Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry Vol 12 No 1 • Jan/Feb 2006

The State of the Church:
A Penitential Self-Examination

By Jerry Andrews

This address was adapted from Andrews's plenary presentation at the Presbyterian Coalition Gathering, Nov. 2005 in Orlando, FL.

The occasional, almost annual, State of the Church address I give to the Presbyterian Coalition, usually cites our and their foibles, the recent silliness in and sometimes humorous events among us, even if they be harmful and in need of attention and correction. It celebrates what small late triumphs can be seen in our common life. It describes us to us so that we recognize our commitments and actions more clearly and amend them intentionally. These speeches are meant to be taken seriously, even if delightfully. This State of the Church address is to be taken seriously, even if painfully. It is a penitential self-examination, designed to help the whole denominational fellowship see itself more clearly and, if in agreement, repent more fully that our renewal and reformation may continue more completely.

A quote from Augustine may suffice as I begin here. Describing his exhaustion from the interminable debates with the Pelagians and their Stoic, therefore pagan, soteriology—one in which the individual is self-sufficient with the graces natural to humanity—he openly doubts that he can persuade them of their, and his, desperate need of a Savior. They think they are without need, he infers they are without passion so he states—they are cold.

> *Give me a man that loves. He experiences what I speak. Give me one that yearns, one that hungers, one that is traveling in this wilderness and thirsts and pants for the springs of his eternal home; give me such a person and he knows what I speak. But if I speak to the cold man, he will never understand.* (my translation).

Lord, help me, help us, to know our need, and not be the cold one.

Thinking theologically about the Church requires holding at once two realities—our life is lived within the eternal and perfect life of God and our life is lived in the midst of our fallen generation.

The first reality is a gift given by God to the Church. The Spirit baptizes us into the Son who, in unending and uninterrupted union with the Father, assures us of our eternal union with the life and love of God. We dwell in the midst of perfect peace, unity and purity.

The second reality is a necessary part of God giving the Church as a gift to the world. The alienation of the world from God and the alienation within the world is the environment in which the Church lives out and announces the reconciliation of God in Christ. That alienation is experienced within the Church. We dwell in the midst of an imperfect peace, unity and purity.

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The painful simultaneous acknowledgment of these two realities prevents schizophrenia—living alternately in one reality while momentarily ignoring the pull and truth of the other, then living in the other reality ignoring the first. We might acknowledge the blessedness of our life in God while suppressing the knowledge of our current alienations and thus leave unaltered because unattended the wretchedness of our world and selves; or forgetting our life in God, we might affirm our sinful state and thus accede to its easy acceptance as though it is inevitable and unamendable. The former degenerates into detachment, the latter despair. Neither acknowledgment without the other tends toward sane and faithful living.

Reaffirming the faith of the Church—that its life is in union with the life and love of God—is a glad acknowledgment of the first reality. The Church has received a great gift from God. It is cause for wonder and worship.

Affirming the truth of the alienation within the world and within the Church—the second reality—by self-examination is a painful but necessary acknowledgment for a Church that fully desires to be a gift to the world. It is cause for repentance and reformation.

Toward a repentance prompted by the Word and Spirit that leads toward reformation that in turn leads toward a more faithful Church effectively offered to the world, the following self-examination is offered to and by the Church. For the sake of our witness in an alienated world to the reconciliation of God, and that we may more fully experience the peace, unity and purity of our life in God, may we have the wisdom, courage and grace now to acknowledge our own need and repent of our sin.

Of what sin shall we repent?

First, let us repent of neglecting repentance. We have seldom offered a repentance. Difficult as repentance is, the nature of our own particular sin and circumstance lately has made it more difficult. We are a divided fellowship. Many are in separate and combative parties. Offering repentance as the Church before the whole Church necessarily is either confessing the particular sins of our own party thus making ourselves and our causes vulnerable which, in an environment of diminished trust, requires near heroism or foolishness, or we confess the sin of the other party and thus reduce our repentance to the appearance of mere accusation. Further, in this division few sins seem to be shared or shared equally among the parties so that a repentance offered by those not in parties also sounds like the choosing of sides or merely cursing a pox on both houses and thus adding to, rather than repenting of, the sin of the Church. We also find it difficult to be specific when repenting, yet the confession of something other than real sin offered after sincere and sustained self-examination is not helpful or worthy of a Church that trusts its Savior to forgive and cleanse us of all unrighteousness. First, let us repent of our continued unwillingness to repent.

Second, let us repent of neglecting the Word. The Spirit uses the Word to prompt our self-examination, repentance and reform, yet we have valued other words more. The voices of the world and our own voices have been heard more frequently and given more deference than the one Word of God which we are called to hear and obey. The Church must strive to still within itself any voice but God's own. To aid our self-examination, repentance and reform, some voices to which undue authority has been given and because of which our experience of peace, unity and purity is diminished, are here identified.

1. "The meaning of God's Word is uncertain because its interpretation is debated." The Church no longer reads and hears the Word together with a desire or hope for common understanding and commitment. Agreement is rare, consensus hard in our fellowship. This, in varying degrees, may have always been true in our history, but now it is accompanied by an easy concession to the impossibility of shared meaning. The voice says, "You have your interpretation and I have mine. Let us agree to disagree. Prolonged attempts at newly formed consensus regarding the knowledge of God's Word will be fruitless." There is resignation and defeatism in this voice. Our sin in listening to this voice is faithlessness which produces laziness.

The Spirit of God, promised by the Son, which leads us into all truth, is at work in the Church no less in our own than in previous generations. The Scriptures can be read together and heard aright together in all times and places. Diminished expectations of the work of the sovereign God in our common life within this generation is the result of hearing this voice say that the human must triumph over the divine—our circumstances over God's intentions. The voice says our private and partisan interpretations are irreducible and immalleable because intractable, and intractable because we are. This voice does not trust the Word of God to break through our presuppositions, perspectives and prejudices to reach and amend the human heart and mind and persuade the Church of what is good, right and true. This is a denial of the doctrine of illumination—the promised work of the Spirit to lead us together into all truth. Thus this is a faithless voice; it does not trust. And it is a voice that urges laziness.

Occasional and temporal ambiguity is not merely admitted by this voice, it is desired. It argues that the fragmented and partial readings by the varied parts of the Church are to remain unattended, even celebrated. The rigor required to give God's Word serious and sustained reading together and then submit that reading to the whole Church around the world and through the ages is rejected as too hard and thus left undone. This is an especial laziness in a fellowship that once showed intellectual gifts serviceable to other fellowships. Our faith in the efficacy of the Spirit's work and our resolve to work toward agreement in faith and practice is weak. The faithless and lazy voice that celebrates the finality of fragmented meaning is to be rejected by every fellowship, and especially so by a Church that is self-consciously confessional. The peace,

unity and purity of the Church is diminished by our faithlessness and laziness; it is enhanced by sustained and shared hearing of the Word.

2. "The world sets the agenda for the Church." This second voice attempts to persuade the Church that its mission and its relevance is established and measured by its conformity to the world's expectations and definitions of the usefulness of the Church. It confuses the object of the Church's mission for its commissioner. The Word, not the world, is the God-given instructor and corrector of the Church. When the Church and the world are at cross purposes, the Church is not therefore and thereby to be transformed. The continued conformity of the Church is to be oriented toward the image of Christ alone. While this other voice beckons us to hear the world as instructive, the Word invites us to see Christ more clearly and mature into Him. While the Church appropriately becomes familiar with the world, it must remember that the world is foreign. The Church is alien to the world in part for the sake of the world—that the Church can bring to the world the saving knowledge of the Savior. Instead, this voice insists that the state of the world's knowledge now being greater than in previous generations it can and should judge the Word because of the Word's distant origins. "Written long ago and far away, the Word is not relevant," it sneers. "It does not speak to or of us," it says with a pretended sophistication. "Surely it is not God who has spoken, but mere mortals out of their unenviable infancy. We know so much more now; listen to the world," it seduces. Listening to the hissing of this voice is rejecting not only the Word written but the Word Incarnate. It is rejecting both Gift and Giver. It is the sin of ingratitude produced by an arrogance. The Word, given in part to enable the Church to fulfill its calling of bringing the world to its Living Savior, has been exchanged in our common life for the words of a world without the Savior. The Word, given to authoritatively direct our mission and keep us on it with minimal distraction from competing urgencies and agendas, has been judged by the Church to be inferior to our own reading of the world's needs and desires. Our contentions and ineffectiveness are among the effects of the loss of our humility before the Word. The peace, unity and purity of the Church is diminished by our ingratitude and arrogance; it is enhanced by a renewed deference to all the Word teaches us to be and do.

