

*Ministry as Crucifixion: Ecclesiology, the PC(USA), and the Cross*  
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Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers,  
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”  
Matthew 16:24

“Hence also in harsh and difficult conditions, regarded as adverse and evil,  
a great comfort comes to us: we share in Christ’s suffering in order that as he  
passed from the labyrinth of all evils into heavenly glory, we may in like  
manner be led through various tribulations into the same glory.”  
John Calvin’s *Institutes* III.viii.1

John Ames, an aging Congregationalist minister in the small town of Gilead,  
Iowa, is the protagonist in Marilynne Robinson’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Gilead*.  
Coming face to face with his own mortality, Ames writes a letter about his life that he  
hopes his young son will save and read when he becomes an adult. Past, present, and  
future tenses intermingle in a narrative which is a prolonged reflection on human finitude  
in the light of God’s eternal and pervasive graciousness. At the time of the writing neither  
Pastor Ames nor Gilead are what they once were. His health is failing and Gilead’s  
vitality is ebbing.

Once Gilead had been a hot-bed of abolitionist radicalism, the frontline of God’s  
Kingdom coming. Ames’ wild-eyed grandfather had preached fiery sermons and  
orchestrated bold campaigns for the sake of God’s sovereign purposes in that same town,  
from the same pulpit, in the same church, where Ames ministers. But now it is very  
different. Gilead seems God-forsaken: an impoverished, dying, forgotten village in the

middle of no-where. The rickety, threadbare church has suffered from neglect for so long that it will soon either be razed or simply collapse. The force of the book turns on whether John Ames can find a sense of meaning, purpose, and hope in the midst of the inglorious decrepitude and death of a once vital legacy and life.

Pastor Ames sustains hope by finding God and following Christ on the threshold of death and loss. The God whose Spirit stirred Gilead in its youth is still present.

It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire or light. That is what I said in the Pentacost sermon. I have reflected on that sermon, and there is some truth in it. But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes, the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring anything to it except a little willingness to see. Only who could have the courage to see it? (Robinson, 245)

In a world where loss and death, betrayal and forgetfulness are so prevalent, courage and hope are difficult to sustain. But Pastor Ames, whose Calvinist faith shapes his vision of the world, has the courage to look straight into the maw of mortality and see God's graciousness shining through. God's sovereign reign is present not only in victory but also in loss, not only in life but also in death, not only in strength but also in weakness, not only in energy but also in exhaustion. In, through, and beyond Gilead's birth, life, and death, as well as his own, Ames experiences and relies upon a God who is everywhere and always gracious. This faithful vision gives him the courage to be gracious as well—to imitate the way of God, known to him in the person of Jesus Christ. So, addressing his son at the end of the novel, he writes:

To me it seems rather Christ like to be unadorned as this place is, as little regarded. I can't help imagining that you will leave sooner or later, and its fine if you have done that, or mean to do it. This whole place does look like whatever hope becomes after it begins to weary a little, then weary a little more. But hope

deferred is still hope. I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love—I too will smolder away the time until the great and general incandescence (Robinson, 246).

His son may leave, the church may collapse, Gilead may die. Yet Ames is not without hope. Faith to see God's gracious presence in and sovereignty over all things gives him the courage for extravagant acts of love, even in the face of death!

Today, we Presbyterians may learn a lesson about faith, hope, and love from our colleague in ministry and theological cousin, John Ames. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is not yet face to face with its own mortality. The life of our denomination has not yet run its course—though it most certainly will at some time or another. We retain significant vitality and steward considerable resources for the sake of God's emerging kingdom. Yet, there is no doubt that declining membership, shrinking budgets, internal conflicts, and social displacement are provoking self-doubt and mutual recrimination. We pine for the glories of previous generations, whose faith and action influenced every facet of American life and culture. With the radiance of past accomplishments casting current circumstances in stark relief, we realize that the Presbyterian Church (USA) “does look like whatever hope becomes after it begins to weary a little, then weary a little more.”

Like John Ames, we can only live in the time we are given. And like John Ames, we may find that in these times, as in the past, God's gracious providence surrounds us, providing ample opportunity to praise God's extravagant goodness, be reconciled with those from whom we are estranged, and participate in God's eternal, emerging kingdom. Faithfulness to our heritage and those who have passed it on to us permits nothing less. Unfortunately, memories of past glory too often seem to dispose us to anxiety rather than trust, defensiveness rather than openness, timidity rather than courage. Instead of vital,

living dispositions, faith, hope, and love appear as historical artifacts amidst the “ruins of old courage, and the lore of old gallantry” (246). Faithfulness to our heritage is more than a memory of the past, it is a living engagement with the gracious God of all times and all places, in our own time and our own place. Fortunately, the constancy of God’s Spirit can take a dusty, dying ember and “breathe it into flame again” (246). If God gives us the eyes to see God’s graciousness in the midst of our own times, we too may experience a revival of faith, hope, and love—a Pentecost for our own age.

### **“RIGHT PERCEPTION:” CALVIN’S SPECTACLES AND CHRIST’S CROSS**

John Ames has a particularly Reformed, or Calvinist, disposition toward the world in at least two ways: first, he is persuaded that God is sovereign over and present in all times, places, and events; and, second, he acknowledges that it is not always easy to see or understand what God is doing. Beauty and agony, grace and sin, life and death are tangled up together, inexplicably and inescapably. After just such an encounter with God’s wonderful and awful world, a prominent character in the novel admits, “I do not understand one thing in this world. Not one” (164). And isn’t that, so often, the truth. John Ames, the cantankerous Calvinist, never gives up the effort, however. In all his encounters with the world, he tries to discern what God is up to, especially those painful, costly, and destructive encounters. For him, right relationship with God is a matter of seeing properly what God is doing: Or, put another way, “right worship is right perception” (135). The pastor’s vocation, he is convinced, consists of helping people perceive things properly. Concerning his own ministry, and its particular failures, he writes:

It seems to me now we never looked up from the trouble we had just getting by to put the obvious question, that is, to ask what it was the Lord was trying to make us understand. The word “preacher” comes from the old French word, *predicateur*, which means prophet. And what is the purpose of a prophet except to find meaning in trouble? (233)

As leaders in the Presbyterian Church (USA), we would be wise to embrace the same sensibility. A frantic accumulation of disparate strategies, programs, and goals in response to our denominations current struggles may distract us from the more essential pastoral and Christian concern—to ask what it is the Lord is trying to make us understand. There can be no doubt that God is actively present in the current crises of the Presbyterian Church (USA), but what exactly is God doing? Right perception precedes right action. Wise strategies and effective programs do not produce a meaningful life, they flow from it. So let’s look up from our troubles—or put more properly, look *at* our troubles—and try to see what God is doing in, through, and to us.

We may get a clue about how best to gain clarity concerning the circumstances we find ourselves in by returning to John Calvin himself. Mindful that God’s will, way, and character shone brilliantly forth through everything, he, nonetheless, admitted that human beings were too dull to perceive God’s providential purposes in the midst of the world. Apart from some assistance, the truth of things eludes us.

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God (Institutes, I.vii.1).

God’s self-revelation in scripture, and particularly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, focus human perception of the world so that God’s graciousness shines

through everything, everywhere, all the time. It was always there, Calvin insists; but now we can see and understand it. Misapprehension and confusion are clarified and corrected as things come into proper focus through God's Word.

A return to the spectacles of God's Word may help us in the Presbyterian Church (USA) see more accurately, and respond more appropriately, to the will and way of God expressed in and through our current circumstances. What we see, however, may require more courage from us than we have previously managed to muster. It may call into question all our efforts at self-preservation, self-justification, and self-sufficiency. In an age of self-help books, personal coaches, and church growth consultants, the cross of Jesus Christ provides a fruitful lens through which to understand the current travails of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and formulate a faithful response to God's word for us today.

There are two, related reasons for selecting the cross as a lens through which to examine the Presbyterian Church (USA) and what is happening to it. First, the church perceives itself as the body of Christ. Those who see themselves in this way cannot faithfully avoid a self-understanding shaped by the crucifixion. From the very beginning, Jesus was clear that his followers would not avoid the cross he carried. "If any want to become my followers," he proclaimed, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Initiation into the Christian body includes participation in Christ's death as well as his resurrection. Through the waters of baptism, we die to self and rise in Christ. "Do you not know," the apostle Paul asks, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death" (Romans 6:3)? Similarly, each time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we are spiritually nourished upon and joined to

Christ's broken body. Everywhere we turn in the church, we are confronted by the cross as the primary source of our self-understanding.

