

“Can Presbyterians Be Enthusiastic?”

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Text: Ephesians 3: 14 - 21

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The 19th century American humourist, Mark Twain (who was raised Presbyterian) once wrote, “You never heard of a Presbyterian going crazy on religion. We go too slow for that. You never see us ranting and shouting and tearing up the ground, Notice us, and you will see how we do. We subside into solemnity and enter the church; we sit silent and grave while the minister is preaching. And we while away the sermon by counting the bonnets on ladies’ heads.” Mark Twain nailed this description of us, historically. We have been called “the sour and the dour” and “the frozen chosen.” In the 19th century there was a split among Canadian Presbyterians. Some congregations embraced the spirit of revivalism with its tent meetings, evangelistic fervour, joy-filled worship. They called themselves “New Light Presbyterians.” Most Presbyterians, though, remained sceptical about what they called “enthusiasm in religion.” They frowned upon raucous revival hymns (like “Blessed Assurance” and “Amazing Grace” – “how unseemly!”). “New Light Presbyterians” labelled the staid, unchanged Presbyterians “Old Light”, a derisive term that many Presbyterians bore with pride. “No enthusiasm for us!” they said. Our seriousness and solemnity arose from our cornerstone belief in the sovereignty of God and the perceived implication for us, which is perhaps best summarized by the title of one of the most famous Presbyterian sermons of all time (by the theologian Jonathan Edwards, Principal of Princeton University): “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”. If that is what you believed about yourself how could you not be serious and sour?

But this point of view missed one central, crucial theme of the Gospel: Christ’s coming and victory in the cross are to foster joy! And so it had been for hundred’s of years. Starting with the Old Testament Prophets (like Isaiah in the 8th century BC) we see this growing anticipation / expectation that God would send a Messiah (saviour) who would change everything for the people of God. The Messiah would restore all of God’s creation, make all things new, and usher in “the end of days”. This belief fostered joy. Even in their darkest days—in the depths of the Jewish Exile in Babylon—this hope that the Messiah—this Saviour—would come to them brought joy! This central, crucial Jewish theme is thus found naturally in the Advent stories anticipating the birth of this long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Joy fills Zechariah’s prophecy about the expected child. The baby in Elizabeth’s womb “lept for joy” upon Mary’s arrival to visit her cousin. Mary responds to the angelic announcement regarding the birth saying “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.” For hundreds and hundreds of years the idea that the Messiah was coming fostered joy. And now that the Messiah has come, and changed everything for us, we too should have joy! But the Messiah has not just come into the world for the sake of the world, the Messiah comes into us, personally. Because of Christ, God comes into our life, renews our life. The Holy Spirit—promised by Christ and sent by God—abides in us, enabling faith. We are to have enthusiasm because we have been enthused. We are enthused. “Enthused” comes from the Greek

“en theos” that simply means “God inside”. When we have Christ in our heart it literally means we are enthused.

And so we should be enthusiastic...but that can seem hard for Presbyterians. It’s not hard for some other Christians. My step-mother loved to tell the story of how she once, during her youth in the 1930’s, attended a Pentecostal worship service in a congregation in Windsor Ontario, composed of descendants of African American slaves. Worship there was a raucous affair! In telling the tale, she would say: at one point this man shouted out at the top of his lungs “If Jesus were to come through the roof to be with us right now I’d pay for the shingles!” We might chuckle at that, but at the heart of the story is a joy rooted in an enthusiasm that is enviable.