3. "I have a sovereign right to my own conscience." This third voice misquotes. The Church believes and teaches that God alone is Lord of the conscience. Thus, the conscience has a Lord and is not itself sovereign. The conscience is to obey its sovereign Lord, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, insofar as Christ's will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed. The Scripture is public and communal; it is not the possession of any one of us or any one party among us. The Scripture instructs the conscience of the Church. Thus, the conscience of the Church because instructed by the Scriptures has an entitlement to act, and in acting, though it too may err, does not infringe on the rights of our individual consciences. Put otherwise, the Church has a right to exercise its conscience. Placing the individual above and beyond the communal, hallowing the thoughts and freedom of action of the member or officer more so than recognizing the right of the Church to exercise its own discerning conscience and will has made discipline in the Church rare and of little effect. Discipline too is a gift of God to the Church and a gift of the Church to all her parts. This third voice though reasons for the autonomous individual apart from the Church's ministrations. It has led to the sin of pride in each of us and the sin of cowardice in the Church. Afraid to ask of her members and officers what the Church must ask for the sake of each of us and for its own sake, and the unwillingness on the part of each of us to give to the collective conscience and will of the Church what we demand for ourselves, we prevent the Word from its full, healing and unifying work in our common lives. The neglect of discipline is a neglect of the ministry of the Word. Our peace, unity and purity is diminished by our pride and cowardice; it is enhanced when we exercise and abide by the discipline of the Church.

Third, let us repent of neglecting to love one another. By our Savior's testimony our love for each other is derivative of and reflective of His own love for us. It is to be of the same quality. It is not. Our love for each other is half-hearted when present and sometimes it seems wholly absent. Love for neighbor is part of our mission in the world, and love for each other is the means by which the world recognizes that we have been sent—a mission which suffers greatly by our foolishly striving to love ourselves more than we love each other. The world's poor and the least are neglected because of our self preoccupations. The unsaved do not hear us proclaim the gospel because of our words against each other. The world's peace is at risk because of our strife. Among us, apathy masquerades as tolerance and the vocabulary of love has become an instrument of division. We have not loved as we have been commanded. Let us repent of our failure to love more. We are in need of God's help lest we become like those of whom Augustine despaired—thinking our neighbor self-sufficient we become without passion and cold.

Lord, we confess our lack of repentance, our faithlessness and laziness, our ingratitude and arrogance, our pride and cowardice, our lovelessness. We repent.

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Lessons from United Methodist Renewal

By James V. Heidinger II

This address was adapted from Heidinger's plenary address at the Presbyterian Coalition Gathering, November, 2005, Orlando, FL.

It is a personal joy and real honor, to be a part of your gathering here in Orlando. I bring you greetings from Good News, a renewal movement representing kindred spirits within the United Methodist Church. Our ministry was launched in 1967, when our founder, Dr. Charles W. Keysor, published the first issue of *Good News* while serving as a pastor in Elgin, Illinois.

In 1981, Dr. Keysor stepped down and I became Executive Secretary of Good News, coming out of local church ministry in Cadiz, Ohio. So, I have had the privilege of working with renewalists within the mainline Protestant Churches in the U.S. and Canada for more than 24 years now.

I want to help you understand a bit more about us United Methodists as a result of my being with you. You need to know something about how we go about our work, and especially you need to know about our bishops. One of our bishops was giving a children's sermon one Sunday in a local church and asked the children a question, "Do any of you know what bishops do?" There was dead silence for a few seconds and then a precocious six-year old boy raised his hand. "I know what bishops do," he nearly shouted. "Alright," the bishop said, "What do they do?" The youngster said with great confidence (and some bit of knowledge about chess), "They move diagonally." Well, that's not bad. They do that and much more, in their appointment-making responsibilities.

If I were to have a text for these moments with you this morning, it would be Paul's charge to Timothy, when he wrote, "*What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that has been entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (II Tim. 1:13-14)*. It has seemed to me that it remains the solemn responsibility of the church to guard the good deposit of the faith, in light of many who would like to re-write the script.

Now, our generation has witnessed the rise of what we call Renewal Movements or Ministries. Every mainline denomination in North America has experienced this phenomena because each has been infected by the same virus—with very similar feverish symptoms: **membership loss, lack of spiritual vitality, loss of Scripture's authority, decline of world mission, doctrinal confusion and defection, pro-homosexual activism, and the embracing of trendy, fad theologies.**

For us United Methodists, in 1968 we merged with the Evangelical United Brethren, bringing our membership to more than 11 million. We are now at less than 8.3 million. That's a loss of at least 2.7 million. Statistics often don't have the impact they should, so let me say it another way. It is like we United Methodists have closed a church of 250 members every day, 365 days a year, for 29 years!! This kind of loss, of course, is not a fruit of the Spirit. In the book of Acts we read that the Lord was adding *daily* those who were being saved. Sadly, our United Methodist leaders seem to be more embarrassed by those numbers than heart-broken and repentant of them.

After 24 years, I continue to feel strongly about the rightness of the cause of renewal. The work of renewal is a much needed, right, and urgent work. Let me share with you some basic convictions that have come to me during my years in renewal ministry.

The work of renewal must be theological

All of us need to face the question, "How did we get into the mess we are in?" United Methodists, for example, must ask just how did it happen that our denomination—once so vital, growing, and effective in winning the lost—has ended up with 30 plus years of consecutive decline? All of the mainline denominations are struggling with issues of human sexuality, but it is really just the *presenting* issue, reflecting a much deeper problem.

As we think about what happened, we need to realize it is not something that just happened recently. All of us in the American mainline have felt the impact of something that happened many years ago. Consider these words from a Methodist professor at Drew University School of Theology:

> *But what does the modern church believe? The church is becoming creedless as rapidly as the innovators can have their way. The 'Confession of Faith'—what is happening to it? Or what about the 'new' confessions that one sees and hears—suitable enough, one imagines, for say, a fraternal order. And as for the Apostles' Creed—'Our people will not say it any more'; which means, apparently, that 'our people,' having some difficulties over the Virgin Birth and the resurrection of the body, have elected the easy way of believing in nothing at all—certainly not in 'the Holy Catholic Church*.'

That sounds like it might be Dr. Thomas Oden speaking at a recent national conference, doesn't it? Well, these words

are from Dr. Edwin Lewis, Methodist professor at Drew but written back in 1933, in *Religion in Life* journal. What a telling vignette those words are!

All of us must look back to the early decades of the 20th century. Two intellectual forces were sweeping across America during this period. Americans were enthralled with the New Science and with Social Darwinism. The **New Science** placed emphasis on observation and experimentation. It challenged any and all appeals to custom and authority. It brought a mechanistic worldview with a strong emphasis on cause and effect. If something were to be true, it must be put to the test of scientific verification. This, of course, wreaked havoc on biblical authority, on revelation, on miracles, and all things supernatural. Under fierce attack, traditional Christian teaching began to disintegrate.