It is, in fact, surprising, given the centrality of the cross, that the church is not more immediately drawn to it as a lens through which to examine our current circumstances. Perhaps part of the reason is that we tend to associate taking up one's cross almost exclusively with "suffering for righteousness sake." If there is no way to trace the sufferings we face to our own righteousness—to see it as a direct result of boldly proclaiming and living out the gospel—then we feel it is illegitimate to give it the dignity of the cross. John Calvin takes a broader approach to bearing the cross, however. While he certainly associates it with the consequences of righteousness, he does not limit it simply to this. Rather, according to Calvin, self-denial and bearing the cross describe the particular way in which Christians respond to any and every sort of adversity that confronts them.

Every sort of calamity, trouble, or loss, is an opportunity for Christians to be conformed to Christ through bearing the cross. For Calvin, any and all suffering provides the opportunity for Christians to repent of their self-reliance and depend solely on God.

As we are by nature too inclined to attribute everything to our flesh—unless our feebleness be shown, as it were, to our eyes—we readily esteem our virtue above its due measure...Hence we are lifted up into stupid and empty confidence in the flesh; and relying on it, we are then insolently proud against God himself, as if our own powers were sufficient without his grace. He can best restrain this arrogance when he proves to us by experience not only the great incapacity but also the frailty under which we labor" (III.viii.2).

Suffering, conflict, and loss, whether the consequence of righteousness or not, drive the Christian from hope and trust in their own abilities to reliance on God's gracious providence alone. The troubles of life are provided by God as "medicine" for the

Christian soul. As the cross of Christ provokes genuine repentance and conversion, a turning from sin to God, from death to life, so the troubles Christian encounter may be experienced as opportunities for mortification and vivification. Through social dislocation, internal conflicts, budget constriction, and membership losses God may be mortifying our flesh—calling into question our sinful reliance on the power, prestige, and significance of the Presbyterian Church rather than God. Through this agonizing time of loss and conflict, God may be calling us to repentance, preparing us for new life, and restoring our ministry and mission. But unless the Spirit of God gives us the eyes to see what God is doing to us, we may fail to respond faithfully. Instead we may anxiously and vainly resist our mortification and thereby spurn the new life made possible for us through participation in the body of Christ. Unless we embrace participation in Christ and his cross, our response to current circumstances may bear witness to the anxious striving and narrow loyalties of sinful human communities rather than to God’s capacious graciousness and the new life and community it provokes.

The cross is not only an appropriate lens through which to examine what is happening to the Presbyterian Church (USA) because the church is the “body of Christ,” but also because the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals God’s way with the entire world. The current situation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) cannot be isolated from the wider world within which it exists and what God is doing in the church cannot be isolated from what God is doing in the creation as a whole. Christ is not only the head of the church but also the Lord of all creation. Colossians places Christ and the cross at the center of the cosmic drama that began with creation and ends only with the final reconciliation of all things.



He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

There is an intimate, unavoidable relationship between the way of God embodied and revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the created order within which everything participates, and the impending and unavoidable telos towards which everything points. Jesus Christ and his cross are the lynch-pin that holds the cosmos together and the key to unlock the impenetrable mystery of God's way with things. It is no wonder, then, that John Calvin described God's Word as spectacles through which we could learn to see properly. What is revealed in Jesus Christ is the power, presence, and purpose that is in and through all things, everywhere, all the time. Those who have been given eyes to see, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, cannot help but observe his reflection in and through all things, just as Christians see Christ prefigured in the Hebrew Scriptures once they are given eyes to see his presence there. He is everywhere, ruling over all things and reconciling them to God.

As Presbyterians examine what is happening to their church and how to respond, we can better understand ourselves and our place in God's world through the lens of the cross. A vision of things corrected by the cross of Jesus Christ would give us the capacity to respond appropriately to, participate in, and bear witness concerning God's gracious and costly way with the world. A few clues about the way the cross may shape our vision of the church and the world may be found in the insights of H. Richard

Niebuhr. In 1943, amidst the agonies of World War II, Niebuhr looked straight at the death, destruction, and animosity of war, searching for the presence of the sovereign God. In a world too easily content with a vision of things oriented around moral retribution or the raw exertion of amoral force, Niebuhr looked deeper. He looked at the agonies of the war through the lens of the cross, arguing that “If the cross is not only a historical event but a revelation of the order of reality, then war is not only like the cross but must be a demonstration of that same order of God” (Niebuhr, 515).

World War II could not be understood properly through the image of moral retribution, which conceived of war as the just punishment of the guilty by the righteous, because so many of those who suffered and died were innocent civilians and soldiers who bore little responsibility for the war but were caught up in its consequences. Neither could the war be understood simply as the raw conflict of amoral vitalities, because so many of the human beings involved courageously and faithfully sacrificed, suffered and died for purposes that transcended themselves. Like the cross, war is a morally earnest yet morally ambiguous enterprise. It is, as Niebuhr puts it, “a strange intermixture of justice and injustice on the side alike of those who regard themselves as the upholders of the right and on the side of the vanquished” (Niebuhr 514). While both sides in the conflict see themselves as the righteous agents of divine judgment on the guilty, they cannot ignore the fact that the burdens of war fall primarily on the innocent. In the light of this fact, the binary oppositions that justify the conflict are undermined. Neither side can consider itself righteous in the face of their own complicity in the sacrifice of the innocent; neither can they imagine the other side as purely evil, in the light of their courageous faithfulness to a cause larger than self.

For those who have eyes to see, war is a call to repentance and conversion. It undermines self-confident, self-reliant, self-defensive, self-justifications, forcing all participants to acknowledge how far they are from true righteousness. It calls forth a new hope for and commitment to reconciliation: forgiveness, generosity and solidarity with the estranged provoked by the suffering and death of the innocent on our behalf and by our hands. As such it is a strange “act of grace, a great recall from the road to death which we all travel together, the just and the unjust, the victor and the vanquished” (515). In and through the very deepest and most deadly consequences of human sinfulness, God’s innocent one vicariously bears the burdens, draws life from death, and prepares and empowers the way for new life.

“Interpreted through the lens of the cross of Jesus Christ the suffering of the innocent is seen not as the suffering of temporal men but of the eternal victim “slain from the foundations of the world.” If the Son of God is being crucified in this war along with the malefactors—and he is being crucified on many an obscure hill—then the graciousness of God, the self-giving love, is more manifest here than in all the years of peace” (515).

His heart and mind shaped by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, H. Richard Niebuhr saw God’s graciousness shining through the agony, loss, and death of World War II. The result was a profound proclamation of God’s grace and the renewal of faith, hope, and love in the midst of the agonies of his own place and time.

Whether the lens through which we see our own suffering or the suffering we inflict upon others, the cross opens the way for *metanoia*, a transformation of heart, mind, life, and relationship. Drawn into the orbit of Christ’s cross, our own suffering and loss challenge our self-confidence and self-reliance, reorienting our faith, hope, and love towards the gracious God of all creation, the ultimate source of every good, the final destiny of every creature. Likewise, recognizing our complicity in the agony and loss of

others—their vicarious suffering for our guilt—our hearts become enlarged and we repent of our self-defensive, self-interested, self-justifying, pre-occupation with ourselves. Through the activity of the Holy Spirit, the cross of Christ transforms all suffering and loss into an opportunity to be reoriented toward God, reconciled with the estranged, and thereby remolded into the image of Christ.

### **THE GOSPEL OF RECONILIATION**

At its heart, then, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ participate in and point towards God’s unwavering purpose and costly plan to reconcile all things to God’s self, as the Colossians passage points out. Christians participate in and embody a foretaste of God’s coming kingdom to the extent that they are reconciled to God, one another, and all God’s creatures. They also bear witness to the good news of God’s kingdom to the extent that they draw attention to the possibilities for new life that God is preparing in the midst of all the agony, loss, and death of the world. In a world where vulnerability and finitude generally provoke distrust, despair, and animosity, Christians may respond with faith, hope, and love, because of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The *Confession of 1967*, in the *Presbyterian Book of Confessions*, offers reconciliation as a lens through which to see the human predicament as well as the gospel of Jesus Christ. It describes human sin as turning from trusting dependence on God and trustworthy interdependence with one another toward anxious independence. “In sin,” the confession states, “men claim mastery of their own lives, turn against God and their fellow man, and become exploiters and despoilers of the world. They lose their humanity

in futile striving and are left in rebellion and despair” (9.12). It is not that humans value things that are without worth, but that they tend to give genuine goods inordinate, even idolatrous, importance. Valuable participants in God’s orderly and interdependent creation clash with one another and God’s providence, when they are offered ultimate and unrivaled loyalty and worth. Groups, like family, nation, race, and gender, can become diabolical, if they try to elude finitude. Nation may war against nation and family against family as they each try vainly to elude their dependence upon God and interdependence with one another. Values, like freedom, justice, equality, peace, beauty, and truth, may provoke conflict and death when they cloak themselves with the pretense of ultimacy. All things are good, but none are God. And when we pretend otherwise, we are drawn into the demonic, centrifugal spirits that agonize the created order.

