

Text: Colossians 3:12-17

Title: Taking Stock- the State of the Denomination

Date: January 3 2010

‘tis the season. No, not the Christmas season- the look back at the last year and the last decade season. Every news magazine, tv show or whatever and its dog has been running some sort of retrospective. And quite frankly, with a decade bracketed by the 9/11 attacks and the financial meltdown, it is sometimes not a bad idea to take a step back and ask- how did we get here? So that is what we are going to do in the next few weeks. Now I know no one here really wants to hear about Presbyterian politics- those 2 words are part of our problem, for when we can reduce what we do down to politics- there is something wrong. Be that as it may, we are Presbyterian- so let’s start there.

As many of you know, I was bought up in the Roman Catholic Church, parochial school, altar boy, the whole 9 yards. How I went from there to Presbyterian is a story for another time. Let’s just say that at a critical point in my life, I was nurtured in the faith by the Presbyterian Church. I came to appreciate our emphasis on God’s overwhelming grace coupled with intellectual honesty. I discovered Presbyterians to be a thinking people, very adverse to checking their brains at the door for the sake of a particular dogma. We saw the value in a connectional approach to ministry- each congregation responsible for its own ministry, yet working together to achieve ministry goals beyond the immediate local level. By and large we respected one another, knowing that our individual understandings of the truth were colored by our own experiences. We were a people willing to live in the tension between a number of viewpoints, convinced not only that Christians in good conscience can disagree with one another- but also that it was better to listen for the Holy Spirit’s voice with more than one set of ears. This was the broad and inclusive denomination I was called to- and I counted myself lucky. Still do.

Then one day I woke up and everything I knew was wrong- ever feel like that? The shared value of connection seemed to have crumbled. We still paid lip service to the idea- but that is all that we paid. Dollars were no longer flowing up the organizational chart- and what does not go up,- does not come down into mission. There were

churches flexing political muscle by withholding per capita dollars. National staff went from 900 to 300.

The assumption of trust is no longer there; the value of holding competing viewpoints in tension are gone. Now we have affinity groups, the 2 largest, the Covenant Network and the Presbyterian Coalition at their best mount insurgencies to whatever the previous GA did and, at their worst, they look more and more like political parties. Let's just color code them Red/Blue and be done with it. GAs come and go and I find myself praying that they do not come up with actions that will still further tick off the folks in the pews. You just know someone is going to win- and someone is going to lose- and winning or losing becomes the focus. There was even a GA a few years back where there were those who wanted to reconvene the whole thing to fight even more! There are times I shake my head and wonder- what happened?

I think what happened is that the institutional evolution we have experienced in the last 100 or so years was running on a direct collision course with that anti institutional bias that is part of our denominational DNA. That, coupled with the widespread rebellion against what was called "the Establishment" starting in the 60s & 70s have placed us in a perfect storm where everything that smacks of institutional is suspect.

Institutional- that is not a phrase one runs across when describing Presbyterians. We were the radicals of the Reformation! Ours is an anti clerical tradition- we ordain laypeople! We rejected the office of Bishop and by extension, the divine right of Kings. In Pennsylvania, where we had no colony state church support like the other colonies, we flourished. During the westward expansion, our insistence on Presbyteries as the mission arm of the church allowed us the flexibility to meet new and unforeseen ministry challenges. Council Bluffs was founded in 1848 and within a decade we had a church!

So what happened to our independent streak? There was the Briggs affair." Charles rigs was the newly appointed Professor of Biblical Theology at Union Seminary in 1891. He declared that the notion of the inerrancy of Scripture "is a ghost of Modern evangelicism to frighten children." The denomination went ballistic and there were calls for a heresy trial. What is this, the Dark Ages? After the New York presbytery found him not guilty, the 1893 GA voted to overturn the non conviction and defrocked him. we

would fight over Modernism and Fundamentalism for the next 40 years! 1910 would see the publication of the 5 Fundamentals and the GA that year instructed it's Committee on Bills and Overtures to prepare guidelines for future ordinations- that took the form of the 5 fundamentals\_- in effect crossing the line into being a legislative body. 1922 saw Fosdick's "Shall the Fundamentalist's Win?" sermon and the 1923 GA reaffirmed its commitment to the 5 Fundamentals and required the New York Presbytery to force Fosdick and First Presbyterian church to conform to the Westminster Confession. In 1934, the leading Fundamentalist leader, J Gersham Machen was tossed out of the denomination.

Do you see the pattern? All through the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, issues that probably should have been handled at the presbytery level were seen as having national import- and were referred to General Assembly after General Assembly. The unintended consequence of this was that GAs moved away from being a body that coordinated larger mission to a body increasingly concerned with approving or correcting the actions of lower judicatories. The net effect was to increasingly concentrate power – and build institution.

Led by Eugene Carson Blake, we worked to unify Episcopalian and Reformed traditions in the late 50 & 60s. and while some good things came out of the COCU discussions, we would eventually leave because the other denominations wanted us to stop ordaining laypeople.

Blame it on Vietnam, Watergate, the 60s- there is no shortage of bogeymen out there to point fingers to blame for the rising sense of distrust that many felt toward Institutions. The environment that we engaged in ministry was shifting radically. Money was spent in a variety of social justice causes- causes that did not always resonate with our people. I've met people who are still torqued that we gave money to Angela Davis. Hey- it wasn't me- that happened before I became Presbyterian! The 70s saw the Authoritative Interpretation banning sexually active homosexuals form ordained office. Authoritative Interpretation- who came up with that idea? Sounds official- sounds Authoritative- but an interpretation of the Constitution does not have the force of a Constitutional amendment and ultimately isn't worth the paper it's printed on. Sooner or later a GAPJC is going to say- put it in the Constitution or don't bother us- which, as I

recall, is how we wound up with Amendment B to begin with. And we have been fighting over it ever since! If it is not one thing, its another!.

So where do we go from here? First off we start with Colossians- and we choose to act as if we love one another- even those we may disagree with. Secondly- and this is happening already- we recognize that the denomination is not the center of the universe. Ministry, like politics, is experienced by most at the local level and that this institutional approach that we have embraced over much of the last century has hit the law of diminishing returns. There are more and more opportunities like our Synod School springing up all over the place. Denominational headquarters in Louisville is getting the message that their job is to help us do what we do. They want to find ways to encourage and empower local ministry. The current buzz word is “missional.”

The emphasis on being “missional” is, of course, nothing really new. Being “missional” is in our DNA- it is what Presbyteries have always done best. Bottom line- We are still a connectional people- we still value working together on projects beyond the local level. However, that being said, we have never been a people content to abdicate responsibility for our own ministry to a larger centralized institution. Missional- by definition implies local. The implication is that our presbytery ministries will need to expand- to fulfill the void left by Louisville as Louisville reinvents the nature of our denominational ministry.

Of course, not everything we know is wrong. We still gather around this table, invited by our Lord Jesus to declare and bear witness to the Gospel. We still choose to work with our ministry partners wherever we may find them. We still look at each other as God’s invaluable gifts- for mutual ministry, encouragement and insight. We are still Presbyterian, placed in this tradition by the hands of a loving God. I do not know what the long range trajectory of the PC(USA) will be- but that is not mine to know. Some things never change- thank God for small favors.