

Theology Matters

The State of the Church

By Jerry Andrews

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Since last we met the Church has defeated Amendment A. The Church has spoken. Again.

And rightly so. Some things are worth saying more than once. During this past year the presbyteries have had an opportunity and obligation once again to debate and vote on the standards of ordination. Once again, keeping faith with the whole Church through the ages and around the world, we affirmed that we all are called to live faithfully within a covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastely in singleness, and that our officers should meet these standards.

Earlier votes—in 1997, roughly a 20 vote margin, and in 1998, a 60 vote margin—compared to this year’s vote, 2002, an 80 vote margin, suggest that not only is the church clear in its decision but is becoming more and more comfortable and confident with its commitment.

The increasingly wide margins demonstrate the growing will of the church to stand its ground in this matter and may also suggest a desire to move toward other matters. G6.0106b, the paragraph once again disputed, is now one of most successfully defended paragraphs in our *Book of Order*. The Church has made its decision and reaffirmed it. Again.

Rev. Jerry Andrews, Ph.D. is pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Glen Ellyn, IL.

The Church may be called upon to defend this ordination standard again soon, but that now seems less likely. The margin of the vote suggests that the legislative season may be nearing an end. It is most likely to be replaced by some combination of a pastoral season and administrative season. The former is preferred. Which season dominates our common life will be determined by those governing bodies which are inclined to defy the constitution in this matter. Their restraint, as difficult as that may be, will permit a pastoral season which will serve the whole church well by helping to create a less adversarial environment.

In this next season, pastoral or administrative, patience is required by those who, like ourselves, whole-heartedly support the decision of the Church. The temptation to despair at the interminable nature of the controversy and the attraction to a new or other fellowship without these troubles must be resisted. We are wearied, but not worn down. The reformation of the Church calls for a hopeful, persistent effort which awaits God’s blessing.

If restraint is exercised both by those tempted to defy the constitution and by those tempted to leave the fellowship,

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then our common life, though presently feeling the heat of the controversy, and surrounded by misunderstanding, and with some open wounds, may begin slowly to cool, be clarified, and even to heal.

Not all will respond to the defeat of Amendment A similarly. May we suggest that those who are joyful, remember those who are not, and those who are not, seek to find wisdom in the decision of the Church.

We note in this vote this year a larger number of commissioners present and voting at presbytery meetings, probably signifying a larger number of elders participating in our common life. This is to be celebrated.

We note that a large share of those Presbyteries voting for a change are from one Synod—the Synod of the Northeast. We express our concern for this regional minority in our church and for the minority within that Synod.

We note that already there are calls for more trust from us all. Of course. We suggest that trust is most likely to grow where it is accompanied by a call for more trustworthiness in us all.

Our common life is not happy. This legislative season has been difficult. Many difficulties yet lie ahead. Church history teaches us that more often than not, the great difficulties of the Church have followed rather than preceded the decision of the Church. Matters of the constitutional and covenantal nature of the Church which now face us may be painful for us all. Our hopes for the Church and our trust in the Savior need once again to grow in us, move us forward, and move us together. The Presbyterian Coalition humbly submits that now is a good time for us to attend to other matters together which will bring greater glory to God.

In the end our hope grows not merely because this Church has spoken, again, but because the Lord has promised good. Always.

Since last we met the Church received with joy “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ,” a theological statement which exalts the Savior in certain and confessional terms. It was gladly received by the General Assembly and recommended for use and study to the whole Church.

Presented by the Office of Theology and Worship, it won immediate and widespread favor and assent. Passed by 97%, it was celebrated. No doubt, some of that percentage was a vote for peace rather than an appreciation of the truth, and, no doubt, there is much work ahead. Nevertheless, 97% is better than 47%. The church was presented with her own faith and she recognized it.

The preservation of the truth, one of the great ends of the church, is governed by an intentionally conservative verb—preservation. We do not invent or fabricate the

truth; we preserve it. May the church have again the humility of the apostle who said, “I pass on to you that which I received.” This year instead of passing on it, we pass it on.

Since last we met the church has not succeeded in defending her own constitution. The issues of discipline have not been deliberated well; the decisive difference between dissent and defiance has not been distinguished. It is not clear if the constitution will hold. If it does not, the church will not.

At a point in our history when we move slowly but deliberately from a regulatory agency to a missional church we debate the accumulated and often unexamined rules in our common life. This is appropriate. But it must be remembered that size is a function of trust and regulation a function of trustworthiness.

A *Book of Order* from an earlier generation was given to me recently. I placed it in my shirt pocket where it fit easily. In that generation the Westminster Standards spoke the faith of the officers of the church. A careful subscription was solicited. If needed, scruples were announced, judged thoroughly, and examined publicly. Agreement on doctrinal matters was valued unashamedly. With that agreement, closely and highly prized, came an easy presumption of the good judgment and practices of the governing bodies. The need to manage closely the deliberations and opinions of the officers in and by a *Book of Order* was minimal. Trust in theological matters, strictly observed, produced a generosity in matters of polity. Believing that truth leads to duty and faith to practice, trust in others and in the whole was higher.

Evangelicals, for so long having borne the brunt of a denomination that exhibited a fundamentalism of the *Book of Order*, have no wish that anyone would bear that burden any longer. We propose the critical and careful reexamination of the faith of the church and that of her officers which, as in an earlier generation, long past, will produce a Church in which

the consensus of faith is greater
the coherence of the body tighter
the trust in the members deeper, and
the rules of her common life fewer.

The current temptation of some to engage in what I think they think is the honorable politics of resistance may be no more than the mere resistance of polity, or it may be a polity of another theology. Its resolution requires not only polity corrections but theological clarity.

Denominational honesty consists, first, in a clear unambiguous statement by a church of its doctrinal belief, and, second, in an unequivocal and sincere adoption of it by its members. Both are requisite. If a particular denomination makes a loose statement of its belief which is capable of being construed in more

than one sense, it is so far dishonest. If the creed of the denomination is well-drawn and plain, but the membership subscribe to it with mental reservation and insincerity, the denomination is dishonest. Honesty and sincerity are founded in clear conviction, and clear conviction is founded in the knowledge and acknowledgement of the truth...

The recent discussions in the Presbyterian Church have disclosed a difference of sentiment respecting the value of denominational honesty. (W.G.T. Shedd, *Calvinism: Pure & Mixed* chap. 15: Denominational Honesty and Honor 1893)

Ever since we began meeting the church has experienced the abiding troubles of a fellowship that pursues peace but not the truth on which it must be founded, and thus experiences the sadness and pain of a people that does not get the peace it so much wants.

The constant call for peace unaccompanied by a passion for truth will not in the end serve the church.