The good news of the gospel is that God has not left the fallen creation to its own destructive devices. The preamble to the *Confession of 1967* boldly states the source of the Church’s hope and mission: “In Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... Therefore the church calls men to be reconciled to God and to one another” (9.07). Through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, God confronts and defeats the power of sin, provoking God’s estranged children down the path toward new life and new creation. This is the Church’s faith and hope, though it is not easy or even possible to describe it in words. “God’s reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the scriptures describe in various ways. It is called the sacrifice of a lamb, a shepherd’s life given for his sheep, atonement by a priest; again it is a ransom of a slave, payment of a debt, vicarious suffering for a legal penalty, and victory over the powers of evil” (9.09). What all these expressions point toward, however, is God’s refusal to abandon the world

to alienation, antagonism, and death. “They reveal the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of God’s reconciling work” (9.09). From this faith grows the church’s sense of mission: Jesus “gave history its meaning and direction and called the church to be his servant for the reconciliation of the world” (9.19).

Reconciliation does not mean that difference is simply dissolved or conflict effortlessly overcome. Such understandings of reconciliation would do justice to neither the Christian understanding of creation nor the reality of the crucifixion. In *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Mirslav Volf distinguishes “differentiation and exclusion.” Difference is essential to the orderly flourishing of the created order. Diversity in unity and unity in diversity is the nature of God’s creation. In the creation story of Genesis 1, God separates things in order to create distinct creatures, each of which is recognized as good. God also binds these creatures together as part of a whole created order, which he proclaims “very good” and apart from which none of the creatures would survive, much less flourish. Volf uses the term “differentiation” to describe the “creative activity of ‘separating-and-binding’ that results in patterns of interdependence” (65).

Exclusion, on the other hand, is the sinful propensity either to cut the bonds that connect, “taking oneself out of the pattern of interdependence and placing oneself in a position of sovereign independence” or to erase the distinctions that separate different creatures, refusing to recognize “the other as someone who in his or her otherness belongs to the pattern of interdependence” (67). Differentiation, in this sense, is essential to the goodness and flourishing of creation, while exclusion, in this sense, is the sinful betrayal of the created order that undermines its flourishing.

Through human sinfulness, otherness becomes a threat and those who are different are treated as enemies. The agony of the human condition is not difference itself, but the warfare between those who depend upon one another for their survival and flourishing. The price of sin is death in the sense that we reap the harvest of our own animosity toward God and one another. The cross of Jesus Christ is a measure of the depth of the inner-contradiction within which we and the entire creation find ourselves. In the name of life and its flourishing, we reject the one who promises abundant life and reject the God who is the source of it. Yet, through the cross, Christ also accomplishes our redemption, removing the sting of death, and reconciling us to God and one another.

From a Pauline perspective, the wall that divides is not so much “the difference” as *enmity* (cf. Ephesians 2:14-17). Hence the solution cannot be “the One.” Neither the imposition of a single will nor the rule of a single law removes enmity. Hostility can be “put to death” only through self-giving. Peace is achieved “through the cross” and “by the blood” (47-8).

Reconciliation among those at odds, not the elimination of difference is the aim of God in Christ; only participation in the cross of Christ produces New Creation.

Those who see their lives and relationships through the lens of the cross are called to repentance for their enmity towards God and one another. They are thereby empowered to give ultimate allegiance to God and to treat the enemy as a fellow creature of God. According to Volf, life reconceived through the cross provokes two fundamental changes: “First, it creates space for us to receive the other” (51); second, “it entails a judgment against evil in every culture” (52). In other words, the cross points out the way in which every person, set of relationships, and set of values, despite their genuine creaturely goodness, tends to forget God and claim ultimacy for itself. Through God’s self-donation in Christ, the cross drives repentant sinners toward absolute dependence on

and loyalty to the gracious God, establishing new life and new creation—self-giving recognition of and relationship with all God’s good, but fallen, creatures. The cross calls us back to the gracious God as the center, source, and end of life. As a consequence, “we are to conduct life so as to relate to all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God” (Gustafson, 113). The indicative of Christ’s cross propels the Christian imperative: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

## **AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE CROSS FOR THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Chapter 3 of the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) depicts “The Church and Its Mission” in the light of God’s redeeming and reconciling way with the world revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity:

1. The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.
2. The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world;
  - a. Sin is forgiven.
  - b. Reconciliation is accomplished.
  - c. The dividing wall of hostility is torn down.
3. The Church is the body of Christ, both in its corporate life and in the lives of its individual members, and is called to give shape and substance to this truth (G-3.0200).

The Presbyterian Church understands itself as participating in and bearing witness to God’s cosmic work of new creation. This cruciform vision sustains and is accompanied by the theocentric dispositions provoked by the cross: humble repentance and self-forgetful love. The church is, after all, just a “*provisional* demonstration of what God intends for all humanity.” It is neither permanent nor perfect. The Church’s faith is in, its



hope is for, and its love is aimed at something other than itself—namely God and God’s Kingdom. As such, it is disposed not toward self-preservation but toward self-giving service. Drawn into the way of Christ through God’s grace, “the Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ” (3.0400).

Too often, however, the Church has failed to demonstrate this sort of faith, hope, and love. Too often, it has placed something less than God at its center—a nation, a class, a race, a cultural heritage. And sometimes that thing has even been itself—the Christian Church, the Presbyterian Church, or some party within the church. The Church, in its corporate life and the lives of its members, has always and everywhere, though never completely or conclusively, failed to love God with its whole heart, soul, strength and mind and its neighbor as itself. The Church, like all God’s good but fallen creatures, has a tendency to turn in on itself and its own. When it does, however, God graciously calls it beyond itself through the cross of Christ, which is inscribed deeply into its own and the world’s suffering, agony, and loss. The church is “reformed and always being reformed” by the cross of Christ.

The final section of Chapter 3 of the *Book of Order* illustrates the emergent nature of the new life the Church embodies and proclaims as well as the dispositions of humble repentance and self-forgetful love this engenders.

The church is called

- a. to a new openness to the presence of God in the church and in the world, to more fundamental obedience, and to more joyous celebration in worship and work;

- b. to a new openness to its own membership, by affirming itself as a community of diversity, becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men of all ages, races and conditions, and by providing for inclusiveness as a visible sign of the new humanity;
- c. to new openness to the possibilities and perils of its institutional forms in order to ensure the faithfulness and usefulness of these forms to God's activity in the world;
- d. to a new openness to God's continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be a more effective instrument of mission in the world (3.0401).

In times of trouble and tension, the cross judges the anxiety, defensiveness, and timidity to which we and the rest of God's creatures are so regularly prone, calling us to repentance. Yet, it also offers us, in the Church and for the world, the assurance of God's goodness, generosity, and faithfulness, calling forth in us trust, openness, and courage, which are the hallmarks of God's Kingdom coming.

Moving from vague generalities about God's way with the world and the proper human response to concrete discernment concerning what God is doing and what we ought to do is the challenge that faces the Presbyterian Church (USA) today. Broad statements about sin and grace, divine sovereignty and human finitude, suffering and redemption, conflict and reconciliation, and judgment and forgiveness are widely accepted and easily embraced. Interpreting what God is doing in the particular circumstances within which we find ourselves and exhorting a particular sort of response is both necessary for Christian faithfulness and unlikely to achieve consensus among Christians. It is at the intersection of our common Christian heritage and the fine-grained details of our daily lives that differences arise and genuine faith, hope, and love are expressed. It is here, in the midst of the real challenges of concrete existence that the church depends on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, it may be that the Spirit is more present in the time of conflict, loss, and suffering that now confronts us

now than in the era of peace, prosperity, and pride that preceded our own. As we encounter Christ's cross in the midst of our daily lives as congregations, presbyteries, and a denomination, we may experience a Pentecost for our own day and age. It is in the midst of our struggles with one another and God that we might together experience a new dispensation of faith, hope, and love.