The second force, **Social Darwinism**, helped create a euphoric sense of upward progress that blended with America's innate sense of hope and optimism. It helped Americans have great confidence in evolutionary development, social reconstruction, and expectations of a new and better world. Things seemed to be evolving, getting better and better every day. Many felt at the time that we were on the threshold of a "*Christian Century*" (and thus the journal by that name). The future was certain to bring unlimited progress to America.

In the midst of this intellectual milieu, theological Liberalism emerged as a movement to accommodate the Christian faith to these rational, secular, anti-supernatural axioms that were quickly finding a home in America's intellectual life. It was an attempt to make the Gospel more believable and acceptable to "modern man" during a time of intellectual ferment. Dr. J. I. Packer, the eminent Anglican evangelical, summarized liberalism's disastrous impact on evangelical faith, saying, *"Liberalism swept away entirely the gospel of the supernatural redemption of sinners…. It reduced grace to nature, divine revelation to human reflection, faith in Christ to following His example, and receiving new life to turning over a new leaf."*

This new theological current was devastating to most all of the historic mainline churches. The loss of the transcendent dimension, of divine revelation, of scriptural authority, and of God's power to transform sinful lives led to an increasingly vacuous theology, characterized by a loss of the sense of the broken relationship between God and man. H. Richard Niebuhr described this new theology with this well-known, devastating critique: "*A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through ministrations of a Christ without a cross"* (from *The Kingdom of God in America*).

So, it is in this context that we carry out our renewal ministries today, still living in the wake of that great "theological depression" of the early 1900s. As we do so, we must heed Paul's charge to young Timothy, "*What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching; guard the good deposit that has been entrusted to you"* (II Tim. 1:13, 14).

Let's remember, first, that the work of renewal must be theological. A second conviction I have is:

Renewal ministries unite and encourage the evangelicals in our churches

One of the facts we need to be reminded of is that there are many folks of solid, evangelical faith in our various denominations. Unfortunately, many of them are not aware of the issues with which we are dealing.

In the year prior to *Good News'* founding in 1967, Methodist pastor, Rev. Charles Keysor, wrote an article for our denomination's pastors' journal, the *Christian Advocate*. He wrote about "Methodism's Silent Minority," that is, those conservative Methodists who had long been concerned about the neglect of the central biblical doctrines in their church's teaching.

After Keysor's article appeared, he received several hundred letters and phone calls from pastors and laity all across the country. They all were saying basically the same thing: "We felt we were the only ones who felt this way." "We have felt so isolated, so alone." They felt cut off and unrepresented by their denominational leadership. Keysor concluded that there needed to be a publication in the Methodist Church that affirmed those key Wesleyan doctrinal tenets.

Many pastors had gone to denominational seminaries, in which they had encountered questions and claims which challenged their most foundational assumptions about the message of the Gospel. Now, at last, here was a magazine and a movement that affirmed the faith and doctrines as they understood it. I just want to say as a reminder this morning—friends, there are many evangelicals out there in our churches! Granted, not all of them can articulate their faith well and many have not been well grounded in biblical teaching. But many are out there who have a basic confidence in Scripture and are in no way revisionists of the faith.

I was stunned by this reality when I saw a study done some 10-12 years ago by one of our United Methodist agencies. In a carefully researched survey, it reported that 70 percent of United Methodists **defined themselves as "conservative" on moral and theological issues!** Think about that. Seventy percent!

This reminded me of the account I read many years ago about a well-known philanthropist in England by the name of Jeremy Bentham. He had left a large sum of money to a hospital in his home city. The only stipulation connected with the giving of his huge bequest was this: He left careful instructions that any time the board of the hospital would meet, his carefully prepared remains were to be brought out and positioned at the table. Then, when the role was called by the secretary as the board meeting

began, when Bentham's name was called, the secretary was to make the response, "Present, but not voting."

Now we laugh at such a story—which I have been told is a true story. But one of the things I have learned is that United Methodism is basically a town and country denomination, mostly centrist and conservative at the grass roots. But our good, evangelical people have simply not been involved. Unfortunately, they have been PRESENT BUT NOT VOTING**.** Finally, however, they are beginning to get involved and it is making a significant difference.

We need to redeem our perceptions about the political and legislative side to our denominational life, so when we think of the legislative process, we don't see a smoke-filled room with wheeling and dealing. The political (or I would rather say "legislative") side of our denominations is a dimension that can be used rightly or wrongly, depending on how we approach it. It can be used or abused. We need, however, to urge our evangelical constituents to be good stewards of what influence they do have. Let it not be said about us that we were "Present, but not voting." Sadly, that has sometimes been the case. I become impatient when I hear some of our pastors talk about going to their week of annual conference, admitting that they are not going to attend and participate in the business sessions because they are too boring. I have seen important votes lost because evangelicals were not there to vote. Unfortunately, we evangelicals have not always been "as wise as serpents" or even good stewards of our influence.

At our quadrennial General Conference in 1980, the first I ever attended, Good News had a small team there trying to make a difference. We may have had 30 persons each morning at our nine morning briefing breakfasts. We introduced 18 petitions and they all went down in flames. It was not a pleasant time.

However, in Cleveland, in 2000, we had as many as 240 delegates and friends each morning at our nine briefing breakfasts. Then, last year in Pittsburgh, we began with 240 at the very first breakfast, and quickly moved to 300, 350, 400, and then 425! It was exciting to see a whole ballroom full at 7 a.m. in the morning with delegates and friends who were supportive and enthusiastic about evangelical faith. The good news for us is that evangelicals have begun to get involved.

I recall two press representatives coming up to me after most all the votes on the sexuality issues were over. The Biblical/Traditional position had prevailed by the highest margin ever. The votes, some 15 of them in all, were stunning. These press reps, one from the Associated Press and the other from Religion News Service, began their interviews with me with something like this: "Do these votes represent the kind of thing that happened in the Southern Baptist Church 20 years ago when the conservatives took back that denomination?"

I assured them that this is not what is being reflected. But what was being reflected is that this huge mainline denomination, with perhaps more local churches in America than there are United States Post Offices, is finally seeing its evangelical, conservative, and traditionalist constituency getting involved in the legislative process. Evangelicals are making themselves available to be delegates to their denomination's General Conference and are getting elected! And why not? They represent the strong majority of United Methodists across the country.

Involvement at the national level of denominational activity has been a dimension of our church life that in the past has been wholly owned and controlled by persons of liberal theological views. They have been running our denomination without opposition for decades. Evangelicals have been happy to focus primarily on local church ministry. However, I believe our Lord would say, "These things you ought to have done, and not left the other undone."

Fortunately, evangelicals are getting involved and liberal hegemony is breaking down. Renewal ministries have played a major role in this new dimension. We have spent considerable time and resources in encouraging and training folks how to get evangelicals and traditionalists elected. We have also provided instruction about how, always prayerfully, they can make themselves available as potential delegates.

An important part of this new emphasis has been a broad-based and unified prayer network, in which United Methodists all across the country are praying regularly for renewal and reform in their church. During the eleven days of our quadrennial General Conferences, we have thousands of persons involved in an intercession prayer network as well as on-site prayer teams bathing all of our General Conference activities in prayer. We have seen evidence of God honoring and answering the prayers of those interceding on behalf of our denomination.

So, let's not forget that renewal groups play an important role in encouraging, uniting, and training the many evangelicals who are out there in our churches. A third conviction I have this:

All of us are called to contend for the truth

Jude wrote, "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

I must confess I sometimes lack patience with my fellow clergy who remain unaligned and unheard from in the midst of the major challenges to our faith and doctrine. I know their primary calling is to pastor their flock. But when we are ordained, most of us United Methodists promised that we would "*faithfully proclaim the Word of God and defend the church against all doctrine contrary*

to God's Word." Our United Methodist bishops, when consecrated to the episcopacy, are given the charge, "*As servants of the whole church, you are called to preach and teach the truth of the Gospel to all* God's *people*." The phrase that impresses me there is "the truth of the Gospel." We need to remember that what we are preaching and teaching is the "truth" of the Gospel and the truth about life.