[I]n loving unity, and dreading schism, she certainly has, thus far, the mind of Christ and his apostles. And yet, it reveals what may prove one of her greatest dangers: for, if upon this ecclesiastical sentiment, this strong love of unity, this sacred dread of schism, she does not hang its proper counterpoise, a still stronger love of truth, a still more sacred dread of error, she will lack the one thing needful, under God, to keep any church steady and safe in a world of sin and falsehood. On this point, ecclesiastical history furnishes abundant testimony. When love of unity overmasters the love of truth, the hope of a safe church is gone. The first step, from this fatal disturbance of the scriptural balance is, to confound the true idea of Christian unity with that of merely outward, visible, secular consolidation; and then, for the sake of maintaining this kind of unity at all hazards, comes the gradual result of making the Church one vast compound; a mixture of truth and error, superstition and corruption; ...make[ing] the whole mass unsavoury to God and unsaving to man. (John S. Stone, on the Episcopal Church 1853)

Ever since we began meeting, the Presbyterian Coalition has voiced an anger in response to interminable problems besetting the church. One of the things said about evangelicals is, I believe, true: If you can't get us angry you might not get us at all. This must end. The anger of a man cannot accomplish the righteousness of God.

On your behalf I have perfected the art of whining, constantly complaining about the absence of a level playing field, the systematic and intentional exclusion from leadership for over a generation, and the hypocrisy of liberals who almost never are. I have postured and posed for you so that we may gain a more fair and more

sympathetic hearing from the church for our grievances. Friends: the days of whine and poses are over.

No longer is this to be about us and no longer about our anger. It is about the church, her reform, and our hope for her.

We are called to the hardest of all tasks; to fight without hatred, to resist without bitterness, and in the end, if God grants it so, to triumph without vindictiveness. (William Temple)

Do we have the character?

Ever since there has been a church, the church at her best has been battling her own errors and at her best has remained a whole church. Hear the seriousness of the Reformer as he learns from the Apostle.

There was not one kind of sin only, but very many; and there were no light errors, but frightful misdeeds; there was corruption not only of morals but of doctrine.

Does he seek to separate himself from such?

Does he cast them out of Christ's Kingdom?

Does he fell them with the ultimate thunderbolt of anathema? He not only does nothing of the sort; he even recognizes and proclaims them to be the church of Christ and communion of saints. (Calvin on 1 Corinthians 1:2)

May God give us such hope in our fight and grace in our hope.

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Church Renewal

By Diane Knippers

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I've been looking forward to this gathering for months. My special delight is to watch long-time friends in one denomination meet long-time friends in another. It's a family reunion of the family of God. It's a particular relief to be here this week. I spent Monday through Thursday noon at the meeting of the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations of the Episcopal Church. In other words, I spent three days talking about ecumenism with people in my own church with whom I have profound disagreements. Now, I'm getting to do ecumenical relations with men and women with whom I enjoy a deep spiritual unity. So, thank you for blessing me.

It is a great privilege to have the opportunity to speak to you. I want to begin by telling you the story of a reform-minded pastor....

It's an ecumenical story, in a way, since it touches two of our denominations. A few years ago, there was an Episcopal priest, named Scott, who was an assistant pastor in a United Methodist Church near Omaha, Nebraska. (How he got that job is, I'm sure, a story in itself.) He was serving in this United Methodist church when another UM pastor, named Jimmy Creech, performed a same-sex so-called "marriage" in Omaha. This evangelical Episcopalian was shaken to the core. One thing that disturbed him was a curious pattern among other local pastors. Evangelical pastors were outspoken about their beliefs in their own congregations, but quiet beyond the local church. Liberals were silent about their beliefs in their congregations, but outspoken beyond.

Scott was conflicted and unsure about what to do. After all, this wasn't even his denomination. Then, he read an article about a Vietnamese pastor in a labor camp. This pastor's job in the camp was to shovel excrement. But the imprisoned Vietnamese pastor said he did that odious task while rejoicing in the Lord. Scott was convicted—and he decided nobody would do anything *that* bad to him and so he spoke up. He spoke up in his congregation, wrote letters and organized meetings and prayer rallies. My

Diane Knippers is President of the Institute for Religion and Democracy which includes Presbyterian Action, a renewal group relating to the PCUSA.

source told me he wasn't hateful or mean-spirited, but stood for the truth in a gospel way.

Well, appointment time came around. He was re-appointed to a small rural church. However, because his daughter was disabled and needed services found only in urban areas, he could not take the appointment. He lost his job and was unemployed for six months.

Praise God, the story doesn't end there. He began to worship at a nearby Episcopal parish. The reason I know this story is that my church then hired the rector of that Iowa parish. Scott served as interim rector of that Episcopal congregation and, after a search process, was named the rector.

This morning, I want to communicate with you what I see happening in our churches and in renewal. I want us to discern together what God is doing in the church as we enter the 21st century.

Renewal in the historic Protestant Churches in North America is at an important juncture. The current generation of renewal organizations largely began in the late sixties and subsequent decades. We were born out of conditions in our churches and in society of the late twentieth century, although the theological problems in our churches date from modernist trends that are much older. Many in the founding generation of our renewal movements are retiring.

Some of those founders may have thought that a strong dose of publicity and perhaps a bit of organizing would solve the problems of our churches. Those hopes have surely been disappointed. One important measure of the health of a church—membership statistics—shows our churches in continuing decline. It's a sad but familiar story. From 1990 to 2000, according to a study released in September, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America declined 2.2 percent, the Episcopal Church declined 5.3 percent, the American Baptist Churches declined 5.7 percent, the United Methodist Church declined 6.7 percent, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) declined 11.6 percent, and the United Church of Christ declined a whopping 14.8 percent. During this time, the U.S. population increased by over 13 percent. Growing

churches, by and large, were more conservative—Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, the Roman Catholic Church, the Churches of Christ. The Presbyterian Church in America grew by 42 percent and the Wesleyan Church about 47 percent. The growing churches are attracting immigrants, younger people, the unchurched, and yes, some of the former members of our churches.

The bottom line is that the dwindling mainline is the increasingly irrelevant sideline. (Let me, as an aside, illustrate this point of irrelevancy. Opposition to the war on terrorism, and now the possible war on Iraq, has easily been the loudest message of our denominational leaders for the last 13 months. Now its perfectly legitimate for Christians to disagree on foreign policy. But the biggest problem with what our church leaders have done isn't that they oppose these military actions, but that they argue in histrionic, biased, exaggerated, and irresponsible ways. And you know how much impact they are having in Washington? None whatsoever. All of their resolutions and statements and demonstrations are making no difference. None.)

Our churches are declining and increasingly irrelevant, even on issues that are their top priority. So, if vibrant, healthy, growing denominations are the goal of our reform movement, we have not achieved success. How's that for the understatement of the day? We have not yet accomplished our purpose, not achieved our aim.

So, do we press on?

The Confessing Theologians Commission has offered us a powerful statement of encouragement, admonishing us to "be steadfast" and to move forward. I am convinced that this challenge is exactly right.

One major reason comes from history. When has the church not needed renewal and reform? Let me quickly acknowledge that there are certainly times of relative health and revival and times of apostasy and dissolution in church history. In our denominations, these are not good days. But they aren't the worst in church history either.

Read the appalling stories of the papacy and church hierarchy during the Medici period, with its shocking materialistic and sexual excesses. I don't think any of our denominations matches that era of church history in its breathtaking debauchery. But next, in contrast, study the life and ministry of the current Pope, John Paul II. We must quickly conclude that, yes, reformations are possible, even *within* a church.

Too many contemporary Christians make the wrong assumptions about church renewal and reform. They confuse the goal or the ideal with the normal. They think that the normal or typical state of Christ's Church is what it *ought* to be—unified, holy, courageous, peaceful,

charitable, teaching truth at all levels. In case you haven't noticed, the church isn't typically like that.