In the remainder of this essay, I offer a particular vision of what God is doing in the midst of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and a faithful, hopeful, and loving way for us to proceed together that ignores neither the reality of difference nor the inevitability of conflict. Using the cross as a lens for seeing what God is doing, I will interpret 1) the changing place of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in the wider society, 2) the internal conflicts currently plaguing the denomination, and 3) the current challenges facing pastors in congregations. I do not assume that everyone will agree with my assessment of what God is doing in our midst or my recommendations concerning how we respond. I simply hope to start a dialogue within the church that looks beyond our troubles to see "what God [is] trying to make us understand."

### *Dislocation of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*

Loss and decline confront the Presbyterian Church (USA) everywhere it turns. This is most obvious in the dramatic decline in membership since 1965. In less than forty years, the number of Presbyterians has shrunk by 40% (Coalter, 21). The impact of this declension is being felt in budgets throughout the denomination: small, rural churches can no longer afford full-time pastors; presbyteries and the General Assembly are shedding staff and programs in order to live within their dwindling means. The network

of institutions and structures identified with the Presbyterian Church, from seminaries to international missions, from the Board of Pensions to denominational presses and periodicals, feel the pressure. Without significant endowments created in more prosperous times, the situation would be even more dire and painful. Wherever you look, the vitality, significance, and reach of a once proud and influential denomination is on the wane.

While the facts of decline are obvious to everyone, the cause and appropriate response are the source of bitter debate and mutual recrimination. Some argue that theological liberalism and moral relativism have diluted the heritage of the church to a potage too thin to nourish the human soul, driving the spiritually hungry to a meatier and more robust faith. Others argue that mean-spirited, judgmental conflicts over (largely sexual) *adiaphora* make the church seem small and irrelevant to those (mostly young people) who “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Coherence battles with inclusiveness, relevance with tradition. Anxious fury drives all to search for the sinner to stone for the sake of communal survival, the scapegoat to drive from the fold to placate God’s anger.

The truth of the matter is more complicated, however. While there is plenty for the Presbyterian Church to confess, the experience of the denomination cannot simply be reduced to the faithlessness of one party or another. Moreover, while there may be no way for the Presbyterian Church, or any of the mainline churches, to return to their lost dominance, the past may represent a more ambiguous expression of faithfulness and the future hold more promise for new expressions of fidelity than the popular rhetoric seems to imply. Certain demographic shifts within the church itself and the society at large seem to imply that the interpenetration and mutual-reliance of mainline Protestantism and

mainstream American culture have come to an end. But, it also seems that, seen through the lens of the cross, the loss of this comfortable circumstance, and all the suffering and death that accompanies it, may lead to the resurrection of faith, hope, and love in the midst of a very different, and amazingly more diverse, American society.

The Presbyterian Church has undergone a number of important changes that shape their present circumstance. Some due to the character of the Presbyterian Church itself, others due to the context within which it found itself. Presbyterians have always valued education. This is both the result and cause of their overrepresentation among the educated, professional, middleclass. They both helped produce and were drawn into the mobile, highly educated, cosmopolitan national culture created in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This had a number of consequences for Presbyterians.

First, it weakened many of the “ascriptive loyalties” (ethnicity, race, region, and class) that had nurtured and preserved denominational identity in the Presbyterian and other mainline churches (Roof and McKinney, 63-70). Scottish ethnicity, regional culture, local class structures, and family heritage no longer held sway over people’s sense of self or choice of church affiliation. Through no particular virtue of their own, but also no particular vice, these relatively narrow and insular loyalties neither dominate nor buffer the Presbyterian Church to the extent that they once did.

Second, like educated people all around the world, Presbyterians, and other mainline Christians, have fewer children. In fact, recent sociological studies trace the dip in mainline membership over recent decades almost completely to this demographic source. “Fertility rates,” according to a study by Michael Hout and his colleagues, “not culture wars or theological debates, explain most of conservatives’ growth and the

mainline's decline" (Hout, 24) Until recently, members of conservative denominations have simply had more children than the more educated members of the mainline churches.

Combine these two factors and you have a recipe for a denomination to shrink and membership loyalty to weaken. Robert Wuthnow reinforces these points, writing:

The geographic and social mobility, and greater levels of tolerance associated with higher education, increased the likelihood that young Presbyterians would marry outside their faith, move away from parent congregations, and leave the denomination entirely. The quest for higher education forced young people to postpone marriage and child rearing, resulting in some of the numerical decline the denomination has experience (Wuthnow 1990, 34).

These factors have been amplified by the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century. The Presbyterian Church self-consciously embraced policies "specifically aimed at lowering denominational barriers and making it easier for clergy and laity alike to cross these boundaries" (32). For a variety of reasons, some which befell it and others which it self-consciously embraced—including loyalty to the gospel rather than parochial identities and reconciliation within the Christian family rather than denominational self-interest—the Presbyterian Church finds itself in its current, relatively bleak situation.

The Presbyterian Church's predicament cannot be understood properly apart from changes in the wider culture and the relationship of mainline religion to mainstream American society. Many sociologists argue that America has undergone three disestablishments (Coalter, 2-4). The first was the constitutional disestablishment which separated church and state. This did not prevent a Protestant cultural establishment, however. Protestantism and American values went hand in hand during the early years of the American Republic. Robert Wuthnow quotes an article from *The Presbyterian Tribune* in 1946, which argued that "It is Protestant theology, not Roman Catholic, which

has provoked men to demand free government and overthrow tyranny...It is Protestant church polity, not Roman Catholic, which schools men in the actual practices of democracy” (Wuthnow 1990, 32).

This sentiment was produced amidst the struggle to resist the second disestablishment. Waves of European immigration in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century confronted Protestants with Roman Catholic and Jewish citizens whose growing significance challenged their dominance. Despite painful adjustments, American society soon became identified as “a melting-pot” based on a shared “Judeo-Christian ethic.” In 1954, President Eisenhower proclaimed that “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith...and I don’t care what it is.” Diverse religious communities minimized their differences in order together to embrace the “American way of life,” a society and culture they understood as superior to any other in the world. Few noticed, however, that the “American way of life” overlooked those in its midst who were not white, middle-class, Judeo-Christian, and male.

The 1960s saw a “third disestablishment,” brought about by several significant cultural, social, legal, and technological changes. A wave of non-European immigration, the civil rights movement, feminism, Watergate, Vietnam, and disillusionment with *bourgeois* values undermined the claim of American superiority and sense of solidarity, common values, and shared identity (Roof and McKinney, 11-39 and Wuthnow 1988, 153-172). At the same time, the expansion of higher education as well as rapid innovation in communication and transportation technologies produced a more cosmopolitan society integrated more profoundly into nationally and globally extensive relationships of interdependence.

Diversity and tolerance rather than solidarity and common values characterize this new cultural environment. The Judeo-Christian ethic that had bound Americans together no longer has the salience it once did. Personal choice rather than inherited roles and individual ability rather than provincial identities became the defining factors in the lives of well-educated, mobile, Americans, who increasingly turned to technological and procedural mechanisms to accommodate their increasingly diverse identities, interests, and aims. Concerning the changing values of American culture and the role of technology in it, Robert Wuthnow writes, “Once the meaning of freedom has become restricted to the idea of choice, then technology became the obvious means of maintaining and expanding our freedom. The images of freedom portrayed on television and reported in newspapers invariably imply that freedom is ours because we have been given new options by technology” (Wuthnow 1988, 292).

For good and ill, America is a very different place than it was in the middle of the twentieth century. Diversity has been recognized and embraced in a way it had not been in the past. Tolerance and inclusion are more highly valued than before, but solidarity and mutual responsibility are less. Narrow, parochial identities have less sway than they once did, but they are being replaced by an even narrower commitment to personal choice, self-interest, and individual fulfillment. Local communities are being drawn into national and international webs of interdependence, but bounded belonging is fading into cosmopolitan loneliness. In much of America today, faith and hope are placed in technological innovation, but love is reserved for ourselves and those in our “lifestyle enclave”—a far more restricted and homogeneous group of like-minded people than any “parochial community” of the past (Bellah, 71-75).



I hope this review of the changes that have taken place within the Presbyterian Church and American society throw some light on the moral and religious ambiguity of the past and also the present. Previous times were an odd mixture of faithfulness and faithlessness, loyalty to God and loyalty to the idols of ethnicity, class, race, gender, and nationality. We bear the cross in the Presbyterian Church today, partly due to our efforts to remain faithful to God above all and partly due to painful changes being forced upon us by external circumstances. Either way, through the suffering and loss being experienced by the Presbyterian Church within the current context of American society, God is graciously destroying many of the idols that previously tempted us. We may pine for the days of old, the particular mix of faithfulness and wickedness it embodied, but there is no return. Today, they are the “ruins of old courage, and the lore of old gallantry” as well as the wreckage of old idols and the tragic memory of old impieties (Robinson, 246).