The Church has always talked about *knowing* the truth, *heeding* the truth, *walking* in and *doing* the truth. In fact, Paul urged Timothy and us to present ourselves to God as workmen who need not be ashamed, "rightly handling the word of truth**.**" It's not myth; it's not just story; it's the "word of truth" that Paul says we must rightly handle**.** And frankly, it is under assault today by those who would revise, reconstruct, re-imagine, and redefine it. Many out there are trying to re-write the script.

All of us are influenced and must deal with how our post-modern age has made truth entirely personal and subjective. All truth claims are valid, says the trendy post-modernist, but it's true only for me. I have mine, you have yours, and isn't this just grand. However, any claim that one's own convictions might possibly be preferable to someone else's brings an outcry. It is seen as an attempt to impose our views on others. When we do this, say our progressive post-moderns, we are being exclusive and are pushing others to the margins. This leaves us with virtually no authoritative truth claims that the Church can affirm year in and year out. We are left only with a handful of "affirmations for the week." Next week's will probably be different than those affirmed this week. It is exactly what Paul spoke of when he mentioned not "being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14).

As I have thought about this development, it seems that what many have come to embrace is a Democracy of Ideas. That is, the view that all ideas "are created equal," and that to disagree with others is somehow to deny their personhood. Of course, we believe all persons are created equal in God's eyes. But their ideas don't share that same virtue.

Now, the fact is that some of our evangelical pastors are weary of this battle over truth, and even see it as a distraction from the real ministry of the church. But Sue Cyre has written so aptly in an article in *Theology Matters* some 9 years ago, that this is not a distraction from real ministry. She contended, "*The battle over truth and falsehood is the real ministry of the church. Everywhere the church goes, it is to proclaim the truth of the Gospel but it is always against a backdrop of some false beliefs*…." And these false beliefs are gripping people's lives, influencing their values, and they usually don't let go of them easily—Scripture attests to that. Sue quoted John Calvin, who in speaking of the long-term nature of spiritual warfare, said, "*Peace is not the norm, the battle is."* What a timely word that is for us today!

I learned from Parker Williamson's great book, *Standing Firm*, that Bishop Athanasius, one of the great heroes of the Church in the 4th Century, was enmeshed in the Arian controversy for some 56 years! Think about that. What a protracted conflict that was. But the result of that struggle was to seal for centuries to come our understanding of Jesus being "fully God and fully man." No doubt many during that struggle felt it was a distraction from the Church's real work. The Church, however, will have to wrestle with those kinds of issues in every generation.

Friends, Paul's words to the Galatians are so relevant for us this morning: "*Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest, if we don't give up." (*Gal. 6:9) We are contending for the "faith once for all entrusted to the saints." The challenge, of course, is to contend for the faith without becoming contentious in spirit and disposition! But contend we must. And then a fourth conviction I have is:

We must develop a strategy for renewal in theological education

In 1975, Dr. Ed Robb gave a powerful address at a National Good News Convocation. His title was, "The Crisis in Theological Education."

A part of the crisis was that United Methodist seminarians could not get solid teaching in Wesleyan theology at our official United Methodist seminaries. In the days following, Dr. Albert Outler, eminent Wesleyan scholar at our Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, heard about Robb's address and took strong exception with him. After all, Outler was one of our leading professors of Wesley Studies at Perkins.

After an exchange of letters, Robb decided to go visit Outler personally. The result of that visit was a new and lasting friendship with Outler—a friendship that led to the forming of A Foundation for Theological Education (AFTE). This Foundation began raising money to fund Ph.D. candidates and beginning in 1976, the first five John Wesley Fellows were chosen. They would receive a substantial grant for three years while they worked on their doctoral degrees in Wesleyan theology and biblical studies. Each year, five more would be selected, and each would remain in the program for three years. There are always 15 John Wesley Fellows in the program. To date, there have been a total of some 105 John Wesley Fellows, many of whom have completed their terminal degrees and others still in process.

The good news is that these John Wesley Fellows are moving into positions of leadership in many of our seminaries and colleges. Many are writing new commentaries which will make a contribution for decades to come. The two deans at Asbury Theological Seminary (at the Orlando and Wilmore campuses) are John Wesley Fellows; Dean Greg Jones at Duke, is a Wesley Fellow; Ted Campbell, until just recently the President at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, is a Wesley Fellow.

We United Methodists have been praising God for the vision Ed Robb had along with Albert Outler to establish AFTE. As I look at the theological scene in the United Methodist Church today, I believe that the future of theological education belongs to evangelicals.

I would also add that I believe there are signs that theological liberalism is suffering from chronic intellectual fatigue. There is virtually no serious engagement in theological substance today; there is little more than *ad hominems*.

We are also excited about the impact today of Asbury Theological Seminary, a non-denominational seminary in the Wesleyan tradition that has kept a strong evangelical character. Consider these statistics: In all of our 13 official United Methodist seminaries, plus Asbury (which is unofficial), we have 3,300 United Methodist M.Div. students preparing for ordained ministry. Of that total of 3,300, 1,200 are studying at Asbury Seminary! Those numbers are stunning. And thankfully, today's students are not coming to seminary in order to evade the draft. In more and more cases, God has called them and they have responded. This brightens the outlook for our future as a denomination. And a final conviction is:

We need the courage to stand for truth

One of the lasting impressions I have after 24 years of renewal ministry is the profound degree to which our United Methodist pastors are intimidated by our liberal leadership. Perhaps it's our appointive system, which certainly can be unjust and unfair. I'm reminded of a pastor who sent a letter to me sharing about a problem in his area. However, he went on to say with real concern, "*Please don't publish this in your magazine. I don't want to be sent to a church that has a parsonage with a dirt floor."*

I knew what he meant. All of us understand that intimidation. We have been ashamed by acquiescing to it at one time or another. Paul must have felt it, too, for he said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel." Again, to the Ephesians, he wrote, "*Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should*" (Eph. 6:19).

We need to pray for courage in the midst of opposition forces in our churches. We need spirit-anointed boldness, saturated in graciousness. Dr. Tom Oden has written these timely words about our need for courage:

> *It is only when the faithful have the courage to say no that yea-saying has plausibility and moral force.*
>
> *Only when Daniel was willing to say no to idolatry in Babylon were the captive people given hope.*
>
> *Not until Athanasius unambiguously challenged Arias did the church's faith become clearly defined.*
>
> *Only when Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg door did a reformation of medieval abuses begin.*
>
> *Not until the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany boldly rejected the specific idolatries of German Christians did their witness become credible in the Barmen Declaration.*
>
> *The yes to the truth of God does not happen without a tough no to false opposition* (from *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*, p. 129).

Paul wrote to the Philippians, "*I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death"* (Phil. 1:20).

A few years ago, I read about Hugh Latimer and the English Reformers. At the time, I knew little about them. Between 1531 and 1556, a number of prominent reformers arose courageously in the Church of England. You will recognize some of their names. Thomas Bilney, Hugh Latimer, John Frith, Robert Barnes, John Rogers, Nicholas Ridley, William Tyndale. What you may not know is what all of these reformers have in common. All of them were burned at the stake for their faith.

I remember reading the moving account of Latimer being bound with Ridley to the same stake. After being tied together and seeing the kindling being lighted, Latimer was heard to say to Ridley, "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, whose light will shine throughout all the country."

And so it did. Just two years later, during the reign of Elizabeth I, 1558-1603, the cause of English Protestantism triumphed. The Reformation cause in England won. Those saints and others who died had made a faithful confession—a confession about the truth of the Gospel. And once again, the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the Church.

