

“Presbyterian History 101: Expanding Our Sense of Who Is With Us”

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Text: Mark 9:38-41

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Within the Presbyterian Church there is a common belief that Presbyterians are slow to change, that they dislike change. You know the old joke, right? How many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb? Ten. One to change the bulb, and 9 to watch and say how much they preferred the old lightbulb. Now, like any such belief, there is some basis for believing Presbyterians dislike change. But if you explore the history of our denomination you will discover that we have experienced a great deal of change! So this sermon is the first of a short series that will look at some moments in our history and how our evolving view of faithfulness inaugurated significant changes for us.

Today we start with the acknowledgment that Presbyterians, historically, have been a pretty disagreeable lot! Really! We would fight over just about anything. At the time of the Reformation in Scotland in the 16th century there was one denomination: the Church of Scotland. But that was no longer true by the time immigrants started to arrive in Canada. In Canada, in the 1800's, there were many fights, church splits and mergers, so many that between 1800 and 1875 there existed at some point 13 different Presbyterian denominations. Thirteen, where once there was only one. Too easily a group of Presbyterians would say to themselves, “Those people are not following us. We have to rebuke them, and if they don't change we'll leave.” And that happened a lot.

An example. There arose a controversy in Scotland regarding the oath taken by those elected to civic office, in which the official had to acknowledge “the true religion presently professed in the land.” Some Presbyterians rejected the oath because they believed it indicated that the Church of Scotland was the “established” or official denomination of the land. These people were called “anti-Burghers”. Those who didn't think this was the case were the “Burghers.” Denominational splits resulted. Now, this was not an issue in Canada, but that didn't stop Canadian Presbyterians from aligning with one side or another—usually out of allegiance with a specific minister. In other words, Presbyterians in Canada aligned with their clique back in the home country, even though the issue was pointless here.

More substantially, a great rift was caused in Presbyterian churches by the First Great Awakening in the USA. This was a spiritual renewal movement that created what we call today the evangelical church. Many Presbyterians became evangelicals, believing that Christians needed an adult faith conversion experience in which they chose to let Jesus into their life. This was scandalous to traditional Presbyterians who adhered to the idea of predestination: that it was only God, by God's action alone,

that made Christians. This split created “Old Light” congregations (the traditional Calvinists) and “New Light” churches (evangelical congregations). Now, being New Light or Old Light didn’t mean you naturally fell in on one side or the other on the issue of the oath taken by civic officials in Scotland. So here in Canada you could find Burgher / Old Light congregations, Burgher / New Light congregations, Anti-Burgher / Old Light congregations and Anti-Burgher / New Light congregations. Then there was the Relief Presbyterian Church. They were die-hard believers in the separation of church and state. They believed it was wrong for churches to receive financial support from government (which did happen in Canada in a way). Nor should Canadian universities (which were all created, owned and operated by denominations) receive government subsidies. Governments should not tell the church what to do and vice versa.

The biggest division was the “Great Disruption” that formed the Free Church in 1843. In Scotland the issue was who gets to appoint the minister of a congregation. But here the Free Church split was more about Canadian church issues. Here the Free Church were the evangelical Presbyterians. They believed in the separation of church and state. And the split was substantial. Church of Scotland congregations virtually disappeared in Nova Scotia. Many congregations in Toronto switched to being Free Church, partly due to the strong advocacy taken by a Presbyterian Elder named George Brown, who owned a newspaper called the Toronto Globe. The Free Church immediately created its own theological college: Knox College (of which I am a graduate). And the Free Church grew exponentially over the next 35 years, mostly because so many Scottish Free Church ministers (now without congregations in Scotland) came to Canada for the opportunity to continue to serve God in this immigrant land.

All these contentions and divisions changed the landscape of eastern Canada. Take my hometown of Guelph. The Church of Scotland established St. Andrew’s there in 1828. In the Free Church split of 1844 a large number of folk left St Andrew’s, walked one block and established Knox Church. Then in 1860 a split caused a number of people to leave Knox to establish Chalmers Presbyterian that was built on the very same block as Knox Church. With a brisk walk you can pass all three church buildings in about 5 minutes. And that is only part of the story. Now, let’s turn our reflection to the passage from Mark’s gospel that we heard today.