Returning to Calvin, we may be grateful for the medicinal effects of these painful changes. Throughout scripture and human experience it appears that times of ease corrupt the faithful and adversity draws them back to God.

In peaceful times, then, they preened themselves on their great constancy and patience, only to learn when humbled by adversity that all this was hypocrisy. Believers, warned, I say, by such proofs of their diseases, advanced toward humility and so, sloughing off perverse confidence in the flesh, betake themselves to God’s grace. Now when they have betaken themselves there they experience the presence of divine power in which they have protection enough and to spare (III.viii.2).

Much of the current pining for the past betrays a longing for a “perverse confidence in the flesh,” which God is graciously but painfully excising from our diseased hearts. Through the cross God has given us, we may experience a new birth of faith, turning from all the

idols and pretensions that previously drew us toward death to the living God who is the source of life eternal.

In her essay, “Running on Empty: The Problem of the Mainline,” Nancy Ammerman points out that “the religious groups that spend the least organizational energy on the core tasks of worship and religious education are the mainline Protestant ones” (8). Despite the endless, vitriolic theological battles, Presbyterians, and other mainline Protestants, refuse to make worship a central aspect of their life and remain largely biblically and theologically illiterate. Ammerman’s “hunch is that this pattern reflects the historic relationship of mainline Protestants to American culture” (8). We have felt comfortable in a culture that seemed to belong to us and reinforce our values, convictions, and way of life. Attention to our core purposes as the Christian church deteriorated: right worship of God, right administration of the sacraments, and orderly Christian discipline.

As Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon have written, “All sorts of Christians are waking up and realizing it is no longer our nation, if it ever was.” This painful dislocation is a gift of grace drawing us back to the true God in Christ and our true selves as followers of Jesus. By removing these cultural props and false loyalties, God has freed us from their tyranny, preparing us for true faith in, hope for, and love of God in communion with one another and all the saints. As congregations, presbyteries, and a denomination, God is calling us to repent of old patterns of life, thought, and action, so that we may embrace a new theocentric life in the cross of Jesus Christ. According to Nancy Ammerman, this is already beginning to happen.

We found plenty of mainline churches where members gather in creative ways to tell each other the stories of their lives and to learn the stories of their faith...But

this shouldn't be surprising. At least since Pentacost, spending time together in worship, eating together, taking care of each other and sharing both possessions and the Good News with the community have been inextricable and mutually nourishing parts of the life of the church (9).

With Ammerman, I hold out hope for a new Pentacost for the Presbyterian Church and all mainline Protestants. Renewed focus on worship, religious education, and communal discernment may usher in a new era, in which our hearts, souls, strengths, and minds offer themselves exclusively to God rather than America, freedom in Christ rather than freedom of choice, abundant life rather than material abundance.

Yet our own day is not without serious trials and temptations. An idolatrous focus on the internal life of the church may easily and surreptitiously take the place of faith in the true God, the maker of heaven and earth. We must remember that we do not worship the God of Christians, but that we are Christians who worship the God of the whole universe. In a society that encourages tolerance of one another, but emphasizes self-fulfillment over solidarity, there is a temptation to become self-absorbed rather than Christ-centered. God's way with the world includes not only beautiful diversity and a rich differentiation, but also mutual interdependence and self-giving service.

A church that finds that America no longer belongs to it may be tempted to isolate itself from the wider world and culture. In an increasingly diverse and fragmented society, it is important for the Presbyterian Church to bear witness not only to its love of God, but also its love for its neighbors. God's good creation is an order of "separating-and-binding," that produces a rich interdependence of particular gifts and mutual service. Rather than dominating the American environment in a way that has excluded many, the Church now has an opportunity to participate more faithfully in God's wonderfully diverse and fragile creation. Both within its body, and in its service to the world, the

Presbyterian Church can make room for all the diverse voices, gifts, and good creatures it encounters, praising God for them, thankfully receiving gifts from them, and selflessly serving them, all in the name of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ. Such a rebirth of faith, hope, and love, within the Presbyterian Church would certainly be costly, likely further undermining its power, prestige, and prosperity. But the cross is not just the sign of death and destruction, it is also God's gracious invitation to new life.

### *Agony Within the Presbyterian Church (USA)*

In addition to its shrinking size and diluted influence, the Presbyterian Church is also plagued by internal tensions. Not only does it seem on the verge of imploding, because of the dearth of people and resources, it also appears ready to explode as its remaining vitality is directed toward deep conflicts over differences in scriptural interpretation, divisive moral issues, and significant theological disagreements. In this, it is not different from other mainline denominations. Once again, it is caught up in significant changes in the nature of denominations and their place in American society. This painful agony is not due, in the end, to a battle between Christian faithfulness and apostasy, as many on both sides of the current debates imagine and proclaim, but to tensions within American culture due to some of the fundamental changes mentioned in the last section. A denominational schism over the current disagreements would be tragic because it would show that our loyalty to the conflicting American ideologies of liberal and conservative, or cosmopolitan and traditional worldviews, are deeper than our shared faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Seen through the lens of the cross, awareness of our own suffering and the suffering we cause others may draw us toward repentance of our

ideological idolatries, a return to faith in the God we all know through Christ, and reconciliation with our enemies—even our enemies within the church.

As noted in the previous section, fundamental changes in American culture took place beginning in the 1960s. Dominant among these changes were increases in higher education and the further integration of a national (and now international) economic and social order. These changes undermined the “ascriptive loyalties” that once helped make denominations externally distinct and internally homogenous. Increasing social and geographical mobility and the expansion of higher education meant that the various denominations were starting to share similar demographic profiles.

While the memberships of the various religious bodies have by no means become indistinguishable from one another socially and culturally, considerable convergence has taken place. No longer are the various bodies as isolated from one another geographically as they once were. Some convergence has taken place on measures of social status. Educational levels, in particular, are now more similar across the various denominations and faiths than they were several decades ago. And the various groups do not differ substantially from one another on attitudes toward a number of salient social issues. To the extent that social and cultural differences produce barriers that are difficult to transcend or lines of demarcation that result in conflict, the deduction of these differences suggest that denominational divisions may be declining in social significance (Wuthnow 1988, 87).

These changes have not brought an end to significant social divisions, however. Today, rather than standing at the border of denominational differences, these divisions are embedded deeply in the heart of the denominations themselves.

Religious energy and activity has taken new shape within and across denomination lines with the growth of special purpose groups since the 1960's. The prominence of these groups in current debates within the Presbyterian Church (USA) is evidence of their growing influence. There are many positive aspects to the emergence of these groups. They are the current locus of vital activity and commitment in American

religious life. They are evidence of the sort of flexible, pragmatic, activism that has always characterized American religious life. In the American context, religious movements have been capable of vitality and revitalization to the extent that they maintain a close relationship with the interests, aims, and experiences of people. Special interest groups have certain liabilities as well. They produce, as Robert Wuthnow points out, a “heightened potential for religious communities to become fractionated along lines of larger cleavages in the society...In combining people who share only a rather focused objective, they run the danger of appealing to quite homogenous groups” (130). To an extent even greater than denominations in the past, then, these special interest groups tend to reflect “divisions in the wider society” (130).

The most obvious cleavage they seem to represent is between “liberals” and “conservatives.” The struggles between these two groups, identified with particular special interest groups, threaten to drive the Presbyterian Church (USA) into schism. The level of distrust and animosity between the two groups is palpable in almost every context within the church. Yet, these are social divisions that do not belong exclusively to religious bodies, but reflect wider fissures in American society at large.

The tension between “liberals” and “conservatives” began, like most of the changes we are examining, in the 1960s. Once again, the expansion of higher education is larger responsible.

So powerful, in fact, were the effects of higher education on a wide range of values and beliefs that speculation began to emerge in the 1970s as to whether a “new class” had come into existence. The rapidly expanding segment of American society who had college educations, said the proponents of this idea, were beginning to have distinct interests and a distinct ideology that set them off from the rest of the population. Egalitarian values with respect to civil liberties and the rights of minority groups, liberal attitudes toward government welfare spending, permissive views on sex and morality, and a generalized interest in

knowledge and education were said to be the hallmarks of the “new class ideology.” These orientations were not only thought to be markedly stronger among college-educated and professional segments of the population, but were also thought to serve well the particular class interests of this segment (Wuthnow 1988, 157).