In the last 11 months, United Methodism has lost three giants in the renewal movement. In December of 2004, Dr. Ed Robb died; just two weeks later, the day after Christmas, Dr. Bill Hinson died; and in April of 2005, our beloved friend and Episcopal colleague, Mrs. Diane Knippers died. These were colleagues who were courageous, willing to stand boldly for truth, challenge error, and say no when it needed to be said.

So, in a fuller sense than ever, this morning, I can say in closing, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us"* (Heb. 12:1).

And let's remember this morning, friends, that there is also a great host of witnesses running with us from *every mainline denomination in North America*. Let us take heart and not grow weary. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. James V. Heidinger II is president and publisher of the United Methodist renewal organization Good News.

A Word of Christ to the Church:
A Bible Study on Revelation 2:1-6

By James R. Edwards

This study was adapted from Edwards's presentation at the Presbyterian Coalition Gathering in Orlando, FL, November, 2005.

Revelation 2-3 preserves messages or letters from the Risen Christ to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (western Turkey today). The first message praises the Ephesians for resisting evil, and at the same time chastises them for "losing their first love." I think there is a word of Christ here for the church today.

When the seven cities are located on a map, a roughly circular pattern appears, with forty miles more or less between each church. The clockwise pattern in which the Risen Christ addresses the churches—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea—probably indicates the order in which a courier would deliver the letters to them.

In reality, Christ's words to the churches are *examinations* rather than mere "messages." Each examination begins with a recitation of the qualities of Christ. Next comes "good news and bad news"; praise for the church's good record, and censure for its deficiencies (except in Laodicea there is nothing to praise and in Smyrna and Philadelphia nothing to condemn). Finally, promises are made to each church.

Each of the examinations is conducted by Christ himself. In four of the letters Christ threatens to come in judgment if the churches do not repent. The virtues cited and praised—patience, endurance, constancy, and loyalty—are the kind needed to survive hardships and persecutions. Each of the examinations concludes with a reward for the "conqueror," the individual or church who bears faithful witness to Christ—even by martyrdom—through temptation and persecution. A refrain, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," concludes each letter. The word of Christ to each specific church is thus relevant for other churches as well. There can be little doubt that the purpose of the final examinations in Revelation 2-3 is to warn the churches of impending trials and persecutions, and to prepare the churches to bear faithful witness to Christ in the midst of them.

A Prestigious History

Ephesus ranked first in importance among the seven churches of Revelation. Along with Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria, Ephesus was also one of the four greatest cities of the Roman Mediterranean World. The significance of Ephesus was due to several factors. It was located at the western terminus of the main trade route leading from Anatolia to Greece. Its great harbor, although plagued by silting from the Cayster River, linked Ephesus with the Mediterranean world. The jewel in its crown, however, was the Artemision, the magnificent Temple of Artemis that ranked as one of the so-called seven wonders of the ancient world. With a first-century population of perhaps 250,000, Ephesus was the brightest of the "seven golden lampstands" (Rev. 2:1). Thousands of inscriptions have been uncovered in Ephesus, many of which attest to the vitality of the Emperor-cult there.

Ephesus played a major role in early Christianity as well as in Roman culture and commerce. Priscilla and Aquila may have been missionaries in Ephesus for as long as three years (Acts 18:24-28). The Apostle Paul spent a similar length of time there as a professor rather than as an itinerant missionary (Acts 20:31). The Christian study center he established in Ephesus caused "the word of the Lord to be heard by all who dwelled in Asia" (Acts 19:10). Ephesus is also traditionally associated with the final years of the Apostle John and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Ephesus was visited by Ignatius in the early second century, and it was the site of two of the seven early Church councils. At the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431, Nestorianism was condemned, and the unity of the full divinity and humanity in Christ was affirmed, as was the doctrine of *Theotokos*, which designated Mary as the Mother of God.

An Enviable Witness

As noted earlier, the Risen Christ praises the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is commended for 1) labor, 2) endurance, 3) non-complicity with evil, 4) discernment of true from false apostles, 5) endurance (again), 6) having "born Christ's name," and 7) not having flagged in so

doing. Notice that "endurance" is repeated twice. Perhaps the repetition intends to emphasize the steadfastness of the Ephesians, but I suspect its main purpose is to make *seven* praises. Throughout the Revelation, the number "seven" signifies divine completeness and totality. The seven virtues acclaimed in Ephesus signal God's approval and pleasure.

The virtues extolled in Ephesus are the virtues of duty rather than the pleasant virtues of peace, joy, and kindness, or the cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and love. If you think of virtues like players on a hockey team, the virtues commended of Ephesus are the defense rather than offense players. They defend the goal rather than advance the puck. They cannot win the game, but they keep you from losing the game.

We cannot be absolutely certain what the Ephesians were defending, but the only proper noun in the section, the "Nicolaitans" (v. 6), may be a clue. The Nicolaitans are mentioned only in passing in the message to Ephesus, but they are described more fully in the message to Pergamum (2:12-17). According to Rev. 2:13, "the throne of Satan" resided at Pergamum. This powerful symbol of paganism appears to be related to the Nicolaitans. The "teaching of Balaam," likewise mentioned in the message to Pergamum, also appears to be related to "the teaching of the Nicolaitans" (2:14-15). According to Numbers 25:1-2, while the Israelites were encamped at Abel-Shittim during the Exodus they "began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab, who invited them to the sacrifices of their gods." Israel was enticed to commit the two most heinous sins against God, idolatry and sexual infidelity, immediately after the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24. These same sins appear in the message to Pergamum, where "the teaching of Balaam" put "a stumbling block before the Israelites to eat food offered to idols and to commit sexual immorality" (Rev. 2:14). "The teaching of Balaam" thus appears to be the offense of the Nicolaitans. In Pergamum, the offense of the Nicolaitans was an accommodating attitude toward pagan society and religion. Pergamum was willing to compromise with paganism rather than resist and remain distinctive from it. Believers there wished to strive for peaceful coexistence with Rome and the emperor-cult rather than risk a confrontation with it.

I have visited Pergamum and the Nicolaitan temptation can still be felt in its ruins today. A panoply of temples from A to Z—literally from Artemis and Zeus—crowns the precipitous mountain summit on which Pergamum stands. Along with Ephesus, Pergamum was a showplace of Greco-Roman culture and religion. Its grandeur set an almost irresistible standard of emulation. Who could resist it? Why would anyone want to? What would you put in its place if you did? There must have seemed no compelling alternatives to such questions.

In Praise of Rugged Virtues

Take another look at the "defensive" virtues in Revelation 2:1-6. Some of them like "labor" and "endurance" are general and could refer to any number of behaviors. But "opposing false doctrine," "bearing up for the name of Jesus Christ," and "opposing evildoers" refer to guarding the purity of the faith and church. None of the virtues seems to refer to what we today think of as "social action." Ephesus is praised for its ecclesiastical integrity, not for its public policy. One of the things that has always amazed me in reading the New Testament is its curious indifference to some matters that are both culturally and politically impressive to us. I've always been surprised by Jesus' indifference to the grandeur of Herod's temple in Jerusalem in Mark 13:1-2. His categorical dismissal of the rabbinic tradition, which by any standard was one of the great intellectual achievements of humanity, is no less surprising. As evidenced by his Epistle to Philemon, Paul chose to abolish the effects of the repugnant institution of slavery within the church rather than in Roman society. Today tourists swoon over the *ruins* of Ephesus and Pergamum, but in the Revelation there is no mention of their shimmering glory. The New Testament is strangely indifferent to the *magnificentia gentium*, but is unwavering in its commitment to teaching, training, and edifying the church to be the people of God. If the church is to be of any service to God in reforming the world, it can only be so in so far as it is an alternative to the world, a redeemed and redeeming community formed and determined by the gospel. The proclamation of the church and the reason for its existence are not indifferent to a better social order, but they are always more than a better social order.