A story that is about rebuking someone who is not in our gang. Of the four gospels, Mark puts the most emphasis on Jesus’ miracles. Mark’s editorial scheme was this: Jesus came to teach about the kingdom of God, and Jesus’ message was given credibility by his power to perform miracles and healings and exorcisms. In other words, successful exorcisms were proof that the kingdom of God was now here. But Jesus was not the only exorcist. In Mark we read that Jesus conferred this ability to the apostles—his closest followers. Then, one day the apostle John said to Jesus, “Hey! We just saw some guy (some guy we don’t even know!) successfully casting out demons, and doing it by using the power of your name! So, of course, we tried to stop him because—you know—he’s not with us. But he didn’t stop!” John’s

words hung there with (probably) an expectation that Jesus would go over and put an end to the matter. But here's the crazy thing. Apparently, this stranger was being a successful exorcist, like the apostles, improving the lives of people who were suffering, like the apostles. Apparently, he was doing it in the name of Jesus, like the apostles. Apparently, this stranger in his own way was pointing people to the reality of the kingdom of God, like the apostles. However, this anonymous guy was not in the same gang as the apostles, so it had to be wrong...even though on the face of it everything this stranger was doing was good! What Jesus said in response was an opposite sentiment compared to John. "Whoever is not against us is for us." That's a pretty inclusive view, isn't it? It seems to me that for Jesus what it was really about was bringing the world into living out the Kingdom of God. He shifted the focus of the conversation from the extraordinary miracle of exorcisms to the simple, commonplace act of providing another with a cup of water. Out of compassion, seeing another person's need. Out of respect. Performing an act that Jesus would have anyone do as an expression of love. Jesus was saying, If you do what we do—even if you are not with us—you, in your own way, are on our side.

The Burgher and Anti-Burgher churches rejoined in the 19th century. They said to each other, "why are we letting an issue that is only relevant in Scotland divide us here in Canada?" After all, they shared the same doctrine, the same form of church government, shared history. They realized again that they really were on the same team. Over time union followed union until The Presbyterian Church in Canada was formed in 1875, when the evangelical and the traditional branches of Presbyterianism united. They realized that on the core things they were really alike, and they could be more effective together than apart. The day our denomination was born, we were second largest denomination in Canada, second only to the Roman Catholic Church.

Whoever is not against us is for us. This idea stirs up the imagination, doesn't it? For a long time so many Christians have thought that if you are not in our tribe then you are not really proper Christians. Thankfully those days are mostly passed. We have realized the harm that is done when our orientation is "we are against you." We have also come to appreciate deeply the benefits when we live and serve together, knowing that the other serves the same Lord. Subsequently in this city we serve side by side with other denominations in so many ventures, like Inn from the Cold and the KAIROS justice initiatives.

I wonder how far we can stretch this idea? Whoever is not against us is for us. Can we stretch it to include interfaith action? For example, we just marked again 9 / 11. A few days after that tragedy an interfaith memorial service was held in Yankee Stadium. One worship leader was Rev. David Benke, a Lutheran pastor from the conservative Missouri Synod denomination. After the televised event multiple complaints landed at their national office. Benke was suspended from ministry. "To participate with pagans in an interfaith service, and, additionally, to give the impression that there might be more than one God, is an extremely serious offense." His "crime" was that he led prayer in the company of religious leaders who were Muslim, Jewish, Roman Catholic, Sikh and Hindu. A gathering of religious leaders who

were all for the same cause: help the healing of a broken-hearted city. Whoever is not against us is for us. I am guessing that Jesus was pleased with the interfaith service that day—a needed cup of water offered in compassion and respect.

Whoever is not against us is for us. In 2009 Sheri and I were in attendance at the Saddledome to hear the Dalai Lama speak. In his opening address, he said that people need to change their thinking from us versus them to realizing we are all fundamentally the same.

“Everyone is loved the same by their mother and grows up with that essential affection and capacity for understanding.” He said, “In our blood, the seed of compassion is there.” His message was that peace comes from mutual respect and compassion...ideas that are very familiar to us as Christians. He also shared his belief that peace in the world may be achievable if religions of the world banded together in its pursuit. He was not telling us to give up our Christianity. Nor would he be giving up Buddhism. He was saying that we don’t have to be a part of the same tribe to pursue common goals. Just like Jesus being OK with someone performing exorcisms who was not a part of his following. What was important was people in need were being helped...whether it was casting out a demon back in Jesus’ day, or helping the homeless and needy in our city today, or working for peace in the world alongside Buddhists in the future. Being for the same cause...pursuing that cause with mutual respect...wouldn’t we be pursuing the expression of the kind of world Jesus encouraged? Jesus said to John that day, God will notice it when we do.