

“A Sight for Sore Eyes”

a sermon by

The Reverend David H. Green

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

As a whole, our nation is deeply and broadly divided. Consider, for example, the titles of two very popular books – Al Franken’s *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations* and Ann Coulter’s *Godless: The Church of Liberalism*.

At the outset, I must admit that each of these books reads well. Al Franken is very honest about the fact that he is writing as a comedian; and, as a result, he is more concerned that the book be funny, than he is concerned about high-minded rhetoric. Al Franken does deliver a book that is fun to read.

Ann Coulter, by contrast, is all about the high-minded rhetoric. She writes to provide information that supports the ideas endorsed in her commentary. While she does write a number of very witty, tongue-in-check passages, Ann Coulter’s book is less fun-filled and more carefully articulated.

I am confident that neither Al Franken nor Ann Coulter would appreciate having their writings used to prove a singular point.

However, both Al Franken and Ann Coulter leave no room for the opinions of the other. Neither seems to allow for a dialogue that might result in a compromise. Both of these writers have a ‘winner-take-all’ attitude.

That monolithic, my-way-or-the-highway mentality may work well when you are trying to sell books. But a ‘winner-take-all’ attitude can be disastrous within the life of the church.

The Decline of the Presbyterian Church

Consider the recent history of our own Presbyterian Church (USA). At the founding of our nation, the Presbyterians were a force to be reckoned with. Historians have long observed that Patrick Henry's great oratory style was learned in the pews of his mother's Presbyterian Church. The great sermons of the Reverend Samuel Davies continue to speak through the lasting voice of Patrick Henry.

Henry's most famous speech was delivered March 23, 1775. In this he used Biblical images – a time for every purpose, a light on our path and the betrayal by a kiss among them. Henry ended this famous speech by using an image that is repeated several times throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Bible – the cry for peace when there can be no peace.

Said Henry, "Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace--but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

There was a day that the theology and Biblical preaching of the Presbyterian Church served to strengthen and to shape the very foundations of our nation. Throughout that time both the Presbyterian Church and the nation prospered from this Holy Alliance.

Such is not the situation of the Presbyterian Church today. From the early seventeenth century, when Presbyterianism arrived on American soil (with the French Huguenots), the church provided important guidance and influence for our nation. The prosperity of the Church continued into the 1960s. In the early 1960s there were more than 4 million Presbyterians in the United States.

In 1960, the Census Bureau reported that the total population of our nation was some 180 million people. At that time, the Presbyterian Churches recorded more than 4 million members. In 1966 the Presbyterian denominations reported a decline in membership; and, for more than 40 consecutive years, we have continued this decline in membership.

This past week the Associated Press reported that our nation's population will soon exceed 300 million people. At the end of this year, the Presbyterian Church predicts that our total membership will have declined to about 2.2 million members. This is to say that since the time of my birth, the Presbyterian Church has lost nearly 50% of its total membership.

The denomination's staff is led by our Stated Clerk, Cliff Kirkpatrick. His office released the information that we had lost some 65,000 members in 2005 and predicts that we will lose more than 85,000 from our rolls during 2006. After announcing this ongoing decline, Mr. Kirkpatrick issued this statement:

"I give thanks to God for the growing faithfulness in stewardship and mission concern that these figures represent among Presbyterians," [Stated Clerk Clifton] Kirkpatrick said. "At the same time, I am convinced that God is calling us to repentance for our failures in evangelism and church growth at a time when there is a hunger for the gospel."

Our stated Clerk seems to measure the success and the strength of the future of the Presbyterian Church by the ability of the church to pay his salary and to provide him with a place of influence at the World Council of Churches. To him, little else seems to matter.

Real Hope for a Great Future

It happens, at times, that certain businesses or perhaps entire industries face their own demise. No business, no industry is exempt.

Such was the situation with the motion picture industry. "After World War II, facing the threat of television and the dissolution of the studio system, film makers thought they had a way out of their troubles: 3-D."

There were technical difficulties projecting moving images onto a flat screen in such a way that the human eye could perceive the depth of the images.

"Various techniques were tried over the years. Spinning devices in auditorium seats, alternating frames in different colors, but the process that eventually reached the screen was called Natural Vision and the vehicle was *Bwana Devil* (1952), a certified dog of a film with Robert Stack and Nigel Bruce. Using cheap polarized cardboard glasses the audience saw films in 3-D though the colors were dark and muddy. Lions leapt from the screen with attending screams, but beyond a fascination with the peculiar special effects associated with the medium,

audiences never worked up the desire to regularly leap back onto the screen. They remained satisfied with two dimensions.”

“3-D did not prove the salvation of the movie industry, which has somehow muddled through without it.”

Even though 3-D fell flat with movie-goers, the motion picture industry has done more than survive without. Today, the industry is larger, and more profitable, than ever before. It still remains the dream of people everywhere that they one day will be discovered and launched into an acting career, complete with fame and fortune.

