerns, needs, hopes, disappointments, fears, thanks, and trust of the congregation and to pray for our communities and the world, also. Public prayer differs from personal prayer because, when I pray aloud in the service, I am not speaking only for myself. So, respect must be maintained for the integrity of the others praying with me silently. Public prayer is not a second chance at preaching. I should not be seeking to impose my arguments or my will upon the people gathered in prayer, even though I do try to make the prayers responsive to the sermon and the lessons. Sometimes ministers and others leading corporate prayer (a more accurate term than "public") get so caught up in

preaching through the prayer that they begin speaking of God in the third person, leaving us to wonder to whom they are praying.

We also discussed prayer in the context of pastoral care and counseling. It is not a given that the minister should always pray in that context. Not everyone wants the minister to pray in every situation, and prayer certainly should not be used to force conclusions upon people unwilling or unready to make them. Such a misuse of prayer abuses both the person seeking help or support and God.

The Sacraments

As Protestants, we have two sacraments (not seven) because we limit them to those instituted by Jesus: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion, the Eucharist). We discussed each in turn, but there were no issues that stimulated argument or even much conversation because we seemed to be in agreement and to assume the importance and meaning of the sacraments.

I spoke of Baptism's combining the imagery of cleansing (from sin) with that of dying and rising. The one being baptized goes under the water to die as the person he or she has been and comes up again to a new life as a new person. For an infant, this understanding of Baptism means the child will not become the person he or she would become without Christ. This meaning of Baptism (which is older than Christianity) was readily picked up and incorporated into our faith as a re-presentation of our union with Jesus in his death and resurrection (read Romans 6). We maintain, also, the imagery of cleansing, the forgiveness of sins.

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Baptism is a sacrament of the church, not a private ritual. The congregation assumes responsibility to and for the child or adult being baptized. So, ordinarily, Baptism must occur within the context of the Sunday worship service so it may be a sacrament for the whole congregation and so the people may promise care and Christian education for the child or new believer. Since the beginning of the 1970's, we have given equal weight to infant baptism and believer baptism; parents are offered the choice of having their children baptized as infants or waiting until the time of confirmation. The weight of our tradition and expectations, however, continues to favor infant baptism. For example, *baptized* children may share in Communion with parental permission if they have been instructed at their level in its significance.

We are willing to baptize infants and children unable to express their faith in Jesus Christ because, in the Reformed Tradition, priority is always given to the grace of God, not to our faith which is both a gift from God and a response to God's grace. God loves our children before they can possibly love back.

We recognize no emergency in Baptism. The eternal life of a dying child does not depend upon our sacrament but upon God's grace. The child can belong to Christ without Baptism. Nothing we do, sacramental or otherwise, obligates God to love us or regulates God's grace. We baptize in

faith and prayer; the act of salvation comes from God through Jesus Christ. We reject as ludicrous the idea that God might wish to claim a child for eternal life but be unable to do so because we did not arrive in time to baptize that child. Even more ludicrous (if possible) is the notion that God might wish not to claim a child for eternal life but might be forced to do so if we do arrive in time with the water. Before baptizing anyone, we pray that what we do with water (in faith and as a prayer), God will do in its full reality by the Holy Spirit. The sacrament is not the thing but represents the thing. God's love and mercy given in Jesus Christ and fulfilled in his crucifixion and resurrection comprise the thing itself. Our sacrament brings that thing, that redemption, to us in a symbolic and representative form in which we may participate and through which we may respond to the thing itself – and so to Christ.

The Lord's Supper is our other sacrament, and the crucifixion (not just the Last Supper) is the event itself. In Communion, we receive and share in the love and mercy that happened for us on Jesus' cross. Communion refers both to our communion with God in and through Jesus and our communion with each other in and through Jesus; so the sacrament draws us together, compelling and enabling us to forgive each other, reconcile with each other, and serve together in unity.

We discussed briefly the division of the Protestant churches, specifically Lutheran and Reformed, over the "how" of Christ's presence with us in the sacrament. Martin Luther insisted the presence of Christ be tied to the elements themselves (though he rejected the theory or doctrine of Transubstantiation), while the Reformed churches spoke of the symbolism of the elements and the "real presence" of Christ. That Christ is present for and with us, we agree. On the question of how his presence happens, we disagree. The feeling of the group seemed to be that it is a shame such arguments can divide the followers of Jesus.

Hymns and Him's

At some point in the session, we got into discussion of hymns: traditional versus contemporary. Here the conversation grew lively as both viewpoints were discussed: keeping the old, familiar hymns versus providing for the tastes and understandings of younger generations to whom the old hymns may be neither familiar nor meaningful. That no consensus was reached simply reflects the situation in the church.

We talked about types of music as well as particular hymns or revisions of hymns. Is there any such thing as sacred music (speaking of musical type, not words)? When are we finding personal comfort and inspiration in hymns familiar to us, and when are we excluding people from the church by forcing our tastes and memories upon them as though they were gospel? How much of our own comfort are we willing to forego in order to reach out to people? These questions remained open and will continue to remain so. We heard the consideration of not wanting to lose the sense of being at home in worship in our own church, and we heard the consideration of not wanting to push our children and grandchildren (or other people's) out of the church and away from Christ.

We also discussed, briefly, the issue of inclusive language with *reference to people* (very briefly of inclusive language with *reference to God*). Here again, what is familiar and natural to one has become offensive to another. We discussed the impact on younger women and men of referring to all human beings as “men.” In our society, the generational gap may have reached the extreme in which both sides consider the matter settled. The “older” side (not necessarily by chronological age) regards the issue as petty and foolish; the “younger” regards it as a settled matter that women are not men and cannot be referred to as men. She is not he. A girl or woman cannot be a son and is excluded from worship when the gospel is addressed only to men and sons. We talked about the possible conclusion: “If you’re excluding me by leaving me out of your references to people, I’ll exclude myself from your church. Good-by.”

More to Come

We did not have time to discuss the Marriage Service or the Service of Witness to the Resurrection (funeral or memorial service). We also need to talk about prayer, Bible reading, and private devotions.

There is no end to the material we could cover in such a course, but the end will come next week. Much will be left unfinished; some will be left untouched. Hopefully, we will have time to look at the nature and purposes of the church and at the way of Christian life. We also need to include God’s promises for the world.