In fact, the biblical and historical evidence is that it never has been that way. I've concluded that church reform isn't some unusual tangent activity. It is the *normal* responsibility of those who love God. It is *integral* to God's redemptive project. We don't reform the church so that we can get on with the other tasks—mission, evangelism, discipleship, seeking justice and righteousness. No, church reform is part of the task of the church.

The early Church was not a golden age. The epistles are directed toward every kind of problem within the church, from the theological errors of Gnosticism, to instructions about social responsibility, to admonitions about sexual immorality. The Church itself was plagued by immorality.

Or read about the early centuries of church history and the ecumenical councils. What incredible struggles! What gripping conflict! Lives were at stake; empires hung in the balance. Indeed, the orthodox faith of the Church was at stake. These were theological and spiritual and, yes, political battles. They make even the most serious contemporary church theological conflicts look almost tame. But out of the refining fire of those theological conflagrations, have come precious gifts—including the creed we say weekly in my own parish.

Reformation is simply one of the ongoing tasks of the church. And we must look for the blessing of this work—that our most difficult battles may produce incredible gifts for our children's children.

If reform is a constant, what then are the attributes of our contemporary reform movements? What is God doing among us in this day? How can we discern God's work among us? I have identified six emerging characteristics of contemporary reformation:

1. It is mature and diverse
2. It is ecumenical
3. It is profoundly theological
4. It addresses moral issues
5. It is global
6. It is generational

It is Mature and Diverse

First, our renewing and confessing movement is mature and multi-faceted. To be sure, some of our organizations are young. But they are joining a movement that has decades of experience.

Just look at the listing of break-out sessions of this conference and review the organizations with which we affiliate. We are engaged in missions and in publishing. We are strengthening theological education. We have

evangelists and are leading in new evangelism strategies from church planting to Alpha. We are engaged in micro-enterprise development and human rights advocacy. We are building marriages, defending the unborn, and healing the sexually broken. We are changing the tenor and results at the assemblies and conventions and conferences of our denominations.

Let me say a word about our diversity. Occasionally, someone will say, “Why can’t you all get together? Why are there so many different groups?” Now, I’ll quickly concede that we must cooperate, within and between denominations. The task is too urgent to allow us to tolerate petty bickering and competition. But, having said that, our many and diverse organizations are our strength. They appeal to different gifts and callings. More groups can accommodate more people and more strategies and more outreach.

Suppose you had three groups doing evangelism in your congregation—using different strategies and effectively reaching different audiences. Suppose one was bringing high school students to Christ and another was working with immigrants and a third was a successful Alpha program. Would you demand that they merge? Or would you eagerly support and encourage all three?

My friends, we don’t need fewer reform groups, fewer renewal strategies, fewer committed leaders, fewer confessing movements. We need more. The United Methodist Foundation for Theological Education should be duplicated in other denominations. The high circulation and aggressive reporting of the Presbyterian Layman and United Methodist Action should be replicated in the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The global anti-poverty work of the Anglican Five Talents organization should be copied by others. And every denomination represented here needs a group parallel to a new Presbyterian group I’ve just learned about—called Youth for Truth. We are a mature and diverse movement.

It is Ecumenical

Our renewing and confessing movement is ecumenical. One of the first charges against the IRD in the early 80s was that we were anti-ecumenical. The accusation, of course, stemmed from our forthright critique of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches. But I kept asking, “Have you seen our board of directors? We are one of the most ecumenical organizations in North America!”

Regarding ecumenism, our renewing and confessing movement is saying enough is enough. To the NCC we say: Out-of-touch leaders of a declining organization representing less than one third of American Christians don’t get to claim the mantle of Christian unity anymore.

We embrace ecumenism. We know that Christian unity can only be found in Truth—the Truth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We watch with anticipation to see God’s work in unifying His Church—recognizing that unity is God’s gift, not a construct of committees and commissions. The third Christian millennium is bringing the promise of a New Ecumenism. We are committed to this New Ecumenism. We are experiencing it and practicing it here.

Let me say one more word about ecumenism and church reform. The reformation we seek won’t come to just one denomination. When I prayerfully consider the renewal we seek, I can’t even imagine that the Presbyterians would experience some kind of dramatic change that would pass the Methodists by. How could there be a reformation that would touch the Lutherans and bypass the Episcopalians?

Let’s be very clear about what we really desire, hope for, contend for and pray for. Let’s be really clear about what we need. Reformation is more than minor changes in church canons or passing biblically-based resolutions or even electing orthodox leaders. Our plight is too serious for that. We need revival. We yearn for another Great Awakening. The Holy Spirit doesn’t bring Great Awakenings to denominations. He brings them to cities, to regions, and, please God, to our nations.

Our renewing and confessing movement is becoming and must be as ecumenical as the revival we so desperately need.

It is Profoundly Theological

There are many people in this room that have much more to say regarding our theological task than I have. We’ve already heard some of them this week. But I must say just a word or two about theology. First, let me note simply that the renewing and confessing movement is theologically serious. One of our groups publishes a journal entitled simply, “Theology Matters.” It’s perhaps no coincidence that this orthodox Presbyterian publication was launched by a woman after the first Re-Imagining Conference.

Let me tell you one blessing of our battles with revisionist theologies. We are rediscovering and re-embracing our heritage. We are studying and re-asserting the atonement, the incarnation, and the bodily resurrection. We don’t take these for granted. We study patristics. We no longer mumble our way through the creeds, we proclaim them. We savor their truth and beauty. And our movement is fully Trinitarian. We worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, knowing that to neglect any person of the Trinity is to distort the Gospel and leave ourselves bereft of God’s full power and blessing.

Theologically, we are at an interesting historical moment as we move from modernity to post-modernity. For years, we have struggled with the modernists—those sons and

daughters of the Enlightenment, marked by rationalism and materialism, dismissive of miracles and alienated from the Transcendent. Admittedly, these often aging voices still get a lot of media attention and adulation in some circles. We Episcopalians are rightly embarrassed that the most well-known Episcopal bishop in the country is one named Spong.

But let's not waste too much time and energy combating worn-out and unappealing modernist heresies. We face new, insidious challenges. In a post-modern era, the problem may not be unbelief, but too much belief—belief in anything and everything. Donna Hailson, one of our confessing theologians, calls it cafeteria religion—in which people create their own religion piecemeal out of the beliefs and practices of a global cornucopia of options. Here the radical feminist theologians lead the way—mixing wiccan croning ceremonies, Eastern healing rituals, erotic litanies, drums and chants invoking ancestors, and even some old camp-meeting hymns—all in an intoxicating, poisonous brew. Theology matters, indeed, now more than ever.

It Addresses Moral Issues

Our renewing and confessing movement confronts a deepening apologetic task—not just about theology, but also about ethics. We must address contemporary moral and social issues. This is a direct product of the dramatic changes in our society. When I first went to work at Good News magazine, nearly 30 years ago, it was usually enough to report that some church leader was endorsing homosexual practice. Readers would immediately grasp the problem. In just a few decades, the moral climate of the West has dramatically shifted. The simple proposition that sexual intercourse ought to be reserved for life-long marriage between one man and one woman is contested, in word and deed, on every side. The new ethic is individualistic and utilitarian. It's not enough to report what is wrong in our churches, we have to teach why it is wrong.