A quick look at the statistics of the decline of the Presbyterian Church seems to reveal a discouraging scenario of doom and gloom. And, in all honesty, I must acknowledge that the staffers at our denomination’s headquarters are predicting that the Presbyterian Church will cease to exist within the next 30 years.

Yes, make no mistake about it, the Presbyterian Church is facing difficult days ahead, and yet I stand here telling you that there are reasons to remain encouraged and optimistic for a great future.

This morning you heard a text from the book of Isaiah. These words were first spoken to the people of God as they faced annihilation, complete destruction, at the hands of the surrounding peoples. While there are some who will tell you that God promises *only* safety, protection and the good life for all of his people, these are not the promises found in the Bible.

To the threatened and frightened people, God spoke through Isaiah and rendered two promises:

First, the threatening evil-doers will eventually be swallowed-up. “The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim will be trodden under foot; and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley, will be like a first-ripe fig before the summer: when a man sees it, he eats it up as soon as it is in his hand.”

The second promise is spoken to the faithful remnant that will survive. “In that day the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem [a victor’s wreath] of beauty, to the remnant of his people; and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.”

In this text the people of God are clearly instructed that they absolutely are *not* to sit idly and to wait for their destruction. Neither are they promised success in battle. The victory belongs not to the people, but to our God. There will – there absolutely will – come a day when “the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem [a victor’s wreath] of beauty,” *not to all of the people*, but “to the remnant of his people.”

Regardless of whatever may come of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the LORD of hosts shall remain faithful. God is faithful not particularly to a specific denomination’s administrative structure, but instead to His own people. Again, God will remain faithful – eternally faithful – to the people of God.

Because God is faithful, there remains hope – everlasting and eternal hope – for a great future.

The Call to Action

What then are we to do?

Since arriving on the island, I have spoken with several of you about your need to join the church. My work to grow this congregation is not an attempt to save or even to strengthen the Presbyterian Church (USA). My conversations with you about church membership are driven by my conviction that there are real and tangible blessings that come from being a member of this particular congregation.

More than a year ago, Leigh and I knew that it was time to seek out our next church. For several months I had opportunities to speak with Pastor and Associate Pastor Nominating Committees with Presbyterian churches throughout the nation. Some were small congregations. Other congregations included thousands of members. But this congregation stood out and apart from the rest.

This is an authentic congregation. This is a congregation committed to worship, to the worshipping community and to the surrounding community.

To a congregation similar to ours, the Apostle Paul wrote a letter of appreciation and affection. Paul was imprisoned and his very life was at great risk. In this uncertain and frightening context he wrote, “...I shall rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

The Apostle Paul did not equate his deliverance with his survival. Instead, his deliverance spoke of God's ability to speak through him – regardless of whether that happened through his life or through his death.

With this in mind, he encouraged the Christians in the city of Philippi to speak through their actions. “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear omen to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.”

Explaining further, he added, “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his [or her] own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves...”

The instructions are simple to say, but so difficult to do: “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit” and, “look not only to [your] own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

The Myth of the ‘Good Old Days’

There was a day and time that the Presbyterian Church had a profound and lasting impact on the life of this nation. Even though our denomination is continuing to shrink, there is no reason that we can not have a significant and positive impact on our own community.

I say this because, first of all, the “good old days” weren't all that good. Because there was a significant and positive influence by Presbyterians, there is the natural tendency to assume that the Presbyterian Church was large and prosperous. Historic facts do not meet the mythical images. During the American Revolution and in the years that followed, Presbyterians accounted for less than one-half of one percent of the American population.

We imagine that to have been a day of great success for the life of the church. Not so, writes Mark Noll, author of *America's God*. The Presbyterians were among the churches that “experienced the last quarter of the eighteenth century as a disorderly decline. The Presbyterian Robert Baird reported this judgment from his perspective in the 1840s: ‘the effects of war on churches of all communions were extensively and variously disastrous.... The times immediately following the revolution were...far from favourable to the resuscitation of true religion.’”

In the late eighteenth century, the Presbyterian denomination was *not* strong and thriving. At its formation, our nation was *not* influenced by a successful church-related bureaucracy. Instead, our nation was influenced by the people of the Presbyterian churches.

The Presbytery of Hanover (Virginia) petitioned the Continental Congress to allow for freedom of religious practice. This petition was heard because of the influence of respected people like the Reverend Samuel Davies.

Patrick Henry was heard not because he spoke for the church. But his speech was informed and influenced by his faith. Patrick Henry was equipped to speak because of the instruction and the example that he received while sitting in the pews of his church home.

About the same time that Patrick Henry was giving voice to the Revolution, Thomas Paine was filling pages with similar insight.

“These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value.”

It may be said today that this is a time that tries the very souls of God's own people. As you live in the midst of this troubling time remember that the faithfulness of God shall not fail. As you work in this troubling time, “do nothing from selfishness or conceit;” and, “look not only to [your] own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

If you, the people who fill these Presbyterian pews do this, there is no choice but for the Presbyterians to have a great influence on our community and on our nation.