Compromising Christ and Culture

Our forbears—at least our Puritan forbears—came to this continent to "build a city on a hill." Our historic fascination with this project can make us forgetful of ensuring that the first love of the church is the *gospel*. Karl Barth's injunction "to read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other," and H. Richard Niebuhr's model of "Christ as the transformer of culture" have attained virtual canonical status in ministerial training grounds. I have used them many times myself, as perhaps you have. For all the truth in these statements, however, I fear that they have backfired. The newspaper seems to have prevailed over the Bible, and the culture seems to have transformed the church. It is almost inevitable that this would happen, for the reality that is familiar (newspaper and modern culture) will always prevail over the reality that must be learned (Bible and gospel). When you look at an interlinear Greek/English New Testament, your eye will instinctually focus on the English and avoid the Greek. In a similar way, our eye has gone—despite our protestations to the contrary—to the newspaper and culture for our marching orders in the church.

In his farewell speech to the Ephesians in Acts 20:29-30, Paul warned that after his departure "fierce wolves would come not sparing the flock, men arising from among your very number speaking perverse things so as to lead

disciples after them in apostasy." That seemed to be happening by John's day. Happily, the Ephesians are commended by the Risen Christ for heeding the warning of Paul by protecting the genuine faith from a false faith.

By contrast, I am mystified why the mainline today seems so nonchalant about theological and moral integrity. We do not allow our children to watch anything they want on television or the internet. We usually guard the boundaries between appropriate and immoral behavior with partners outside our marriages. We make no apologies for enforcing such measures; indeed, we would apologize if we were negligent about them. Why, then, have we left with flanks and gates of our faith unguarded and undefended? On an eternal scale of values our faith is infinitely more valuable than our families. The warning to Pergamum is especially relevant here. John does not directly accuse believers at Pergamum of open immorality. Rather, they have condoned insidious doctrines that encourage others in evil ways. Their "inclusiveness," "broad-mindedness," and "tolerance" permit behaviors that imperil their faith and church.

Speaking of the sixth Deadly Sin of *acedia*, Dorothy Sayers said, "In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for."[1] I fear the effects of such tolerance in our church today. It is joyless tolerance that begrudges rather than gives life. It is a concession to a kind of relativism that believes nothing is true enough to live and die for, and hence nothing false enough to oppose.

The temptation to compromise Christ and culture is pervasive and subtle. In one way or another it has been present in the bloodstream of the church since Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from the cross. "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus said, "for you do not think the thoughts of God but the thoughts of man" (Mark 8:33). We have all heard the adage that "So-and-so is so heavenly minded that he or she is of no earthly good." I wonder if our church has not become so earthly minded that it is no earthly good. The unprecedented materialistic prosperity of the West has, ironically, been like a draught of brackish water that has left people thirsting for true spiritual water today. Is the church a place where people can find water that quenches their spiritual thirst? We must constantly ask ourselves, "What is the uniquely saving word of the gospel in this sermon, in this study, in this gathering, action, or program of the church?" C. S. Lewis was right in saying that the great reformers of this world have been those who have had the strongest conviction of a world to come. When the church seeks first of all to be the church, when it is unflaggingly determined to preach a gospel and live a life pleasing to Jesus Christ, then it is precisely the most catalytic force for good in society.

Thus, we see that the Ephesians defended the faith in times of trial and persecution. In both Testaments, steadfastness under duress and hardship is a stellar virtue. The Risen Christ promises eternal glory to those who "conquer." Surely the Ephesians qualify for that honor.

The Loss of Our First Love

The fact is, they do not. We perhaps could have guessed this would be the case. This is not to say that the praises of the Risen Christ are a "set up" or disingenuous. They are not. The steadfastness and discernment of the Ephesians are genuine—and genuinely praised. But for all their merits, the Ephesians have done what we often do in life: they have done all the right things, but lost the most important thing. They have been clear about what they were *against*, and forgotten what they are *for*. They have won a battle and lost the war. They have allowed what they oppose rather than what they affirm to define who they are. I do not normally quote Pelagius with approval, but something he said is apropos here: "Your enemy has overcome you when he has made you like himself." In some sense, the Ephesians, for all their resistance to the evil around them, have become like the enemies they have heroically resisted. When in the name of fighting evil we lose the good for which we fight, how do we differ from our enemies?

"I have this against you," says the Risen Christ, "that you have lost your first love" (Rev. 2:4). The Greek word for "lost," *aphekes,* does not mean merely misplaced or overlooked; it means "forsaken." The Ephesians have made secondary matters primary, and in so doing they have forsaken "their first love." What is the first love of the church of Ephesus, indeed the first love of any church? The first love of the church is Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom of the church, the one Savior and Lord of the world. More precisely, the first love of the church is the proclamation of the whole gospel of Jesus Christ for the whole world so that it may be received wholly by faith. To forsake such a love is not merely to make a mistake. It is, in the words of John, to "fall." G. B. Caird puts the problem in Ephesus well: "[The Ephesians] had set out to be defenders of the faith, arming themselves with the heroic virtues of truth and courage, only to discover that in the battle they had lost the one quality without which all others are worthless."[2]

A Denomination with an Identity Crisis

The PCUSA looks different to me than it did thirty-five years ago when I became a Presbyterian. It seems to me that the denomination today is defined by "causes"—causes corresponding to a liberal political agenda, for the most part. We have become an "issues" denomination rather than a confessional denomination. At presbytery we discuss overtures, we are careful to observe proper procedure, but we seldom discuss our "first love" with loving passion. It is not uncommon today for candidates for ordination to be given a harder time by presbyteries if they use masculine pronouns for God than if they have

defective Christologies. We are a denomination defined more by the *Book of Order* than by the *Book of Confessions*. Like the Ephesians, we are more concerned with "right positions" than with our spiritual center. Being right on any number of issues—and I think the denomination often is right on issues—seems more important than guarding the purity of faith. We want to be admired for correctness on certain issues, hoping thereby to influence public policy. We seem in danger of replacing the Faith with faithfulness to issues and causes.

We are also a denomination with an identity crisis. When a denomination shifts from confessional identity to an identity determined by polity, it will, as ours has, suffer a confusion of identity. When individuals give up core values, they often try to reassert their identities—or establish new ones—by behavioral changes at the periphery of their lives. I believe this is why our denomination has committed itself to certain issues and causes with such puritan resolve. We may be committed to the actions in question, but we are also trying to recover or discover who we are.

Like all mainline denominations, the PCUSA is having a hard time adjusting to its disestablishment from society. It is like a player who has been pulled from a football game and is now watching from the sidelines, fairly certain he will not be put back in the game. Is there life on the sidelines? Is there a reason to exist when you get no recognition and rewards from society? How can a church that has enjoyed the respect of culture exist when respect has turned to indifference, or even disdain? As simply as I can put it, this seems to me to be the crucial question before our denomination today.

The Eiger Sanction is not a great film by most standards, but there is a scene in it of relevance for our discussion. A French climber has died during a bivouac on the North Face of the Eiger. The leader of the climb asks why he died? The partner of the French climber responds, "The man inside was not strong enough to keep the man outside alive." As a sometime mountaineer, I can attest to the truth of that statement. I see the French climber as a metaphor of our denomination. Can we find "the man inside" who can keep us alive? I am not asking if we can heal our divisions over the question of ordination, not even if we can stop the precipitous hemorrhage of our membership. I am asking if we can find "the man inside," that is, the reason we exist, not the rewards of our existence. "The man inside" is, in fact, Jesus Christ. Does Jesus Christ still reside as the vivifying heart and soul of the PCUSA? Would the Apostle Paul—or the world, for that matter—recognize in us the mystery of God, "Christ in you" (Col. 1:27)?