As I said earlier, in every age there is a need for church reform. Reform movements rise up in reaction to wrong, to false teaching and evil practice. But the end result can be a great blessing to the Church universal. The reform battles of the early church gave us the blessing of creedal affirmations of Christ's humanity and divinity. The monastic reforms have left a legacy of spiritual disciplines that grace our lives. Men of courage and conviction were martyred so that we might read the Holy Scripture in our own language. The great proclamation of justification by faith—which we now hear echoing throughout the whole Church—sprang from the lips of reformers challenging a church in which it seemed that everything could be bought.

Let's face it. Some of the deepest wrongs we face today have to do with human sexuality—the abuse and misuse of one of God's greatest gifts. In the midst of our current

struggles, we may miss a larger redemptive possibility. I am convinced that God will use this struggle to rejuvenate and redeem marriage. My own marriage has been immeasurably strengthened as I've struggled with the issues we face and studied to find answers in natural law, in tradition, and in Scripture. I see so many young marriages that benefit from the intentional determination of men and women to form godly unions in opposition to cultural pressures.

Like all of you, I admit to being discouraged from time to time. Whether I'm flipping channels on television or listening to the debate in the House of Bishops, my anguished cry is often, "What are we coming to? Where will it end? How far can this go?" But history teaches and faith assures me of this: Out of this deep and terrible struggle, God will reveal more to us about what He intended all along for marriage than any generation has ever known before.

Marriage and sexuality aren't the only issues demanding a new apologetic today. Another great moral struggle today is over life itself. When does life begin? When does it end? Who decides? The renewing and confessing movements have strong organizations fighting the scourge of abortion and seeking to protect both children and women from this great social evil. We are not equipped and ready to face the end of life questions. Partly this is because our churches are not taking uniform and predictable positions on euthanasia, assisted suicide, stem cell research, cloning, etc. There's not a lot of truly bad teaching coming from our churches on these issues, demanding our reaction. But there's not a lot of teaching on these issues from the churches, period. At the same time our society desperately needs thoughtful, courageous Christian voices. This is an area in which the renewing and confessing movement can and should lead. We need researchers and writers, we need task forces and models of ministry. We need to do this now.

This is more than a theoretical issue—more than an ethical or political debate. As we baby boomers age and as life expectancies increase, care of the elderly will become a critical national issue. There will be increased pressure on the aged and infirm to end their own lives, pressure often consistent with their own desire to die rather than lose independence. The question over the worth of the human person will be asked, not just at the beginning of life, but increasingly to the end. And the struggle will play out in our homes and communities. We need families and congregations willing to testify to the infinite worth of each person created in God's image by their sacrificial service to those nearing the end of life.

And then there are the character issues in our corporate and economic life. Greed, deception, and corruption—all personal moral failings whatever else they are—have severely damaged our economic institutions. Even worse, they have betrayed the promise of free economies to those

escaping communism and to the poorest of the poor around the globe.

Another moral issue has to do with our popular culture and media saturated with debased sexual images. So much of our entertainment is squalid and de-humanizing. Yes, its victims are certainly women and children, but men as well. The internet makes all of this even more insidious. Our final speaker for this conference is Jerry Kirk. He is a great social reformer, I believe much in the tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth century anti-slavery movement. Dr. Kirk would rid us of slavery to pornography. He is going to challenge our movement to concrete action.

Let me tell you about a dream I have. I would like to see our church leaders spend as much time clamoring for change in Hollywood as they do in Washington. Earlier this month, United Methodist bishops demonstrated before the White House. Why don't they demonstrate in front of motion picture studios or the corporate offices of internet providers? What if our church activists and social action agencies organized letter-writing crusades and divestment campaigns and petitions and resolutions and turn-off-the-TV weeks—all aimed at purveyors of pornography and unending sex and violence in our entertainment industry. Washington and Ottawa may be the political capitals of our two nations, but New York and Hollywood are the media capitals of the world. It wouldn't even require a huge ideological or theological shift for our churches to lead this kind of effort. It really only requires the will and the effort. This is something our renewal groups could lead.

Again, we see the connection between a moral failure in the West and its negative impact throughout the world. The popular culture that we export gives a bad name to democracy and human freedom—and to the degree that our nations are identified as Christian—to our faith. So, both the blessing of liberty and the glorious hope of the Christian gospel are tarnished by the media images we broadcast around the world. The most serious price is often paid by the weakest and most vulnerable—for example, Christian minorities in Islamic-dominated lands.

This leads me to the third emerging issue I want to highlight. We have a huge apologetic task in the face of the rise of Islam—including challenging the shocking myopia and naiveté of many of our church leaders before this threat.

We see on the part of many of our church leaders a reprise of the kind of response they made to totalitarian Communism two decades ago. The Soviets, like many Muslim nations today, were abusive of basic human rights, including religious freedom. There was the constant threat of armed conflict—including terrifying unconventional weapons. Too often church leaders felt that their peace advocacy required denying the human rights abuses. Today, Islam is portrayed as an innocuous,

peaceful religion. The existence of a radical Islam is minimized or denied. We are well on our way to betraying Christians, Jews, and even moderate Muslims who are minorities in Islamic regimes—just as we so scandalously betrayed fellow Christians in the Soviet empire.

This is an issue in which the renewing and confessing movements can be on the side of democracy, human rights, religious rights, and rights of women. This is an issue about which we can remind the leaders of the mainline churches that there can ultimately be no peace, unless there is also justice.

It is Global

My fifth point is that the reform movement is a global movement—and must become even more so. We Anglicans recognize how much we need the witness of the growing body of Anglicans in the global South. We see our mutual dependence—the churches of Africa, Latin American and Asia need our resources, our technology. They need enormous help in countering poverty, combating AIDs, building just and free societies. They need help with theological training to provide pastors for all the new converts. But we have realized how much we need them as well. We need their fervency, their gospel commitment, their evangelistic zeal, their towering faith.

But this connection is not only for Anglicans, it is for all of us. The center of Christendom has moved South. Most of our churches are connected to world movements, such as the World Methodist Council, the Baptist World Alliance, etc. Our reform movements must build relationship of mutual service and support with like-minded believers through such global movements.

There is an irony of our time. We are more aware than ever of the fact that around the globe our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering and dying for the faith. They suffer for the same faith that many of our church leaders are undermining and too many of us are too timid to defend.

I believe God revealed something to me that has filled me with pain and awe. There is unity in suffering. What if He is using the suffering of the persecuted church to embolden us? Would He allow their suffering to teach me something about Him and defending his Truth? Nothing has humbled me more than to make that connection.

Some American church leaders are re-imagining, distorting, demeaning and denying the very faith for which some Christians in our world are dying. Our brothers and sisters are suffering slavery, hunger, oppression and imprisonment—and some are shoveling excrement—to defend the Gospel. My dear friends, we may feel the sting of prejudice and marginalization in our churches, but we have not yet begun to suffer for the faith.

It is Generational

Now for my sixth and final observation about our renewing and confessing movement. God is raising up a new generation of reformers. God is renewing His church, but it is a multi-generational project. Let me tell you what I am convinced God is doing. He is raising up a new generation to be Athanasius.