The church, like most other social institutions in America, began to reflect the divergent and conflicting interests and worldviews of generally more highly educated liberals and less educated conservatives, or, as I called them in the previous section, cosmopolitans and locals.

The growing influence of this new class in American society at large and the mainline denominations in particular, eventually fomented a reaction on the right. As American society shifted and changed, “the old separatist variant of American fundamentalism [came] under serious attack by a new generation of conservative leaders who saw greater gains to be had from disciplined participation in society than from withdrawal” (173). This was in part because of the emergence of new leaders and new organizations on the right, but it was also because of the changing social location of religious conservatives. The growth and power of this new conservative movement was due in part to the same demographic shifts that produced the liberal movement. In addition to the higher birth rates among religious conservatives, they were also becoming better educated, more prosperous, and more urban (and suburban). No longer a fringe group, conservatives have emerged as an increasingly large and powerful segment of mainstream American culture.

In the 1950s there was a broad consensus at the heart of American culture that drew on the Judeo-Christian ethic. In a time when America defined itself over against “godless” communism, President Eisenhower began his inaugural with prayer, initiated

the National Prayer Breakfast, and oversaw the addition of “Under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance. In the wake of the significant social changes mentioned above, this consensus broke down. A society that was increasingly diverse, well-educated, mobile, and prosperous produced significant shifts to the left and the right. Cosmopolitans emphasized tolerance, equality, and inclusiveness. In the name of the gospel and the American way, they fought for racial justice, gender equality, and respect for religious and cultural diversity. At the same time, however, cosmopolitans presided over a subtle shift in American values towards an increasing emphasis on the value of personal choice. As the influence of conservative Christians grew, they reacted negatively to this emphasis on personal choice, and the self-indulgence and anomie it seemed to promote. They responded by emphasizing a more traditional way of life, characterized by communal values, mutual responsibility, local (rather than individual) autonomy, and objective moral absolutes.

These deeply divided groups came into conflict with one another over issues of abortion, school prayer, government spending, and changing sexual and gender norms. Amidst the growing power of special interest groups and the changing nature of denominations, cosmopolitans and traditionalists came to deeply distrust one another.

According to national data collected in 1984,

conservatives thought liberals were not very religious or dedicated to the Christian faith, took an “anything goes” attitude toward religious and moral issues, tended to be too outspoken, and yet accepted uncritically everything their denomination told them; liberals, in turn, described conservatives as closed-minded, inflexible, intolerant, and egoistical” (Wuthnow 1988, 215).



And though over twenty years have passed, this animosity and distrust seems as powerful as ever, with the ordination of practicing homosexuals as the fissure at which the tension is currently experienced.

The depth of the tensions within the Presbyterian Church (USA) raises the question of whether schism is inevitable and ought to be welcome. Each side, after all, experiences the other as preventing it from faithfully living out the gospel. Since the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly passed the recommendations of the *Peace, Unity, and Purity Report* in the summer of 2006, the issue of schism has taken on new urgency. What does faithfulness to the gospel require of Christians so deeply divided? How ought we to understand the turmoil we currently face? What is God calling us to do and be as a denomination?

While it would be easy for both sides to believe that God is calling them to separate in the name of Christian faithfulness, I believe this would be a prideful betrayal of the gospel of reconciliation, allowing ideological loyalties to supersede loyalty to God in Christ. Viewing the current antagonism through the lens of the cross, Christians on both sides of the current struggle, might see their agony as an opportunity for repentance and new life. As a result, the church might bear witness to a deeply divided world of the reconciliation that has been made possible through the painful judgment and grace of God.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the conviction that sin is the source of antagonism. Human beings are at odds with God and therefore at odds with one another. They gather together around values, interests, and aims to which they offer divine authority, bringing them into conflict with other groups doing the same thing. Each side

claims divine sanction and condemns the other as the enemy of the true God. Motivated by the desire to serve God, crucifixions ensue. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was crucified in the name of God and for the sake of righteousness, after all. And so, today, we might see the agonies the Presbyterian Church (USA) is suffering, which are simply part and parcel of the divisions in American society at large, as the cross we carry as the followers of Jesus Christ. The question is whether we have the faith to suffer this cross for the sake of new life and new creation, or whether we will flee from it, like the disciples, who saw in the cross nothing but the destruction of their hopes and dreams.

Seen through the lens of the cross, we might see our own suffering and the suffering of others in which we are implicated as an opportunity to repent. For those on the Peace, Unity, and Purity Taskforce, who spent five years in bible study, worship, prayer, and discernment with one another, certainly experienced this call to repentance through coming face to face with the suffering of others.

- Those of us associated with the Anglo traditions that have dominated the Presbyterian Church (USA) came to understand how much alienation and pain we have caused by past oppressions of other racial and ethnic groups and by currently maintaining barriers to the full inclusion of those groups' members, cultures, and gifts.
- Those of us who identify our views as liberal came to understand how alienating it is for conservatives and evangelicals when their passionate commitment to holy living and upright conduct are labeled rigid and judgmental.
- Those of us who identify our views as conservative came to understand how alienating it is for liberals when their passionate commitment to justice and compassion are labeled unbiblical.
- Those of us who identify our views as moderate came to understand how alienating it is when those with passionate concern on either end of the theological spectrum are labeled extreme and divisive.
- Many of us came to understand how alienating it is for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons to be regularly identified as a major threat to the peace, unity, and purity of the church.
- Many of us also came to understand how alienating it is for those who support a ban on the ordination of non-celibate persons to be accused of prejudice, and

how alienating it is for those who oppose such a ban to be accused of moral laxity.

- All of us came to see that the Presbyterian church (USA), in its current factionalized state that we have all created together by mutual stereotyping and misuse of power, fails to offer a suffering world a sign of the peace, unity, and purity that is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ (*Final Report of the Taskforce on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church to the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly*, 11-12).

Not only did they experience a call to repentance through this process of engagement with one another, they also learned to see the other, their opponents, as a gift for which they were grateful. "Most surprisingly, our faith was enriched and strengthened by the contributions of those whose views on contested issues we do not share... Our experience of Christian faith and life has been extended and expanded. Our trust in other Presbyterians and our respect for differing perspectives has deepened. Most of all, our joy in believing has been greatly increased by the work of the Holy Spirit" (13).

Directly confronted by the cross, in their own experience and the experiences of others, these enemies came to see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Through the mortification of the flesh, they no longer relied on themselves, their own wisdom, or their own strength. They came to see that they could not produce peace, unity, or purity, by dint of their own efforts. Moreover, they realized that their efforts were threatening peace, unity, and purity. Losing faith in themselves, they turned to God who offers the gifts of peace, unity, and purity through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so, members of the Taskforce on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church open their report with a common confession of faith in God, whose gracious, self-giving, empowering spirit is the only source of shared hope and common life. "We must remember," they write, "that the truth of the gospel rests on the power of God, not on the

power of the church” (3). God’s will, power, and wisdom, not our own is the source of peace, unity, and purity. This humble realization, recognized in the mortification of the cross, engenders the humility to “take time to seek the truth together. In so doing, we make room for the living God to lead us and guide us by the Spirit. This can occur every time we meet for worship, study, and service” (7).

New life may come, but it will be God’s doing, not our own. A new Pentecost may bring the cacophony of disparate opinions and perspectives about God’s will into a single, unified refrain of praise. But, if it is to happen, it will be a gift of the Holy Spirit not an achievement of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Meanwhile, we in the church can only wait upon God, praying together, worshipping together, and seeking God’s will together. Our disagreements will not disappear, nor our struggles abate. But we may move forward in faith, hope, and love, confident that, if the cross truly is the revelation of God’s way with the world, the Spirit may be more deeply present in our current agonies than in all the years of peace that preceded these struggles or the peace that might follow from schism.

Staying together may, indeed probably will, prolong our agony and the agony of those with whom we disagree. Even worse, it may prolong the agony of those caught in the middle of our struggles. The life and ministry of some in the church will be put on hold while the church waits on God. Important ministries and missions in the church and for the world will be deprived while our time, energy, and wisdom continues to be caught up in these internecine struggles. There is no easy resolution to the deep conflicts that divide us. As such, the cross may seem like foolishness to those who are wise. It may seem too much to bear among those counting the cost. Yet, for those willing to see all of

life, even the life of the church, through the lens of Christ's cross, it may be a sign of God's costly graciousness in Jesus Christ, reconciling all things to God's self.

