

Remarks on the State of the Presbyterian Church
and its Commitment to Theological Tradition

by
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My brief remarks will center around two points: (1) The current situation in the church as I understand it, both with regard to interest in the Reformed tradition and with regard to interest in Reformed theology. It will quickly become apparent that I find very little evidence in the leadership or literature of the church to suggest that there is any serious interest either in the Reformed tradition itself or in the more specialized area of our theological heritage. Indeed, it pains me to say that I find in our church scant evidence of any serious interest in formal theology at all, whether of the Reformed variety or not. (2) Because I find it of no particular value just to decry the lack of interest in the church's tradition and theological heritage, I will make some suggestions about practical steps which we can take to help remedy the situation.

In the post-World War II years we have seen (and have been forced to seek ways to deal with) the consequence of the widespread acceptance of the existentialist philosophy in society and church. The inordinate emphasis on a personalistic world-and-life view has created an attitude which insists that nothing which does not have immediate "meaning for me," nothing which is not "relevant," has more than passing interest or value. Hence there has arisen in both church and society a mindset which is almost totally a-historical. Everything is evaluated, and valued, on the basis of its relevance for the moment. Given that predilection, the question naturally arises: What value can the events of the past possibly have for my problems of the moment? As an historian, it is a constant struggle to try to convince the modern student that the study of history is worthwhile even if there is no easy or apparent application to a problem or issue of the moment. Hence one must work hard to overcome the total lack of historical interest in these students, but while it is extremely difficult, it is possible when a student is open to learn.

If anything, the a-historical mood which results from the acceptance of existentialist philosophy is a much greater problem child in the church than it is in society at large. In the first place, because existentialism has been widely (one can almost say thoroughly) accepted among Protestant theologians, the a-historical world view has become part and parcel of church thinking and teaching. There is scarcely a theologian in any Presbyterian seminary in this country who is not profoundly influenced by existentialism. And, because our ministers are trained under these theologians and church history instructors, Presbyterian teaching and preaching are constantly passing on this perspective. This is not an entirely negative development in the church, for much nineteenth century theology was so thoroughly theoretical that there was often no application to the problems of daily life. But the result of the

wholesale adoption of the existentialist program among our theologians and teachers is finally much more tragic than the theoretical emphasis of earlier theology, for it has resulted in complete disinterest in the traditions of the church, and is presently resulting in almost total disinterest in theology itself.

The double disinterest in tradition and theology is excused, even promoted, under the smokescreen that the twentieth century church must marshal all its forces to meet the crying needs of the hour--social injustice, the evils of the capitalistic economic system, the scandal of the disunity among Christians, and the like. Anyone who raises a voice to promote the cause of our noble tradition is treated with disdain, and whatever is offered in defense of that tradition is brushed aside as useless and therefore unworthy of serious consideration. One gets the feeling that a massive, collective guilt feeling exists in the church which governs all its thinking. One further gathers that this massive feeling of guilt can only be exiated by supporting and promoting causes which distance the church from the ills of the present age in which the church has taken part and which it has at times defended. The result is a tragic forsaking of the traditions for which the church stands.

Generally the arguments to support this subversion of the Presbyterian system are related to the cause of church union where it is supposed that a repudiation of denominational distinctives will lead to--or at least further the cause of--ecumenicity. In this case, the rejection of the system is deliberate. Ecumenicity is a more noble cause, and if it requires the severing of ourselves from the past, so be it. The thinking of these modern-day prophets of ecumenicity seems never to rise above the belief that by pushing aside our traditions we dissociate ourselves from the "evils" which the church has condoned and in which it has participated. So blind is their faith in this program that they never seem to stop and deal with the issue that some form of church government, and some theological tradition, must be established, and that whatever polity and theology is adopted, it, too, has been besmirched by involvement in the social, economic, and disunion evils of the present day. And what is the supreme irony in all of this is that the movement in the church is more and more toward a hierarchical structure, a structure associated with the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches, churches which have had more involvement in the "establishment" than any other.

In spite of the amazement I continue to feel over the movement toward the episcopal system, what I find as a historian to be so tragic is the lack of interest in history which seems to lead these "prophets" to think that it is possible to dissociate oneself from history itself: so powerful is the a-historical mindset that it blindly accepts the idea that the way for the church to move ahead, to build a better history, is to deny its present history. Beyond that, when they are presented with the idea that by denying the Presbyterian heritage we forfeit the right to be called Presbyterians, they shrug and respond, "So what?" I have a serious problem

with the integrity of those who wish to continue calling themselves Presbyterian while rejecting Presbyterian traditions, and I have an even greater problem with the idea that one builds the future through rejection of history, rather than through affirmation thereof. If we think we can build a future by denying our past, then we are most sadly deceived indeed.

There appears also to be a "populist" mentality which governs much of the decisions and direction of the church today. While this does not preclude a movement toward episcopacy in the area of polity, it does have a strong effect on the church's theological perspective. Specifically, anything in theology which smacks of the idea of a majestic God, a God who inhabits eternity and governs the affairs of earth, is rejected out of hand. It seems that the egalitarian goal of the American experiment finds the idea of a majestic God a bother, and hence Someone or Something to be suspect when dealing with the basic issues of existence. In short, any idea which transcends the immediate becomes irrelevant as we seek meaning in the here and now.