Some of these young reformers are here. I want to introduce you to them. And I want to ask you to stand when I mention you. Melissa Bixler. When she was still in high school, Melissa went with me to the Episcopal General Convention and single-handedly organized other youth to testify on youth abstinence. Bruce Mason. When he was the assistant to a large church rector, Bruce spent the better part of a summer drafting a program of action for reforming the Episcopal Church—and now works for the AAC. Some of these young reformers are on our IRD staff. Jerald Walz. Last spring Jerald was a lay delegate to his United Methodist annual conference, and he gave major impetus to an effort to see that a pastor who had had a sex change operation did not receive an appointment. Meghan Furlong. Meghan helped recruit a team of nearly a dozen members of her church to attend this conference, including four other young adults. Steve Rempe. I can't forget when Steve came back from a General Assembly of the ELCA and told of going to report on a press conference organized by homosexuals—and recognized that he was the only straight person in the room. Most recently, he and one of his colleagues braved a WCC-NCC sponsored conference in Washington this summer, prepared a sharply critical and insightful report on its excesses, and engaged in a spirited correspondence with some of the conference leaders.

Let me tell you about the characteristics of these young reformers—and why I think of Athanasius.

- They are respectful, but they are not willing to leave the important task of reform to their elders or to those who outrank them in the church. If the bishops can't or won't be apologists for the gospel, they will.
- They are articulate and eloquent defenders of the faith. They are thoughtful and they do their homework. They are not silent.
- They know that they may well spend their lives in ecclesiastical exile. Their goal isn't a comfortable career. Their evangelical elders were often shocked to discover the heresies and injustices of our denominations. But this generation knows what it is getting into. They are not looking for material success, nor for ecclesiastical security and comfort. If they wanted the latter, they could find more amenable denominations or start an independent congregation. But, they are accepting God's call to join the

movement for reformation. And they are prepared for exile.

These are six signs I see of God's working among us. The renewing and confessing movement:

1. It is mature and diverse
2. It is ecumenical
3. It is theological
4. It is addressing ethical issues—marriage, end of life, character of corporate leaders, pornography, Islam, human rights—the list goes on
5. It is global
6. It is generational

Conclusion

What is the future of the church? What is the future of our movement? I don't have the gift of prophecy. All I can do is study our history, observe the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst, and claim the promises of God for our future.

I don't think the shape of the future Church will be the isolated, bureaucratic, politicized, modernist denominations of the twentieth century. In fact, I believe it will be mature and diverse, ecumenical, theologically grounded, addressing major ethical issues, and global. And it will be shaped and lived by the next generation. The Church will change. God does not. So, I do know one thing about the future—it will be a future in which God keeps His promises.

A couple of Sundays ago, my good UM friends, John and Helen Rhea Stumbo, visited my husband and me in Washington and came to our Episcopal Church with us on Sunday. Our closing hymn was one of my very favorites—The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. As we sang the final notes, I turned and saw tears in Helen Rhea's eyes. "We don't have that third verse in our hymnal," she said. "And it so spoke to me and what I've been wrestling with."

So last week, we got a copy of this hymn from my parish and faxed it to Wes Putnam, asking him if we could sing it this weekend. Listen to these words:

Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed;
Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.

For two thousand years, the saints and martyrs have cried "How long?" Today, across the globe, our brothers and sisters cry, "How long?" I've wept tears outside the House of Bishops and cried, "How long?"

And we cling to the promise, that soon, soon, soon, the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.

Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline: Mutual Accountability in the Reformed Tradition

By Charles Wiley

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“We teach best what we need most to learn.”¹

Mutual Accountability

What is the nature of our mutual accountability within the Christian community? It is a question vexing our church. I read headlines about a constitutional crisis, the lack of discipline in the church, and calls for submission to the will of the church. Many are angry that discipline is not being applied the way they think it should be. Others are angry that discipline is not being exercised against those who dissent. On this we should agree: discipline is not working the way it should. Discipline in the Presbyterian Church is atrophied because we have failed to exercise a comprehensive and biblical notion of the role of discipline in the Christian life.

In exploring the theme of mutual accountability, I will use some lessons learned from the Reformation period in Geneva as a window into the history and theology of discipline in the Reformed tradition. In the past twenty years there has been extensive research on the role of discipline in the Genevan Reformation under Calvin. This research has been spearheaded by Dr. Robert Kingdon of the University of Wisconsin. For too long the picture of discipline in Calvin’s time has been dominated by episodes such as the burning of Servetus—the, *perhaps*, heavy-handed use of discipline to enforce doctrinal and moral purity. But that picture turns out to be horribly incomplete. Earlier translators of the Registers of the Consistory were not interested in the everyday exercise of discipline; instead, they picked out the most salacious stories and ignored the vast majority of more ordinary disciplinary cases. Kingdon and his team have done us a great service by translating all the records, thereby giving us a representation of the everyday practice of discipline in Calvin’s Geneva.²

Charles Wiley, Ph.D. is an Associate for Theology in the Office of Theology and Worship. He is editor of Selected Theological Statements of the PC (U.S.A.) General Assemblies (1959-1998), and the series editor of the twelve-volume Foundations of Christian Faith.

Why Discipline?

The recovery of the exercise of church discipline in a biblical, Reformed manner is vital to the future of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

As you may know, John Calvin’s first effort to reform the church in Geneva was less than successful. One of the principal causes for opposition to Calvin’s reform was his insistence that the people take communion every week in worship—under the previous Catholic regime the people only received the elements once a year. Because of deep-seated resistance to a reformation of all of church life, Calvin departed for Strasbourg, France, where Martin Bucer mentored him. Under Bucer, Calvin grasped that a reformation of the church called for a retrieval of discipline for all people in the church.

A few years later when the situation in Geneva became desperate, the city fathers called Calvin back to continue the reform of the church. In preparing to return Calvin pressed for a number of concrete reforms. Again he requested weekly communion, but this time he insisted strongly on disciplinary practices around the table. The city leaders balked at the extent of Calvin’s demands. Calvin finally relented on weekly communion, against his better judgment, but he would not compromise on the establishment of a Consistory that would ensure a baptismal discipline around the table.

While the faithful proclamation of the Word and the right celebration of the sacraments were at the center of church practice for Calvin, he recognized that discipline was necessary for holding these practices together. In his famous reply to Cardinal Sadeleto, Bishop of Carpentras in Southern France, Calvin wrote that discipline held the church together: “For the body of the Church, to cohere well, must be bound together by discipline as with sinews.”³ Because discipline was vital to give space for Word and Sacrament to work in the church, Calvin fiercely defended its exercise:

Of all the institutions he built it was the one he defended with the greatest tenacity. He even threatened to resign his charge and to leave the city at times when its authority was challenged. He was completely convinced that it was not enough for a community to arrange for true Christian doctrine to be taught. It was also necessary for a community to require that true Christian precepts be lived.⁴

Central to the Reformed tradition from its very inception is a commitment to the faithful living of Christian faith coupled with an admission that such faithfulness is not possible alone. In the church we need each other, accountability with each other, to live faithful lives.

