

by Herbert Schlossberg

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Lately we have been hearing again a surge of concern about conditions in the Presbyterian Church (USA). The trouble with much of the opposition to these trends has been that it is not informed by the theology of the church. We hear renewed talk of leaving the denomination, and defections may become much more numerous in the future as provocations increase. One would think these good Presbyterians were Baptists or Congregationalists instead of members of one of the largest reformed bodies in the world. One of the measures of our impotence as a denomination is that so few of our people understand what Reformed theology is so that the critics are leaving in contradiction to the doctrine they supposedly are defending.

More than a club

One distinction of our faith is that it does not regard the church as a voluntary organization. That will amaze some people who think the church is like a fraternal group or social club which you belong to as long as you think it is giving you the return you expect from your investment of time and money. If it stops doing that you are free to take your business elsewhere. But our theology teaches that the church is something very different. It is the body of Christ, and it functions in a connectional way just as the parts of the body do. When Paul described how this works he said that if the foot or the eye should declare that it is no longer part of the body that would not make it any less a part of the body (1 Cor. 12). If these organs begin to function as if they were not parts of the body they would still be parts of the body but the body itself would not be able to do what it is intended to do. Parts of it would be on strike so to speak.

No perfect Church

But someone answers, "I am not talking about leaving the body of Christ. I am just going to

another portion of it that has not gone to pieces and begun serving evil." This explanation will not do. It implies that if we leave our own church with all its problems we'll find something approaching perfection elsewhere. But this is not true. There are serious problems everywhere in the worldwide church. This is just what we should expect, because there have always been serious problems even in the apostolic church.

It is hard to see how anyone who has read the New Testament could say anything about recovering the purity of the early church since that purity is conspicuous mainly by its absence. The letter to the Galatians was written to rectify a false gospel of works righteousness that had sprung up in the church and was replacing the true gospel.

The early chapters of Revelation speak of churches which tolerate false teaching, idolatry, lukewarmness, and other weaknesses, and demand that it repent. First Corinthians, in which Paul wrote about the church as the body of Christ, was riven by serious sexual irregularities which he denounced in that same letter. But in none of these cases do we find pulling out of the church given as a remedy for the problem.

Some of the situations described in these apostolic churches are horrifying, but the New Testament writers do not say to the faithful, "Leave the church and form a new one that is closer to what Christ intended."

Calvin made precisely that point when he recognized that "the most heinous sins have sometimes possessed entire churches." Forgiveness remains possible for these churches, he continued, "for the Lord's covenant remains, and shall remain forever inviolable." (Institutes, 4,1,27).

Wounding the healers

When Christians pull out and abandon the rest of us who are trying to reform the church they leave a serious gap in our ranks. A departing eye leaves us with only one eye remaining which impairs both our peripheral vision and our depth perception. Thus the Reform movement within the church is left seriously weakened. The mistake of those who leave is not primarily that they have made it harder for us to reform the church, but that they have misunderstood what it is that has to be reformed.

When the ship founders

It is difficult to be part of a church that has been sailed onto the reefs by an irresponsible

leadership and is breaking up on the rocks. You watch in disbelief as church people in positions of authority echo the demands of tyrants, provide a forum for the advocacy of immoral acts, and ignore central doctrines of the faith. This is hard to take. It causes an ache to belong to a church that does these things. It seems easier to pull out and belong to a group that does not indulge itself in such evils.

Choosing the difficult path

It seems easier. And that should alert us to the problem. Although it is easier to abandon ship than to reform it, what doctrine is it that declares ease as a criterion in deciding the church to which we should belong? It has never been the case that religious organizations are paragons of virtue in the midst of a world full of evil.

The Old Testament speaks of ungodly prophets and priests (Jer. 23:11), priests who do violence to the law of God and who profane holy things (Ezek. 22:26), idolatrous priests who serve the evil idols which demand that children be sacrificed to them (Zeph. 1:1-5). In the vision of Ezekiel the angel of the Lord was to pass through Jerusalem destroying every living thing because of the sins of the city--beginning at the sanctuary itself. The only ones to be spared were those "who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it" (Ezek.9:3-10). In other words, the people who were faithful to the Lord in Ezekiel's time were the ones who were agonizing over the debased state of the Temple and the society of which it was a part. The covenant of God would not allow them relief from that burden by pulling out. The only comfort Scripture allows comes from faithfulness to God's covenant.

Covenant theology

Reformed theology is also called covenant theology because the New Covenant of Jesus Christ entails a similar kind of faithfulness. It does not provide the option of desertion to some more comfortable situation because the church is in need of reform. The church is always in need of reform, some times more than other times. Our present situation is far from the worst the church has known in its two thousand year history.

How long do we stay?

Recently my wife was discussing this issue with a group of Presbyterians in the midwest. One elder seemed to speak for many in our denomination when he asked: "How long do we stay? How bad do things have to get before we can leave?"

I don't think that question can be answered because it is the wrong question. We are a creedal church, and our constitution specifies that the Bible and the creeds form the basis of our beliefs. The fact that this may sometimes be honored in the breach more than in the reality does not alter the fact that we have an unchanging standard to which we can appeal, one that forms the basis for our continued call for repentance and reform within the church.

It is ironic that some who insist on a return to the Biblical standard should hold a non-Biblical view of the church. They want to leave the church because it needs to be reformed, when reformation requires the kind of work and witness that they themselves are most qualified to contribute. So long as our constitution upholds the Bible and creeds as our standards of faith, it is too soon to quit.

Anguish and action

The sad state of our denomination and the kind of leadership it has experienced in recent years should rightly be the cause for a certain anguish among those who want to be faithful to it. But the wholesale desertions that have taken place and are still going on are not the proper response to the crisis. A lot has happened in the Reform movements of the last few years for which we can be thankful. We should take heart from these things. They should help us recover our sense of hope and give us new vision for remaining in the PCUSA and making it what it ought to be.

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