Recovering From a Fall

"I have this against you, that you have fallen from your first love." In mountaineering, a fall is a serious matter. If it doesn't kill you, it usually injures you. Even if you are not seriously injured, it is difficult to recover from a fall. I don't believe our denomination is dead, but it certainly is injured. The Risen Christ gives three commands for the recovery of Ephesus that we should hear as well.

"Remember from where you have fallen" (Rev. 2:5). The first admonition of Christ is to *remember*. In the Old Testament the great sin is forgetting the steadfast faithfulness of God. The Israelites are continually reminded to remember God's faithfulness. Memory of God's faithfulness is itself a saving act of God, and the first step in being in God's will. "It belongs to the gratitude of faith to recall God's works and wonders, and to think on the saving acts of God in the past," says Otto Michel.[3] This past summer I spent a week at the Greek Orthodox monastery of Simonopetra on Mt. Athos. The monks devote their lives "to cultivating the memory of God." The memory of God always leads to *acknowledgment* of God's saving activity in our midst, to *confession* of God, and to *devotion* to God. The first antidote to fallenness is divine memory.

Memory is dependent on being reminded. I am particularly concerned whether our preaching is producing the memory of God that sustains our lives in faith. I recently heard someone say, "This is a true story, not a preacher's illustration." We preachers should be scandalized by such an aphorism. If we cannot tell the truth, let us get out of the pulpit. If the church is not a place of absolute truth telling, then why should people believe us? My father struggled all his life with faith. One of the reasons he struggled was because he did not find ministers very believable. Modern culture eviscerates language. Language—especially public language today—is often used to obfuscate and confuse rather than to clarify and guide. The *prophetic* metaphor is one of the great ecclesial metaphors of the Reformed Tradition. The prophet tells the truth when the priest and king do not. If our preaching is not recounting the mighty works of God, if it is not upholding week by week the one true story of salvation, if it is not bringing every point back to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, then the memory of the people of God has nothing on which to focus, and without saving memory there can be no saving faith.

"Repent" (Rev. 2:5). The second antidote for fallenness is repentance. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, comes from two words meaning "to change the way we think," "to see things differently." We shall never act differently unless we think differently. The root of repentance and transformation is attitudinal before it is enacted. The command to repent reminds us (despite all our society says to the contrary) that we are not "victims"—at least not *only* victims. We still have choices to make. Despite all that has happened to us, we can still remember and return.

"Do the first works" (Rev. 2:5). The Ephesians have been commended for doing good works, but they have forgotten to do "the first work." The "first work" is their "first love." The Greek word *prote* can mean both first in order of sequence, and first in order of priority. I would like to

think it means both here. "First works" are those works that first characterized the Ephesians, works that really reflected their faith rather than simply opposition to their enemies. But "first works" may also mean "first" in the sense of priority: the first work of faith is always faith itself! "This is the work of God, that you believe in the One sent by God" (John 6:29).

The Longing for a Spiritual Home

N. T. Wright recently said that our culture longs for a spiritual home, but does not know where to find it. I further believe there are many people who long for an ecclesial home, but do not know where to find it. What does the PCUSA have to say to such people? Helmut Thielicke once told me that after World War II the churches in Germany were filled with people who were shattered and disillusioned, but that the churches had no word for them. Like Jesus' story of the return of the unclean spirit, "the final state of the place was worse than the previous state" (Matt. 12:45).

The Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force recommends the following word to the church today: "So far as may be possible without serious departure from these standards, without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained" (G-6.0108). A friend of mine used to say that there are three kinds of communication: that which cannot be understood, that which can be understood, and that which cannot be misunderstood. G-6.0108 belongs to the first category of communication—it cannot be understood. It consists of a qualified conclusion prefaced by two conditional modifications—and it is virtually impossible to understand. It can be interpreted to mean virtually anything a committee wishes it to mean. Is it possible that this is Christ's word to the church today? Or is this an example of the church speaking in the language of the culture to complicate and confuse?

I hope and pray that our church will not leave people hopeless as the church did in Thielicke's day. If, as N. T. Wright says, people are longing for a spiritual home; if they are longing for an ecclesial home, then let our word be, "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isa. 55:1-3). Let the word of Christ to the church be, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my burden upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28-30).

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[1] *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World* (Eerdmans, 1969), 152.
[2] *Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (Harper & Row, 1966), 31.
[3] O. Michel, *TWNT*, 4.685-86.

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Never Easy, Ever Hopeful

By Mary Holder Naegeli

Adapted from a sermon delivered by Naegeli at the Presbyterian Coalition Gathering in Orlando, FL, Nov. 2005.

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

One of my favorite quotations from *Peanuts* is this: "No problem is so big or so complicated that it can't be run away from."

We pastors are classic conflict avoiders. We bury our heads in the sand—particularly if we feel that the difficulties of ministry, *especially* those caused by denominational issues, are an outrageous intrusion into our real calling, the pastoral ministry. If we can just escape the conflicts, ministry might even be easy or—dare we say—fun. Indeed, when will it ever be easy?

Christians came up with an idea a few decades ago about how one knows the will of God. It went like this: If circumstances got difficult or you encountered obstacles, then the path you were pursuing must not be God's will. And if you didn't think it was God's will, you quit. This is what I call the "open-door/closed-door" method of knowing God's will. It has its place among an array of data points for discerning God's will. But if one relies on it exclusively, one may give up on a perfectly good idea too soon. An unforeseen outcome of this unfortunate mindset is a generation of Christians who are wimpy, unable to persevere through periods of serious difficulty.

I may have described the extreme case. Perhaps we might

not actually quit, but we lose heart or we get discouraged, because by outward appearances things seem to be falling apart. And we wonder: When will the ministry to which I was called ever be fun?

This year's been a really tough year for me. Just a year ago I lost my associate pastor with very little notice upon my return from a sabbatical. And that was the first of five staff departures in this last year—each one a different case and a different reason, none of them, I don't think, because of me—and a real bummer. Presbytery has delayed for two months the consideration of our mission study that would allow us to form an APNC and start our search. I have officiated at nineteen memorial services this year. In the last two months I've been plagued with an intestinal parasite. And to cap it all off, two weeks ago, for reasons we still cannot explain, our entire campus was overcome with fleas. Yeah, life is difficult; ministry is difficult.

And these circumstances are nothing compared to the hardships suffered by our sister churches here and around the world. My heart absolutely breaks for the difficulties of the diaspora of southern churches to other parts of the country and all of the devastation that so many of you have encountered.

The question is the same—when will it ever be easy?

I hate to break it to you, but it's *never* going to be easy. The Christian ministry is difficult. This is a given and it's nothing new.

Our passage today points to several reasons why the church of our present day faces difficulties. People's eyes are blinded. They cannot see and they cannot hear. There's a lot of noise that is making it difficult for people to hear the gospel. Books like *The Da Vinci Code* do not help us, but muddy the waters and make it very difficult for people to get the clear gospel.

There is opposition. Opposition to the gospel builds among those who have competing agendas. We have that even within our own denomination. We have seen our debate opponents use evangelical names and phrases to deceive Presbyterians into thinking that their position has evangelical support. We've seen the distortion of Scripture, deception, and bad ethics in the process.

People offer plenty of opposition and so does the evil one who opposes our work, the work of the church. There are spiritual battles we're all facing. I have seen this reality unfold in my own congregation.

Tracing back the spiritual history of First Presbyterian Church of Concord in San Francisco Presbytery: in 1983 our church bought a piece of property next door to our campus. It was the town porno theater. It was discovered in the course of making the deal that the porno theater's lease was unbreakable for three more years. So for three years First Presbyterian Church of Concord was the proud owner of a pornographic theater, deriving income from it. What do you do? Some people left the church—quite a few as a matter of fact—because they considered that income the devil's money. This invasion into Satan's real estate began what has become a twenty-year season of spiritual battle in our church. And I know it's because the evil one lost territory and now opposes our efforts to make Christ known in our city.