The church in our own time is entering a new age, perhaps in the end as dramatic a shift as the Reformation was in its time. After four and a half centuries of ascending importance within our culture, our church is fast becoming a minority church. As we enter this new time, our identity is at stake, not for its own sake, but for the sake of being faithful to our Savior, Jesus Christ. In such a time, an attention to what makes us *us* is vital. And thus a biblical practice of discipline is required.

Ordinary Discipline

The great achievement of our Reformed forebears was the recovery of ordinary discipline.

Ordinary, not extraordinary, discipline was the preoccupation of the Reformers like Calvin. Since I have coined the terms *ordinary discipline* and *extraordinary discipline*, I will expand on what I intend by them. *Ordinary discipline* is the practice of the church to assist Christians to stay true to their deepest desires, desires given to us by God—to live a faithful Christian life, to stay true to the vows we make at baptism. *Extraordinary discipline* involves either holding someone to their vows against their wishes or resolving a dispute between parties where there is no agreement on the good.

Ordinary discipline was Calvin's preoccupation, although he clearly believed and practiced extraordinary discipline. Preceding the time of the Reformation, discipline was primarily exercised in two ways. The first was extraordinary discipline of heresy trials and the like—people who were accused of opposing the church's teaching or standards. The second was special discipline for those in religious vocations (monks, nuns, and those in religious orders) that went well beyond what was expected of the average Christian. In fact, the extraordinary discipline of the late medieval period has significant continuity with that exercised by the Reformers. It was in the second realm that there was a great change.

Calvin took the special discipline restricted to those in religious vocations and extended it to every believer. He rejected the notion that only those who had taken vows of celibacy were to live truly disciplined lives. In a real sense, Calvin extended the monastery to the whole

church, expecting every Christian to submit his or her own life to Christ in all aspects of life.

Rather than describing further the practice of ordinary discipline in Geneva, I will illustrate it with an account from Geneva in 1542, the account of "Master Michiel the Saddler and His Nephew." [The text is from the minutes of the Consistory, the body of ministers and elders that exercised most cases of discipline in the church—it is not composed of polished, complete sentences.]

Why he and his nephew have been in conflict for a long time, and various other questions. Answers that he pardons his said nephew although he has caused him much pain, and that he will never be in his company, and that he has not taken Communion three or four times because of this quarrel, and that he took it last time. The Consistory, the preachers having given the said Michiel strict admonitions, exhorted him to pardon his said nephew entirely according to the commandment of God for the offenses his said nephew has committed against him for the honor of Jesus Christ. Answers that for the love of God he pardons him entirely for the injuries he has done him. And also that he go to the sermons, and answers that he can hardly go there because he is ill.

The nephew was asked what grudge or resentment he has felt against his uncle for a long time, and other things. Answers that he carries no hate against his uncle and that he does him all the favors he can, but that he is not pleased with him and does not care about him, and that he does him all the honor he can and has begged mercy on his knees from his uncle and he wants to pardon him also, and promises that he will never give any displeasure either to him or his aunt. And they pardoned each other and embraced and expressed love for each other and left together.⁵

This account of Michiel and his nephew is far more typical of discipline in Geneva than heresy trials or other spectacular tales. It was not the arena of burnings at the stake or banishment from the realm: it was the pastoral process of helping people to reconcile with one another in Christ, even uncles and nephews who cannot speak to one another.

Ordinary discipline is the role of the church community reminding us of what we truly want. Augustine described the Christian life in this way, "Love God and do what you will."⁶ This was not a statement underwriting an "anything goes" account of the Christian life. No—the foundation for church discipline is, ironically, the freedom we have in Christ. Not that we need to reign in freedom so we behave correctly, but rather that in Christ we are emancipated from our slavery to sin and are free to obey. Discipline becomes a help, a boon to us in exercising our freedom to live godly lives.

It was this *ordinary* discipline that was at the center of Geneva's ecclesial practices. For Reformed Christians, there is no extraordinary discipline without the practice of ordinary discipline. Extraordinary discipline is only practiced as an outgrowth of ordinary discipline.

Much has changed since the time of the Reformation, but God still calls redeemed sinners to live faithful lives. And we still cannot answer that call on our own strength. We need the life of a disciplined community surrounding us to give us strength to follow.

Reconciliation

Ordinary discipline is local, relational, and restorative. The goal of this exercise of discipline is restoration and reconciliation.

It is ordinary discipline that should be at the heart of our practice: ordinary discipline is congregationally focused, principally carried out by pastors *and* elders together who know their people. Martin Bucer said that discipline was best handled between friends. Ordinary discipline is not the sole province of pastors, but is a mutual ministry of pastors and elders. A great first step to transform a congregation would be to transform the session from a board of directors for the church corporation to a body of elders with responsibilities for the spiritual life of that congregation: counseling with those to be baptized, accepting people into membership, being responsible for the service of the Table. Too often these vital responsibilities are handled in a pro forma manner.

This mode of holding one another accountable is characterized by discernment, not an adversarial legal system. Unfortunately, the system for discipline in the Presbyterian Church is often adversarial. I do not know when the adversarial legal system became part of our disciplinary procedures, but it was in place at least by the time of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversies in the 1920s. This distinction between ordinary discipline and extraordinary discipline is reflected in the preamble to the "Rules of Discipline" in the *Book of Order*:

D-1.0103 Conciliate and Mediate

The traditional biblical obligation to conciliate, mediate, and adjust differences without strife is not diminished by these Rules of Discipline. Although the Rules of Discipline describe the way in which judicial process within the church, when necessary, shall be conducted, it is not their intent or purpose to encourage judicial process of any kind or to make it more expensive or difficult. The biblical duty of church people to "come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court ..." (Matthew 5:25) is not abated or diminished. It remains the duty of every church member to try (prayerfully and seriously) to bring about an adjustment or settlement of the quarrel, complaint, delinquency, or irregularity asserted, and to avoid formal proceedings under the Rules of Discipline unless, after prayerful

deliberation, they are determined to be necessary to preserve the purity and purposes of the church.⁷

The irony is, of course, that this ordinary discipline described in the preamble is easily forgotten as we wade through the careful rules of an adversarial system laid out in the Rules of Discipline. Almost everything I have heard or read about discipline in the PC(USA) over the past few years has focused solely on extraordinary discipline, completely overlooking the more dominant pattern in our tradition.

In the story of Michiel and his nephew, did you note the asking of forgiveness, the embrace, and the leaving together? Almost every case of church discipline during this period ended in touch appropriate to the relationship of the parties involved: a hug between spouses, a handshake between business partners, etc. Ordinary discipline is not about "getting" each other or holding each other's feet to the fire. In ordinary church discipline we care enough about each other to treat one another with respect, with love, and with the will to risk helping each other grow in Christ.

The ordinary discipline that we must exercise is local, restorative, and reconciling.

Worship at the Heart

The exercise of ordinary discipline is irrevocably related to the worship life of the church: the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is in the practice of baptism that we have the foundation for ordinary discipline. When we witness a baptism we hear something like:

In embracing that covenant, we choose whom we will serve, by turning from evil and turning to Jesus Christ.

Do you renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God's righteousness and love?

I renounce them.

Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?

I renounce them.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior?

I do.

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love, to your life's end?

I will, with God's help.

Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

I will, with God's help.⁸

In response to the grace of God offered to us in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we make these vows, these promises. They are promises that recognize our being bound to God and the bonds we have with one another in the church. In the Reformed tradition baptism functions as the “visible vehicle for incorporation into the church.”⁹ In a real sense the exercise of ordinary discipline does not require us to commit ourselves to any further accountability than the vows we make at baptism.

In Calvin’s time and for a long time thereafter, the primary locus of examination of living out these vows was in preparation for coming to the Lord’s Table. This was an admirable move, to “discern the body” before communing at the Table. However, in time the system devolved from a mode of discernment to a more technical requirement to have acquired a Communion token to be admitted to the Table. In our day we must recover the notion of self-examination and corporate discipline around the Table, but not in a mechanistic, legalistic fashion. Instead, it must grow out of mutual love, forbearance, and accountability.

Discipline was not a third mark of the church for Calvin, but instead provided space for working of the two marks, the Word and Sacrament. Calvin believed that God had promised to work when the Word was faithfully preached and heard and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, “For it is certain that such things are not without fruit.”¹⁰ Discipline is a human activity done in obedience to God that allows us to better hear the Word and receive the grace of God promised in the sacraments.

One significant worship practice that embodies ordinary discipline is the passing of the peace. More than just a chance to say “howdy,” the passing of the peace in worship gives space for reconciliation. I became a Presbyterian at Blacknall Memorial Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina. One of the most profound parts of that fellowship for my wife and me was that we reconciled with each other and with others during the peace. It is not a place for extended mediation for disputes. But to look someone in the eye with whom you are not at peace, extend your hand and say, “The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” —that is the fruit of the gospel.

It is no mere historical argument that ordinary church discipline is connected to the practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. One of the grave dangers of the exercise of church discipline is that it can become terrifying—an exercise of power obsessed with mere moralism. We have more than enough examples in the historical record of the overreaching of church discipline to back up this fear. By clearly connecting discipline to the grace offered by God to us in word and sacrament, we make it more difficult for it to descend into mere moralism. To be faithful to the Scriptures and to the best of our tradition, we must clearly connect the practice of discipline to the worship life of the church, the hearing of the word, the engrafting into the

church in baptism, and the continual feeding on Christ at the Lord’s Table.

Grace in the Mundane

In ordinary church discipline most cases are mundane.

When people were brought before the Consistory in Geneva, the most common “offense” was not adultery, or prostitution, or heresy, or the other “good ones.” It was hate. Hate was the presenting issue in the story I presented of Master Michiel and his nephew. When discipline is solely focused on extraordinary discipline and high-profile offenses, we lose the ability to realize it is in our everyday lives with each other that our sin seeps out.

In another account from the Consistory in Geneva, we read again of the nephew of Michiel, but this time in relation to his aunt, Claudaz, the wife of Michiel the Saddler:

Asked to give an explanation of her faith and about the quarrel between her husband and Mermet, their nephew, and why she has a grudge. Answers that the said Mermet said vicious things to her but that she wishes him no harm and that she wishes him no harm sic and pardons him freely. Said the Lord’s Prayer in her native tongue not very well, and says she knows the confession in Latin, and that she always takes Communion for the love of God. The Consistory advises that she be reconciled with her nephew Mermet. And touching the faith, that she frequent the sermons and come to catechism on Sunday with the others. And that she be admonished about the hypocrisy of her peace with her nephew Mermet. And that Monsieur Pierre Viret, Britillion and Frochet be assigned to reconcile them and that they be remanded to Monday after the sermon at the Magdalen so they can live in peace together.¹¹

This ordinary discipline is simply the mundane working out of our desire to be faithful to our Savior. Here the goal of the ordinary discipline is so “they can live in peace together;” further, that this peace be lived out and not just for the sake of appearances. Ordinary discipline concerns just these sorts of mundane aspects of daily living. This connection between reception of grace and holy living is expressed well in the French Confession of 1559:

By faith we receive grace to live holy lives in awe and reverence for God, for we receive what the gospel promises when God gives us the Holy Spirit. So faith does not cool our desire for good and holy living, but rather engenders and excites it in us, leading naturally to good works.¹²

Because ordinary discipline is centered on the good works that naturally grow from God’s grace working in our lives, it is centered on the mundane aspects of our lives. Considering discipline primarily as the extraordinary cases obscures this important aspect of the Christian life.

We Are All Implicated

In an appropriate exercise of ordinary discipline, we all are implicated.

Ordinary discipline implicates those that defy the constitution and those who bring charges against them. Ordinary discipline implicates people of questionable character and successful pastors. Ordinary discipline implicates deacons in a small church and General Assembly staff. We are all implicated. All of us

have lived for ourselves,
and apart from [God].

We have turned from our neighbors,
and refused to bear the burdens of others.

We have ignored the pain of the world,
and passed by the hungry, the poor,
and the oppressed.¹³

Moving Forward

In sum, our task is to reclaim a biblical doctrine of the church. The church is not simply a collection of like-minded individuals. When the church is ordered correctly “pure doctrine can be maintained, vices can be corrected and suppressed, the poor and afflicted can be helped in their need, assemblies can be gathered in the name of God, and both great and small can be edified.”¹⁴

If we look at the debates in the church over discipline, in print, on the net, in conversation, the discussion focuses exclusively on the practice of extraordinary discipline. The question for all of us in the church is whether or not we, as individuals in Christian community, as churches, and as sessions, are faithfully exercising ordinary discipline—a discipline of all of life rooted in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and guided by the Scriptures. Are we committed to a discipline marked by the grace of a community of forgiven sinners? Will we engage in discipline marked by a loving community, not by formal

charges in an adversarial system? If we are not exercising ordinary discipline, then why are we so interested in extraordinary discipline?

Jesus said: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. . . .” (Luke 16:10)

¹ Richard Bach, *Illusions: Handbook of a Reluctant Messiah* (New York: Dell, 1994).

² See Kingdon, Robert M. “A New View of Calvin in the Light of the Registers of the Geneva Consistory,” in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion* (eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong, Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997).

³ John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. I. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 117.

⁴ Robert M. Kingdon, “Calvin and the Family: The Work of the Consistory in Geneva,” *Pacific Theological Review* (1984), 5.

⁵ Kingdon, R. M., T. A. Lambert, and I. M. Watt, eds., *The Registers of the Consistory of Geneva at the Time of Calvin*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 45-46.

⁶ *Ama Deum, et fac quod vis.*

⁷ *Book of Order* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002), D-1.0103.

⁸ *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 407-409.

⁹ John W. Riggs, “Emerging Ecclesiology in Calvin’s Baptismal Thought, 1536-1543.” *Church History* 64, no. 1 (1995), 42.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.i.9.

¹¹ Kingdon, et al, *The Registers of the Consistory of Geneva at the Time of Calvin*, vol 1, 52.

¹² “French Confession of 1559,” trans. Ellen Babinski and Joseph Small (Louisville: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1998), para. 22.

¹³ *Book of Common Worship*, p. 54.

¹⁴ “French Confession of 1559,” para. 29.

Bible Study of the Book of Revelation

Study 11: The Book of Revelation

Chapters 20-22: The Seen and the Unseen World

By Rev. Mark Atkinson, Union Church, Lima, Peru.