Scripture helps us understand how God’s coming to us fosters joy, and the pattern is like this. Jesus’ coming to the world is a gift from God to you. Think about the nature of a gift—a great gift. A gift is always an act of grace. We don’t earn gifts. A gift comes from the care and kindness and generosity of the giver. If you have received a significant gift, did you feel surprised, taken aback, humbled even? Have you said to yourself, “I don’t deserve this”? These are common reactions to the grace that is a gift. But even as we think “I don’t deserve this” the gift giver is saying to you “but I want you to have it!” The fact that someone would have such care, such kindness, such generosity for you and me: that prompts gratitude. And there is something else about the wonder that “this person has done this...given this...for me!” that creates a moment of joy. We’ve all seen it in the reaction of children opening Christmas presents: the anticipation, the excitement, the unbridled joy! Jesus once told his followers, “I assure you that unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18.3). The kingdom of heaven is a gift of such magnitude that we are to receive it like children opening a precious present. God’s gifts enthuse us and so we ought to be enthusiastic!

One of God’s strategies to enthuse us—to bring God inside—is the church. So I wonder: has this congregation helped you to be enthused? Have you known God’s grace here?...that has come to you through the gift of another?...that has taken you aback?...for which you are grateful?...that gave you a moment of joy? Perhaps it was an anthem by the choir. An “ahaa!” that came to you through a sermon. Knowing people on the prayer chain are holding you up in prayer. All gifts to you. Someone who reached out to you wondering how you were doing, or visited you? Making a new friend here? Being inspired in how you can live the faith by the example of another person here? This congregation gives us all gifts all the time, but being accustomed by habit may blind us to seeing these gifts. Every anthem the choir sings has been rehearsed for weeks. It is there gift to you, to encourage your faith. A gift they give because they are enthused—they have God within. The people who will serve coffee after this service and then wash your cup for you, they are enthused (they have God within) and that prompts them to offer you a gift of hospitality. The property committee is enthused (they have God within) and they go around behind the scenes replacing lightbulbs and bringing the garden back to springtime life. You get the

point? As we sit here we are surrounded by people who are enthused. And as they share their gifts to us, whether big or small, they are doing so because they have God within. Every time we receive one of those gifts we should acknowledge our gratitude and feel a spark of joy! And become more enthused ourselves.

I received a gift from God this week in a visit to John. Most of you would recognize John. He would be here week by week in his large powered scooter wheelchair. To look at him one might see limitations but he is enthused. And being enthused (having God within) makes him enthusiastic! He led the charge at his nursing home to have a storage room turned into a chapel. The company that owned the nursing home had no money for such a project so John led the fundraising to pay for the changes. He offered to lead a weekly prayer group. It started as a gathering of 3 people but has grown to 10. One of the staffers stopped by and told me that John was her right-hand man. One of her jobs was to pair up staff persons with newcomers to the nursing home to help them get introduced and integrated into their new home. That plan didn't work well because the staff are so busy. So John does that work for her, helping new residents grow to feel at home. John serves on the committee that brings the needs and concerns of residents to management. He's also on the entertainment committee. Health concerns do not allow him to worship with us right now. He told me, "God doesn't give us any more than we can handle, so I guess I can handle this." But it's not dampening his enthusiasm he has for God. His current project is to create a library of Christian books for the chapel. John is enthused (he has God within). That brings him a gratitude and joy that pours out into a Christian ministry he has in his nursing home. I started this story by saying my visit to John this week was a gift of God to me. One of strategies God uses to enthuse us—to bring God inside—is the church and the people of the church. John's enthusiasm enthused me. It has given me yet another new glimpse into what is possible when we recognize God's gift of grace that resides in us, and then let the joy and gratitude for that gift move us into new adventures with God.

This morning we read Paul's great prayer to the congregation in Ephesus. The petition of that prayer can be summed up in one sentence. May you be infinitely enthused! "I pray that God will strengthen your inner being with power(!) through his Holy Spirit that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." In other words, I pray that God enthuse you! How much? Paul goes on. "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth (that is, to know the dimensions of God, which are infinite!), and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (Christ's love which has no bounds!), so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (the totality of God filling us)." What would our lives be like if we were open to that kind of filling? We would know such joy! We would have deep gratitude. And contrary to what Mark Twain wrote, people might begin to see Presbyterians going a little crazy with religion.