People oppose our Kingdom business, and the devil surely does. Now if that's not enough, ministers and elders and deacons and church members are themselves weak and vulnerable to sin. We have had our own share of scandals that have, for many, made the gospel hard to see. And certainly the world we live in promotes the idea that life should work and ministry should be fun and fulfilling. And so don't, please, talk to me about discipline or delayed gratification. These attitudes define the framework in which we are doing our ministry.

And so Jesus said, and I believe from first-hand experience, that ministry is difficult. "In this world you will have trouble." He told us that we would suffer persecution, and urged us to be prepared for it.

And so we ask, "How bad can it get?" How difficult can it really be?

Paul was hounded as he preached the gospel and planted churches. There were folks who came in after him and tried to undo what he was doing; trying to say, "Now Paul gave you a good start but really you've got to do more—you've got to become a Jew before you can become a Christian." The so-called Judaizers or the peddlers of the Word came to undermine Paul's progress.

Sometimes you feel that's what's happening in your own setting. You preach a sermon on Sunday morning, and the folks read the newspapers or watch a contradictory television program on the History Channel or read *Da Vinci Code* and come back the next week and you have to start all over again.

But for Paul it was far more serious than that. Later on in the book of 2 Corinthians in Chapter 11, he begins a list of some of the hardships he has experienced. "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I've been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep. (We certainly can feel that one.) I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches."

He's afflicted, stymied, persecuted, at a loss sometimes. Perhaps he in his day experienced what we do now: those

crabbies who set ambushes in our congregational meetings, or presbytery committees delaying action that will benefit our congregation, or church members who move away just as they retire or just as they buy their first home. Or, as in our church, you might have the year when the children's department falls apart. That year the elders, the Session as a whole, became our children's department. Now you can imagine how those elders felt when they were installed. "Wait, wait, I thought I was going to be an elder. But I'm teaching Sunday school?"

Or heaven forbid that G-6.0106b would be challenged again.

We're tempted to say, "You know what? This is not the ministry I signed up for."

For the last three years, I have prayed every week with fifteen pastors of different denominations, most of them nondenominational. One of them oversees a church—Harvest Church—which bought the other theater in town, the Capri Theater, at the Park N Shop shopping center eight years ago. They didn't know they were supposed to apply for their use permit *before* the sale went through. After they bought it, they applied for a use permit to be a church, and the City denied their application. For years the city refused permission. The church offered to make it a conference center: "We'll have just two hours of worship on Sunday, but the rest of it will be multi-use." Resoundingly rejected. And then they brought the issue back: "Okay we're going to be a church—twenty-four hours a day—deal with that." Appeal after appeal was pursued. The church spent eight years and over two million dollars to finally get permission to worship in the Capri Theater.

Before that was over, Rich, Harvest Church's pastor, came to our prayer meeting and said, "You know, I just want to do the ministry that I've been called to." After commiserating with him, all of a sudden the wind of the Spirit blew in the room and we realized, "Rich, this *is* your ministry!" His gracious perseverance has opened relationships between the wider Church and the City that were unimaginable ten years ago.

And I've come to believe that where you and I are, with the stuff we're dealing with, we are in the ministry that God has ordained for us. Our ministry is to the denomination in which God has placed us to evangelize. This is our ministry, and we're not going to give up. We're perplexed, but we're not going to give up; we can't give up.

Now some people do give up—people without adequate faith to see God's purposes in their calling. They can't sustain a positive attitude.

Paul sees his defeats as privileged participation in the sufferings of Jesus. He doesn't stack them into his pity pile and bury himself with them. Rather he lets each disappointment, each difficulty, remind him of the overwhelming love of Jesus expressed through Christ's passion and death.

So with this way of thinking, Jesus' crucifixion leading to resurrection and humanity's redemption, Paul sees this repository of his own hardships pointing toward resurrection hope. And what *that* means is that how things end up in this life is not the final outcome of our labor. By not losing heart, by remaining faithful and setting forth the truth plainly, doing an honest ministry, we are accomplishing something of great eternal value.

According to Paul—and this is set now in the broader context of those middle chapters of 2 Corinthians—our hardships accomplish at least three things that can encourage us when circumstances are difficult.

1) These ministry hardships remind us that what we are experiencing now is not heaven. This may seem perfectly obvious, but if we are focused on the Lord's Kingdom work, we are hoping to have a taste of heaven before we die. We may be trying to create heaven on earth; we may wish for the kind of ministry, the ideal ministry that could be mistaken for heaven some day: perhaps we expect our church to become heaven; or our city—But the truth is, it isn't heaven; it never will be heaven. We are "away from the Lord," not yet with him—it's the "not yet" part of the kingdom. So don't get too attached to this church, to this denomination, to this body, to this building. It's all going to change. It's going to be traded in for a new body—and a new Body with a capital B.

2) Our hardships engender hope in a glorious future. We live by faith, not by sight. Now we're groaning through life's difficulties—oh no, not another setback! But the Holy Spirit is given to us as an "engagement ring" if you will. And someday the bride of Christ will march down that aisle into the Bridegroom, Christ's arms. We live in this hope.

3) But our hardships accomplish one more thing. They test our commitment to the Lord, when there are no feel-good props. We make it our goal to please God alone, Paul says. It builds character in us. We are strengthened from the inside out by the difficulties. It is enlarging our capacity for the work we're going to do in heaven. We're going to work there, you know. It's going to be productive; it's going to be wonderful. But we are going to work. And this work we're doing now is getting us ready and enlarging our capacity to hold and to view the glory of God. This body and these eyes cannot survive a first-hand viewing of God's glory—*yet*.

We're tested and we're strengthened and we don't always know any more than that, why things happen the way they do. Paul sees hope. He says, "We do not lose heart. We have a treasure—the gospel. It is true and valuable."

One of the ninety-five theses of Martin Luther, posted on the door of the church in Wittenberg says: "The true treasure of the church is not indulgences, it's not worldly

wealth; it is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." We have that treasure in these jars of clay.

God can use even me. And God can most certainly use you to deliver this treasure to our spiritually impoverished and love-starved generation. There is no room for excuses on that point. God can, wants to and will, over your dead body, use you in ministry. He says it right here. We're dying, and yet Christ rises, and the work of the kingdom bears fruit through our wasting away.

God delights to demonstrate his power in our weakness. And that's one of the amazing paradoxes of our faith and its experience in our lives. The glory of this treasure shines through our inadequacies and our flaws.

We have hope, because God is doing something through us. If we're wimpy Christians and we sit back and we say nothing when we see things coming down, the stuff will just keep happening. But if we stand up straight and we speak the plain truth graciously, patiently, don't yell—we don't do that—we don't twist Scripture, we don't play any shenanigans in the processes of our presbyteries, but remain honest with the gospel and our life in it, then God is going to bear fruit, if not visibly under our leadership, then in this generation. I believe it.
We know this to be true: Jesus Christ is Lord and the only Savior given to humankind by which we may be saved. We know that. We don't lose heart; we're people of hope, a hope that fades memories. Difficulties we have to endure will soon be forgotten—they are "light and momentary afflictions." We are people of a hope that removes fear. We have courage to face the relentless onslaught each day brings. A person who looks forward in resurrection hope is not afraid to tackle today's problems, no matter how big or how complicated they may be. And I am blessed by so many people in this body who do the really rigorous work, the homework, the preparation, and the writing that equips the rest of us to do the work of Christ that we've been called to.

So let us walk in power and purpose, so that God may receive and we may fully see the glory that awaits. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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