Moreover, it may prove to be an important witness to the gospel of reconciliation in a deeply divided society. In a cosmopolitan society of distrustful strangers each anxiously pursuing their personal preferences and self-interest, the Presbyterian Church (USA) may bear witness to self-sacrificial love for the enemy that is only possible in God. In an age when a new, anxious tribalism seems the only remedy for the anomie of the contemporary world, the Presbyterian Church (USA) may proclaim another, more generous and inclusive way toward a common life in God's emerging kingdom. The agonies felt within the church are not uniquely Christian struggles. They are part and parcel of the American struggle with the changes that have befallen it. Laying the brokenness of the human condition, in its 21<sup>st</sup> century, American form, before God, may be the Christian witness to which we are called today. Bearing this cross on behalf of our whole society, may point to and participate in God's gracious purposes in and for the whole world.

### ***The Challenges of Ministry: A Profession in Crisis?***

As part of the hand-ringing about the state of the Presbyterian Church (USA), one often hears complaints about the ministry as a profession in crisis. Without a doubt, the suffering of the denomination is experienced by its pastors as well. Various studies among clergy offer some of the symptoms associated with this underlying dis-ease:

an often desperate sense of loneliness, a high drop out rate in the first five years of ministry, personal financial struggles because of problematic changes in the economics of ministry, splits within congregations as well as denominations, the loss of a sense of purpose that leads to thinking of pastoral ministry as little more

than a low-paying job, and a reluctance to encourage others to consider pastoral leadership as a vocation. The quality of those entering the ministry seems to have declined relative to other vocations. Ordained ministry's status as a respected and trustworthy vocation has also declined in the broader culture (Jones, 24-5).

Once considered an equal among the three traditional professions, ministry no longer lays claim to the same financial rewards or social recognition as law and medicine. Yet it continues to demand a similar level of education and work-load.

If this weren't enough to make ministry a relatively unattractive profession, add the facts that success is difficult to measure and conflict is impossible to avoid.

*Resurrecting Excellence* offers a humorous but disheartening job description for ordained ministry:

Wanted: Person to fill position that involves important but undervalued work; exact job description unclear. Long hours; must work weekends and holidays. Low pay. Master's degree required; doctorate preferred. Must be accomplished at multitasking, including running an organization without clear authority to do so. The successful candidate will be skilled as a public speaker, manager, politician, and therapist, and will devote significant time each week to pastoral visits. The position reports to multiple bosses (26).

Understood as a profession or a career, ministry is indeed in crisis. Few ambitious, talented, promising young people interested in climbing the ladder of social success are drawn to ordained ministry; who can blame them. Ministry seems a recipe for suffering, conflict, humiliation, and loss.

As noted already, this was not always the case. Parents once encouraged their children to pursue ministry as a way to advance the family's fortunes. They thought of it as a relatively peaceful and prestigious way of life. This was more or less true up through the 1960s, when the comfortable relationship between the Christian faith and the American-way-of-life began to deteriorate. Growing pluralism and cultural conflict made the waters of congregation and community more difficult to navigate. Increasing

educational standards undermined the social distinctions between clergy and laity. Urbanization left many churches out in the demographic cold, unable to offer clergy decent pay or attractive locations. The declining significance of ascriptive loyalties and an increasing emphasis on personal choice created a far less stable, more competitive religious environment, in which members demand to have their needs met or threaten to go elsewhere. These changes have turned ministry into anything but a peaceful and prestigious way of life.

Not only is it no longer a profession in which one can assume a relative degree of social respect and recognition, the intrinsic purposes of ministry are vastly more difficult to achieve in an increasingly complex environment that is no longer as supportive of the church and its mission as it once was. The authors of *Resurrecting Excellence* write:

These structural and systematic conditions for pastoral leadership have often left clergy confused about their work and disconnected from their vocation. Indeed, in a national clergy survey in 2001 conducted by Pulpit and Pew, over half of the clergy across the denominations reported that among their greatest problems is their “difficulty reaching people with the gospel today (25).

The meaning of the gospel for our age is not nearly as clear and far more contested than in previous generations in the United States. Moreover, because of the cultural clout of individual choice and personal fulfillment, proclamation of the gospel is fighting a dangerous headwind that always threatens to throw it desperately off-course, no matter how skilled the pilot.

In this inhospitable environment, seminary administrators, denominational officials, concerned lay-people, and frustrated ministers gather to develop ways to right this floundering profession before it goes under completely. A variety of measure, policies, and proposals are recommended, from lengthening seminary education to

creating clergy support groups, from increasing salary levels to new recruiting strategies. All of these ideas are wise and will likely help, but apart from a new conception of ordained ministry and the nature of the church genuine renewal is unlikely. A spiritual awakening, not a set of strategic and institutional innovations, is the only hope for the church and its ministry. New life cannot be brought about through the wisdom and hard-work of pastors or laity, church officials or seminary professors. It is finally a gift of the living God, whose Holy Spirit “blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8). Learning to see ministry, not as a skilled profession, but as a cross-centered calling, might give us all, clergy and laity together, the eyes to see that God’s Spirit is already in our midst, bringing life out of death, hope out of suffering, and reconciliation out of conflict.

A profession connotes power and prestige attained through the achievement of special knowledge which sets one apart as a member of a special class of people. Benevolently, the professional uses his or her particular, highly-refined knowledge to serve human beings in a particular way. Doctors, for example, use their technical knowledge to serve the cause of health and help those who are ill. They interact with people on a regular basis, but in a particular location (the doctor’s office), for a particular purpose (avoiding and overcoming disease), and in a particular way (as authorities set apart by special knowledge and skill). The parallels with ministry are obvious: a pastor’s particular location is the church; her particular purpose is spiritual well-being; the particular knowledge that sets him apart is theological.

The difference, however, becomes apparent, if we reflect on the norm of “professional distance.” Professionals are instructed to keep their distance, to remain



objective, not to get too personally involved. Doctors cannot help you if they become as sick as you are. Lawyers cannot assist you if they get on the wrong side of the law with you. For professionals, it is knowledge that gives them the power to help others, but also keeps them at an objective distance from and in hierarchical relationship to their clients. It would be unprofessional to get too deeply involved or invested in the lives or conditions of those whom they serve. They need to remain separate and above their clients.

Once this may have worked as a vision of ministry and it probably still has important lessons to teach ministers. Perhaps, in the 1950s, when power and prestige still attended the office of ministry, within the congregation as well as the wider community, pastors could expect people to defer to their authority and special knowledge. Certainly today, pastors must recognize the importance of boundaries for their own, as well as the congregations, health and well-being. But, given the important changes that have taken place, ministry as a profession, with its connotation of prestige, authority, and distance, no longer serves the church or its pastors.

Pastors are not physicians to a broken body. Rather, they stand in the midst of and participate in the suffering of those in desperate need of a physician. Pastors are intimately acquainted with and personally involved in the current dis-ease of the church. They are caught up in the divisions, sidelined by the dislocations, and anxious about the health of the church. Social prestige, communal authority, and professional distance are no longer the hallmark nor should they serve any more as the ideal of ministry. Given the situation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as well as other churches, ministry is better

conceived as a cross-centered calling, one that does not distinguish them from, but binds them together with the rest of the Christian community.

Parents, teacher, career counselors, and the culture at large encourage us to choose a profession. Christian calling, on the other hand, is very different. It is something we receive. Far from the cultural expectations of a self-initiated life plan, vocation befalls us. Far from a personally chosen direction, a calling lays claim to us and changes our direction. It comes to us as mortification and vivification, the death of an old self and the birth of a new life. It is losing an old, tattered faith, but receiving a new and better faith; despairing of an old, threadbare hope, but inheriting an unforeseen and undreamed of hope; and breaking with an old, faded love, but being reunited with a true and generous love. The Presbyterian Church (USA) and its congregations stand at the foot of the cross, on the threshold of this calling; and so do Presbyterian ministers. But this is nothing new. This is where every Christian, every congregation, the whole cosmos, and every pastor stands since creation and until the eschaton.

More training and better techniques, more intelligence and greater charisma, will not protect pastors, or congregations, or denominations, from suffering, loss, and agony. For they are all stand at the foot of the cross together. It is God's costly, saving way with the world, including pastors. Christine Pohl prepared a paper for a Colloquium on Excellence in Ministry at Duke Divinity School in 2001. *Resurrecting Excellence* quotes it at length:

Within faithful Christian communities...understandings of excellence and practices of excellent ministry will often be complex and somewhat ambiguous given at least the following factors. First, at the center of our proclamation and our hope is a crucified Savior...Second, the Kingdom of God privileges "the poor, crippled, lame, and blind," and faithful followers of Christ have a distinctive call to welcome "the least" to our tables and into our congregations...Third, while

pursuing holiness (or excellence) Christians recognize the persistent reality of human sinfulness. We all depend on God's forgiveness and healing as our struggles with sin and its consequences are part of daily congregational life. And finally, our own motives and efforts in ministry are often a strange mixture of sin and grace, skill and frailty (4-5).