Finally, it doesn't need to be said that the basic direction of the church is to be fashionable in all that for which it stands, whether in desexing the Bible and the worship documents of the church, or in decrying injustice in South Africa (while ignoring or remaining silent about the vicious imperialistic action of Russia in Afghanistan, or the Marxist program of mass starvation in Eritrea!), or in weeding out any portions of the Bible which seem offensive to the modern mind. It has become a church which seems to be more interested in proving it is "modern" than a church which takes seriously its history. It would appear that there is throughout our denomination an egotistical presumption that we moderns are far wiser than our predecessors, a presumption which is both an evidence of a lack of respect for the past and an overweening pride in the position of modern man. It is an attitude which will not only destroy the tradition, but will also ruin the future.

But while we can catalog the ills of the present church in the fashion that they have dealt with the historical church, if we take our tradition seriously we have an obligation to do more than decry the present folly. Hence I want to add a few suggestions of positive action which we might take to preserve the tradition while at the same time finding ways to apply the message of that tradition in the twentieth century.

As a first step, we need to give priority to the matter of teaching and explaining our tradition in our seminaries and colleges. It is a grand tradition; it lies at the root of the whole democratic tradition of America. We need constantly to promote and present its history and contribution in a sympathetic way. But in doing this, we need to take seriously the problems which existed to cause the wholesale repudiation of a noble past. We must recognize in theology that too often we have taught the discipline as if it were another branch of philosophy. Theology is not, nor can it be,

just another academic discipline teaching truth which is intellectually comprehended and defended. We must enthusiastically embrace the truth that faith is the fundamentum of theology, that edification of the saints is its purpose, and that shorn of its spiritual dimension theology becomes lifeless. And as we teach our tradition we must begin with its founders, appreciating the tradition they sought to preserve through its reformation, and grasping the fundamentals of the teaching of Zwingli, Calvin, Knox, and their contemporaries. Only when this foundation has been laid should we go on to introduce them to Brunner and Barth, Bavinck and Berkouwer, or Kung and King.

A second step we should take is to offer for our church leaders refresher courses in theology and the history of the Reformed tradition, rather than courses in pastoral counseling, social awareness, and the like. We must restore to our tradition the idea that the main function of the minister is the proclamation of the Word of God; that his or her time should not be frittered away on a million and one "pastoral concerns." Most of that kind of work should be returned to the lay leadership of the church where it belongs. There should be regular refresher courses at centers like Davidson, Presbyterian, Erskine, Union, King, Montreat, etc., and these should tie into the continuing education plans of our ministers and youth leaders.

A third step we should take is to begin producing church school materials which feature the history of the Reformed tradition. This can be done in a number of ways which stimulate the interest of the people and effectively communicate that they are part of a noble tradition. One of these ways could be brief biographical vignettes of the great figures of the church, always tying in what they stood for as well as who they were. Too frequently we have left the writing of these materials to the appointees of the bureaucracy, or at least to the selection of the bureaucracy, and these are the folk who are least suited to be making that kind of decision. They will always be more concerned about correcting the sins of the fathers, producing activists, finding ways to accommodate the civil rights lobby, or the women's rights lobby, or whatever happens to be the "in thing" of the moment, than they will be concerned about the spiritual growth of the people and the promotion of a sober recognition of the grand tradition of the Reformed.

A fourth step we should continue to take is the use of conferences like this one to teach, to challenge, and to promote the values of the Reformed tradition. The encouragement which is forthcoming from the coming together of the scholars of the tradition and the leaders of the local churches is of inestimable value for both groups. And, from the practical side, the corrective value for the scholars to hear from those on the "front line," and vice versa, is also of inestimable value. We should make conferences like this one a highlight of the church year, encourage sessions to put in the budget funds to send their ministers and youth leaders to such conferences, and do more to advertise such meetings.

Finally, I am convinced that a fifth step which would do much to support and promote our theology and traditions would be the production of inexpensive editions of theological treatises, sermons, commentaries, and other writings of the great figures of the church. With the widespread use of the word processor which characterizes our lives, the production of such materials could be both easily done and inexpensively provided. Again we should not be bashful about including in our church budgets funds to support such an enterprise, for the return in lay interest would easily offset a monetary expense. These materials could also be used as the texts for church school classes, retreats, even conferences like this one. The sermons and commentaries of Calvin, for example, are much more readable and spiritually challenging than almost any sermons or commentaries of the modern church. Reading them would naturally bring a new awareness and appreciation of his work, and serve to strengthen our tradition.

In conclusion, we have much to be concerned about as we view the programs, literature, and direction of our church. But our response should not be one of creating a cult of professional gossip mongers, nor of cutting and running, but we should rather energetically move to establish programs, literature, and impulses which will shore up, and ultimately preserve, the noble heritage which we all share but too seldom appreciate and too often take for granted.