

A Bicentennial Communion

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Trinity Sunday, May 21, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 8:22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

All of us us have read stories or seen movies where a person receives a blow to the head and forgets who he or she is. They don't know their name. They don't know their parents. They don't know if they're married or single. They don't know who they are or where they're going. They suffer from amnesia.

The Presbyterian church is suffering from amnesia. We've forgotten who we are and as a result we don't know where we're going. We've largely forgotten what we believe. I've often heard Dr. Gillespie, President of Princeton Seminary, make a distinction between tradition and traditionalism. *Traditionalism* is the dead faith of living people whereas *tradition* is the living faith of dead people. We don't need traditionalism. Traditionalism kills a church. But we need to recover our authentic Biblical and Reformed traditions if we're going to know who we are and where we're going.

It's hard to know where to begin. I could speak of the traditional Presbyterian emphasis on the sovereignty and majesty of God expressed in Psalm 8, "O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Or I could speak of the traditional Presbyterian emphasis expressed in our epistle lesson where Paul writes that we're put right with God by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. So many Presbyterians ~~think~~ ^{have forgotten} ~~that we can't~~ ^{our} ~~they can earn~~ ^{salvation} ~~the way to heaven,~~ ^{when} ~~when~~ ^{salvation} is a free gift to be received by faith in Christ. Or I could speak on the words of Jesus found in the Gospel lesson where he says that it is the Holy Spirit who guides us into the truth. The Presbyterian church has always had an emphasis on

education and the importance of seeking the truth.

But this morning I want to hold up just one Presbyterian distinctive which in the light of our bicentennial celebration I believe is most appropriate and that is our church government. I know that might sound kind of anti-climactic for many of us. I know that for many of us church government doesn't sound very exciting, spiritual nor perhaps even very biblical. And yet I believe some extremely important, exciting, and spiritual principles lie at the root of our form of government which I believe is based in Scripture.

It's no accident that we're celebrating the bicentennial of our first General Assembly in the same year that we, as a nation, are celebrating the bicentennial of our Constitution, the oldest written Constitution in the world. Many people have claimed that the United States' Constitution was deliberately patterned after the Presbyterian *Form of Government*. As a staunch Presbyterian I believe there's some justification for the claim. The writers of the Constitution were all deeply influenced by the principles of representative government present in the Presbyterian Church. James Madison, the main writer of the nation's Constitution was deeply influence by Presbyterian John Witherspoon.

Presbyterians have always been wary of power and authority resting in individuals and with good reason. The Bible tells us that all power and authority belongs to God who alone is sovereign. We believe that the Risen Christ is the head of the church and no mere mortal human being. We believe that Jesus Christ exercises his authority in the church through groups of people chosen by God's people relying upon the Holy Spirit whom *Christ has promised* will guide us. We believe that it's unbiblical and positively dangerous for one person to have sole authority in making

decisions for a church or a nation. We believe that God's authority in the church and in the nation and world expresses itself in groups of people duly elected. That's why in a local church no bishop appoints the pastor. You the people, pray to God and trust that the Holy Spirit will lead you to the right person. Of course groups of people can make mistakes just as can individuals. But we believe that groups of people who together study the scripture and rely upon the Holy Spirit are more likely to be led into the truth. *by The Holy Spirit.*

As Presbyterians we have a profound distrust of anyone who claims the right to exercise God's authority on their own. We have a profound distrust of anyone who claims that the Holy Spirit speaks solely to them independently of Scripture or anyone else. That's why John Knox who reformed the church in Scotland believed it was extremely important that *everybody* in Scotland, from the lowest servant to the most powerful Lord, should know how to read ~~so that they could read~~ the Bible for themselves and not take for granted everything the preacher claimed the Bible said. That's why Presbyterians have always had such an interest in public education. That's why in the Presbyterian church the minister has no more authority or power than anyone else. I don't have the authority to celebrate the Lord's supper whenever I want. I don't have the authority to change the hour of worship. The only authority I have, under God, is to choose the scripture and preach an uncensored sermon. Everything else is under the jurisdiction of a group of people.

In the local church that group of people is called *The Session* which is made up of elders chosen by you, the congregation. And our church isn't independent. *The New Testament knows nothing of completely independent churches.* We're under the jurisdiction of a group of people called the Presbytery, half of whom must be lay Elders since Presbyterians have

always been distrustful of clergy with too much power. The Presbytery is under the jurisdiction of a group of people, half Elders, half Ministers, who are called *The Synod*. And the Synod is under the jurisdiction of a group of people called the *General Assembly*.

Sometimes the secular press, ^{not understanding} ~~which doesn't understand our~~ form of government, quotes the Moderator of the General Assembly as though the views expressed by that person are the official views of the church. But the moderator isn't like the Pope or the Ayatollah who speak on their own authority. The Moderator simply has the lowly job of moderating the meeting of the General Assembly and has no authority to speak for the church unless the church ~~has~~ ^{has} authorized it. We believe that we best arrive at the truth when groups of people study the Scripture together and pray together and rely together on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We believe that, as Jesus said in our Gospel lesson, "the Holy Spirit will not speak independently."

You see, we believe that the Bible teaches and that human experience confirms that the human heart has a tendency towards idolatry and tyranny. We believe that if any individual gains too much power they'll exercise it tyrannically and idolatrously even when their intentions are good and patriotic and even Christian. And the best way to guard against tyranny is never to let power rest in individuals, but always in groups of people duly elected for the purpose of governing. We believe this is supported by the Word of God in Scripture. This principle is a Presbyterian distinctive which I hope we never forget, either as a nation or as a church.