The pastor is anything but the docetic savior (or well-trained professional), immune from suffering, whose knowledge empowers his followers to escape mortality and pain too.

Christians are poor, blind, and lame sinners who hear the call of Christ to patiently carry their crosses, knowing that inexplicably, miraculously, wonderfully, this is not the end of faith, but its beginning, not the death of hope, but its rebirth, not the defeat of love, but its victory. And ministers are those who are called to stand in their midst, as one of them.

As part of the body of Christ, hearing God's gracious but costly call, ministers are no different than other Christians. But they do have a special role. They serve the Christian community as it attends to God's presence, interprets God's will, and conforms itself to God's way. For those who have eyes to see, God is present everywhere, all the time. It is difficult to pay attention, in such a frantic, diffuse, and distracted culture, however. We skim along the surface of things, moving a mile a minute, merely catching glimpses of life and the world as they fly past us in a disorienting fury. Pastors serve the Christian community by helping it pay attention to the God who is in, under, and above the turmoil of their daily lives. Well-organized worship provides space to attend to God and neighbor. A well preached sermon points to God's presence in the midst of our lives and the world. Small group ministries create opportunities for Christians to gather and attend to the presence of God in their lives, relationships, and responsibilities.

The mere attendance of a pastor at those fundamental moments of joy and sorrow, life and death, joining and separating, focus Christians' attention on God's presence in

these times and places. Playing basketball with a minister or running into him or her at the grocery store awakens, if only for a moment, an awareness of God's presence in even these mundane moments of life. The burden of always being a reminder of God is certainly one of the crosses clergy bear. Their presence can make people uncomfortable as well as comforted, judged as well as forgiven. And there is simply no way for a clergy person to set this burden aside or to live up to its demands. (I know this is true. I am an ordained minister who plays pick-up basketball.) Pastors are those who provide and embody attention to God in the midst of life. Their work is, in some ways, nothing more than to pay attention, which is both a heavier burden and a more wonderful gift than one can imagine.

But attending to God's presence in the midst of everything also requires the difficult work of interpreting what God is doing and demanding. The church cannot be itself apart from its fallible and dangerous efforts to discern God's will. The pastor, in particular, stands on the threshold of the holy-of-holies, daring to tread on holy ground, for the sake of the Christian community. With fear and trembling, confidence and doubt, agony and joy, ministers seek a word from God for this time and this place, whether they are preaching a sermon, preparing a bible study lesson, leading a session meeting, or providing pastoral care. This too is a heavy burden and a wonderful gift. It cannot be avoided but is fraught with peril. After all, to say and believe that a word is from God, even while standing at the pulpit, is not the same as actually saying a Word from God. Pastors stand at the foot of the cross and listen for the call and speak the word they hear, but the cross is both judgment and promise to them, the Christian community, and the whole world. They can only pray for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, speak with a

courage born of faith in God's graciousness, and humbly welcome God's righteous and rehabilitative judgment. And, as every pastor knows, judgment comes.

The difficult and dangerous work of discerning God's way and interpreting God's will does not belong to the pastor alone. It is the responsibility of the whole community of faith. Congregations participate in this fundamental activity in formal and informal ways—through session meetings, bible studies, surveys, letters to the pastor, and a variety of other more and less pleasant means. Presbyteries and the denomination as a whole also participate in this shared responsibility of discernment, also in a variety of comforting and discomfiting ways. In a time of genuine division and disagreement, when the Christian community is at odds about what God is doing and what God requires, pastors, congregations, presbyteries, and the denomination as a whole may find itself called to the foot of the cross, experiencing its painful judgment upon all their plans, assertions, dreams and desires.

There, at the foot of the cross, they may, together, repent of their sinful self-reliance and self-interest, their idolatrous ideologies and narrow loyalties. They may humbly listen to one another, and together listen for the voice of God. They may find a new life together, a more truthful vision of what God is doing, and a more faithful way to respond; they may, in other words, receive the gift of new life. It will not come without agony, suffering, and loss, however. It will not come without the death of things we cherish or the loss of goods we desire. It will not come without humiliation and dislocation, for it is God's way to lift up the humble and knock down the proud, to welcome the sinner and send away the righteous, to include the alien and exclude the familiar.

Ministers cannot avoid this cross. In fact, if they are fulfilling their calling, they will lead the way towards the cross, and suffer it along with the rest of the church. Through an emphasis on Christian education, they will prepare the church community for its work of discernment and welcome the (even acrimonious) dialogue that it provokes. Through preaching and worship leadership, they will courageously and humbly initiate the discernment, even when it is dangerous and painful.

In the patient, generous, humble, yet courageous way in which pastors bear the cross, they may inspire a congregation to discern a cross-centered calling and become a cross-centered community. Through a generous, humble, yet courageous congregation, a pastor may be drawn into a new cross-centered life, vision, and practice. Together, pastor and congregation, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, may increasingly conform themselves, in faith, hope, and love to God and God's way with the world in Jesus Christ.

Now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...and might reconcile both groups to God in one body, through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it (Ephesians 2: 13-16).

This does not mean that difference will be erased or eliminated. Just as Jews remained Jews, and gentiles remained gentiles within the early church, so the new humanity today will include liberals and conservatives, African-Americans and Caucasians, the well-educated and the illiterate, citizens and illegal aliens, rich and poor, men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, life-long church members and newcomers. This does not mean that painful conflict will soon disappear. Sin and death have not yet been completely defeated, even in the Church. The burden of the cross falls to all those who would follow the way of Christ toward the reconciliation of all things, including pastors.

Where will these pastors come from and who select and train them for their cross-centered calling? In many ways, the answer is no different from before: the church will select leaders from among itself, who have the gifts for this particular cross-centered calling in service to God, Church, and world. They will be trained in much the same way as before: the Church will inculcate them in the dispositions, knowledge, and practices requisite for this particular cross-centered calling in service to God, Church, and world. But in some ways, this new age requires very different modes of recruitment and preparation. No longer can the church draw gifted people into the ministry by promising them social status and influence. No longer can the church depend upon widely shared cultural assumptions about the proper interpretation of scripture and the true meaning of the gospel. The intrinsic attractiveness of the cross of Christ and the Christian life will have to suffice as a recruitment tool. Deep and abiding attention to the confusing Word of God, the contested traditions and practices of the Church, and the ambiguous movement of the Spirit in our own time, will need to serve as the basis for training ministers and preparing them to lead confused and conflicted congregations. In some ways, it looks like a fairly bleak prospect. Without a doubt it is our cross to be born in this particular place and time. Yet, despite and because of the suffering it entails, the cross points towards and empowers new life. It may be that God is more present, and the promise of new life more immediate, in this crisis for ministry than in previous times of ease and assurance.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is in crisis. The way forward may not be to avoid or overcome the agonies, loss, and suffering that confront us, however. Seen through the

lens of the cross, God may be calling us deeper into the painful and costly realities that confront us today. There we may find not only judgment, but grace, not only death, but new life, not only loss but also life abundant, for there we may find God. The cross reveals God's way with the world, including and especially the church. For Christians it is not only an unavoidable symptom of following the way of Christ, it is a gracious medicine that confronts the poisonous spirit of our own sinfulness and directs us back toward God. If the church is the body of Christ, it should welcome this opportunity to bear the cross, mortifying its own flesh and bearing witness to the new life in Christ.

Perhaps the Presbyterian Church (USA) will not follow the path recommended here. Perhaps it will, but this vision is not an accurate assessment of what God is doing or how we ought to respond. Both could be true, both are likely to be partly true. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is no more likely to know God perfectly or follow God flawlessly than any of God's good but fallen creatures in the past. Whatever path the Presbyterian Church (USA) follows, it will not escape its own mortality. The decisions we make as a church today may serve to lengthen or shorten the life of the Presbyterian Church (USA). They may prove a witness to God's reconciling purposes for the whole creation or they may not. Either way, we need not worry, for our faith is not in the Presbyterian Church (USA), but in God; our hope is not in (or for) the Presbyterian Church (USA) but in (and for) God; our love is not simply for the Presbyterian Church (USA)—though it certainly is for that—but for the universal, eternal God of grace whom we have come to know through this finite and fallen creature of God. "I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last, wild gesture of love—I too will smolder away the time until the great and general incandescence" (Robinson, 247).



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