When we recite together the Nicene Creed, one of the truths we affirm is *I believe in all that is, seen and unseen*. In the last chapters of John’s revelation he is giving us a glimpse, an insight, behind the veil to see the unseen realities that exist beyond our five senses. The material and the spiritual, the seen and the unseen, exist side by side. Our great temptation is to forget spiritual

realities, to reduce all of life to the material, to what we can feel, taste, smell and touch.

Chapter 20 begins with the image of Satan being bound and imprisoned for a thousand years. The meaning of these verses is among the most contested in the entire Bible. How should we understand the meaning of this thousand-year imagery? This is not the venue to get into a full exploration of the debate and varieties of interpretation offered. As we have done while exploring other passages of Revelation, we will seek to avoid fanciful understandings and instead will attempt to interpret the passage in a way that is meaningful to the church throughout the ages and is consistent with other biblical teaching.

First, the binding of Satan is probably best understood as having occurred during the ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth came proclaiming the Kingdom and casting out demons. Whatever was the prior scope of Satan's power, with our Lord's arrival it was circumscribed and limited. Secondly, the result of Satan's binding is that he is no longer able to *deceive the nations*. With the coming of Christ, the gospel is now proclaimed to the Gentile world. The nations now know. The promise given to Abraham¹ was that through him and his descendants the nations of the world will be blessed. With Christ's advent the power of Satan to keep humankind in the dark is now ended. Thirdly, as with the other numbers we have encountered in Revelation, it is best to interpret the thousand years in question symbolically, not literally. For these reasons I would suggest that the best way to understand the millennial reign of Christ is as the time *in between*. It is the time in which we live, the time between his first advent and his Second Coming. It is the time of the Church militant.

And this leads us to the next phase of John's vision and another puzzling passage, vs. 4-6. Again I would suggest that it is best to view this from the experience of the church in the world. What does John see? He sees some who occupy thrones of judgment. Those who occupy those thrones are those who 1) have suffered greatly and 2) who have not yielded to the mark of the beast. They belong to Christ and reign with Christ during the thousand years. This is a vision to encourage Christians facing hardship and persecution. We are peering behind the veil of history. While the church in the world is buffeted and battered, the greater reality is that she is held fast and secure. The saints already reign with Christ. The reference to the first resurrection in v. 5 is probably to be understood as a reference to the moment of regeneration when, by Christ's power, a man or woman is reborn in Christ. By faith believers have already passed from death to new life. The reference to the rest of the dead in this verse applies to those who have not experienced this new life and so will wait in their graves until the time of the final judgment.

Vs. 7-10 describe the final battle that brings an end to the world. This is the same battle described in 16:14-16. The war Satan wages is an all out war. His defeat will be total and complete. In the end, behind the veil, there are only two options, two realities: Christ or Satan. And this reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is not an achievement. It is not something that we will usher in by our spiritual efforts or accomplishments. The battle belongs to the Lord.

The world ends with a bang, and after that (vs. 11-15), comes judgment. What we do on earth counts for eternity. Before God's throne of judgment the dead are raised. Two books are open. We are told that one is *The Book of Life*. The first death is physical death here on earth. The second death is the Day of Judgment. The only escape is for one's name to be written in *The Book of Life*. The

other book is not named, but it appears to be a catalog of human works, for we are told that the dead are judged (v. 12) according to their works, as recorded in the books.

A New Heaven and a New Earth

Chapter 21:1-8 tell the last vision of Scene Seven in the sequence of the cycles of John's revelation. In Scene Seven we saw behind the veil, discerning fundamental spiritual realities that stand alongside of the world as we know it. The final vision of this scene is of things made new: a new heaven, a new earth, and a new city, a heavenly Jerusalem. A voice declares: "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." This is the great hope of the church, that one day the renovation will be complete. We will behold God in his glory. We will see his strength and beauty. It is the hope of the beatific vision.

In v. 1 John tells us that he sees a new heaven and earth, and he also tells us one thing he does not see. He sees no sea. Why does he include this detail? The sea was a baptismal image. It was an image of redemption. You pass through the waters of baptism to enter the Promised Land. Now John is there, he is on the other side of redemption. There is no baptismal image now because that dispensation has passed.

This is the message of hope given in the book of Revelation. The failure and fragility of the church in the world is not the final word. Our three great enemies, the world, the flesh and Satan will not have the final word. Catastrophe, heartache, sacrifice and suffering are real, but they are not last word. Even when we encounter evil at its greatest—think of the beast and his number—that too is not the last word. The last word is here, in these verses, with the promise of consummation and restoration, of wiped away tears and of spiritual thirst that is finally satisfied.

One More Thing

But of course, the book of Revelation does not end here. There are still more verses to go. Before we look at them, let us think again about the structure of the book as I have laid it out in this study. We have followed seven cycles or scenes within Revelation. Within each scene, there have been seven separate visions. The seven visions of each scene are obvious in the case of the Letters (1:9-3:22), the Seals (4:1-8:1), the Trumpets (8:2-11:18) and the Bowls (15:5-16:21), and easily discernable in the remaining scenes. Taking note of the fact that there have been seven scenes, each with seven visions, we realize that there is a numeric symbolism at work again in this book. No Jew would miss the meaning of the number 49. Ancient Jewish law provided for a year of Jubilee that was to be observed every fiftieth year. The Year of Jubilee brought the release of every slave; the restoration of what had been

lost, the opportunity of a new beginning. The final scene, the Eighth Scene, of Revelation, (beginning at v. 9) is the Jubilee. With this ending is a new beginning.

An angel promises to take John and show to him the bride of the Lamb (v. 9). He takes John to a high mountain and, surprisingly, shows to him the new city of Jerusalem descending from heaven. It is surprising because the city is a symbol of human effort to organize and live life independent from the knowledge of God. The first city was founded by Cain.² As he runs from God he founds a city to help him hide from the Almighty. Human life began in a garden. We would expect that at the end of the story we would find a return to that garden. Instead, God takes the city, that place where we hide from him in our rebellion, and through Jesus Christ transforms and renews it. The city becomes not a place of rebellion but of redemption.³ Further, the bride of Christ is herself the new city of Jerusalem. The number twelve predominates. There are twelve gates symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. There are twelve foundations, symbolizing the twelve apostles. Together, the twenty-four make up the totality of God's people. The imagery of the stones in vs. 19-20 suggest the precious stones that were imbedded in the breastplate worn by the High Priest of Israel. The stones are now part of the city, for there is no temple (v. 21). None is needed. Redemption is accomplished. Jesus Christ himself is the temple. Nor is there a sun or moon, for Christ's glory illuminates the heavenly realms. He is the light.

Ending at the End

The Bible is unique among the books of the great religions in that it tells a story that begins at the beginning and ends at the end. The story that began in the Garden is completed in the heavenly city of Jerusalem. The rivers and trees of Genesis chapters 1-3, reappear in the last chapter of the Bible. From them flows the river of life. They had been barred to Adam and Eve but now, through Christ, the river of living water flows once more. John quotes the risen Lord Christ three times (vs. 7, 12, 20) in this final chapter of encouraging his people with the words, *behold I am coming quickly*. The pastoral purpose of Revelation is seen clearly in this. Christ says to his church that he is "the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." (NIV)

¹ Genesis 12:3

² Genesis 4:16

³ See also Isaiah 60, Ezekiel 40:2

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