

To Be a New Church, Part 1: Courageous Confession

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Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Kings 5:5-7

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

A few weeks ago, I told you that I would be attending a national conference on multicultural churches. I promised that I would report back to you on what I learned and experienced, on your behalf. So today and next Sunday I will do that.

But this is not to turn the sermon into an activity report or a travelogue. I will not be showing any slides (especially the one of me wearing a Scottish kilt in a skit promoting Charlotte).

To get to where we are going this morning, I'll have to provide some data and factual context. But the subject of how and whether the church will change to move beyond the status quo, when Sunday morning at 11 o'clock is still the most segregated hour in America is deeply scriptural and theological.

That question will define the future of the Presbyterian church: Will we grow and serve in new ways? Will our denomination continue to decline as it has for the past fifty years until it simply dies off? Or, will it become something altogether new, something we can't yet imagine?

To be sure, as in all things, God is in charge. The church rests in divine hands and those hands will shape its future. So we go forward with those most cherished words of our denomination on our tongue – that we are a people “reformed and always being reformed.”

Demographers predict America will be a majority-minority nation by 2040 or 2050. That means a group of minority populations – African-American, Asian-American, Latino and others – will, together, comprise the largest segment of the American population.

That new day is coming more rapidly to our nation's largest and fastest-growing metro areas. In Charlotte, it's predicted as soon as five years from now, perhaps ten now that the recession has slowed the influx of Latinos.

It's happening all around us. It's the new immigrant from India who works at the bank or the hospital. It's out Central Avenue, with its neighboring Thai, Vietnamese and Mexican restaurants. It's the 34 beautiful Latino children who now attend preschool on our campus every weekday.

To be sure, the term minority-majority should not be taken to mean that the new majority will act as one monolithic group. To the contrary, our nation and our city will be a mix of many cultures and traditions.

So, how will we, as a city and as a nation, navigate these uncharted waters?

Last March, Time magazine addressed the 10 most important ideas for our nation's future. One is what it called "The White Anxiety Crisis."¹ Author Gregory Rodriguez wrote that the most crucial socio-demographic issue facing the country is how the current majority will react to its change in status in the coming decades.

We whites have been the dominant culture since our nation's founding – in some ways that many of us don't even recognize, yet. From California to Arizona to right here in Charlotte, we're seeing how some whites are reacting. I am sure there are many good stories that don't make the press. But, whether it's reaction to the color of our president or what's happening in Arizona, we're seeing much more of what happens when we listen to our fear and anxiety.

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For us in the church, these oncoming realities raise questions of how we understand ourselves as children of God, each with a unique story. We might also ask what we need to do to allow the Holy Spirit to prepare us for our future together.

For all we love about being Presbyterian, we don't exactly have a reputation for looking ahead. We are one of the whitest denominations in America, 92% white to be exact. Except in rare, God-given places like this one, we are, as with other Protestants, segregated. Whites worship and live out their faith with whites. The same goes for blacks and Koreans.

Diversity in our racial make-up is increasing, in part because older whites are dying. But, at the current rate of change, we won't even make it to 20 percent non-white until 2060, well after the country is more than 50% non-white.

¹ Time Magazine, March 23, 2010

All of that makes up the backdrop for last week's conference, the 11th such gathering of Presbyterians. The church uses the term 'multicultural' to convey that our congregations must become more than just multi-racial. To be multicultural means that people of more than one ethnicity and culture come together to share worship and the work of mission. It also means sharing power in decision-making, in leadership and all forms of how we live out our faith together. That, my friends, is where things get difficult. It is where our vision, much less our faith, may be most sorely tested.

And if the truth is to be told, our denomination's pastoral leadership appears to one of the reasons we are moving with all the speed of half-dried concrete. A recent survey asked representative groups of Presbyterian members, elders and pastors to pick the two most important priorities of the church among 14 options. In the results, building diverse, cross-cultural ministries ranked next to last. What's more, the pastors surveyed ranked it even lower than members and elders.

So, what will it take for the church to move forward to discern and become the church God wants us to be?

At last week's conference, two predominant perspectives emerged. They stand in contrast to one another yet are, in other ways, interdependent.

The first says that we can never become a fully integrated, multicultural denomination without confronting the sin of racism directly and without hesitation. This view says we must hold nothing back until those who need to be heard are fully heard and until those who need to acknowledge their complicity and participation in systemic racism, however directly or indirectly, have done so. Anything less, this perspective says, falls short of a faithful confession and submission to God and one another.

The church suffers from a quiet, largely unacknowledged cancer, the proponents of this view believe, and can never be whole and healthy without heavy chemotherapy to eradicate what ails us.

The second view doesn't deny the sin of racism and the unfinished business of healing its scars. However, this second view looks more to the future. This view focuses on the emerging generation of Americans who are showing more and more signs of being post-racial.

These twenty- and thirty-somethings are tired of the dysfunction in the institutions their parents built, including the church. They want to be fed spiritually in authentic ways. They want to be invited into healthy, respectful, inclusive relationships. They want to be

a part of a community but, at the same time, to retain self-control and individual identity. They are comfortable with complexity and paradox, when two things seem to contradict but both are true. This generation, the experts say, is more interested in solutions, in discussing what is right as opposed to debating who is right or wrong or to blame.

Now, perhaps, you see what I mean about how these two views about the path to being a new church sit, perhaps uncomfortably, side by side.

In my remaining few minutes today and in next week's message, I want to explore how these two perspectives speak to us – collectively and individually, as a denomination and as Caldwell church.

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One of our denomination's most vocal proponents of the first view – that deep apology and confession of our racism must happen – is Rev. Jin Kim, who co-led a two-day track I attended.

Rev. Kim is the founding pastor of Church of All Nations, a Presbyterian church in Minneapolis made up of Koreans, Latinos, blacks and whites. Born in Korea, he came to the U.S. in 1968. He grew up in multi-ethnic environments in Columbia, S.C. and Atlanta.

Rev. Kim is a candidate for moderator of the denomination, the top elected position that will be decided when the denomination meets in General Assembly in July. He has served the denomination in many offices. He is also a past president of Presbyterians for Renewal, a group that opposes the ordination of gays and lesbians.

Rev. Kim doesn't mince words about his view of the state of the church. We have made an idol of our own denominational traditions, he says. He believes we need to move from 11,000 lukewarm congregations to a few hundred vital energetic congregations. We are not prepared for the coming era of post-Christendom, when we Christians will be the oddballs in a dominant secular, globalized culture. In the meantime, our non-white brothers and sisters will continue to resent the church unless deep confession and apology for racism takes place.

This idea that this kind of confession and apology is needed no doubt would anger some whites, who think they owe people of other races nothing for years of control in society. That's just the way it is, they might say. Other whites might be sympathetic generally but disagree that they should confess personally.

As Presbyterians, though, we are a confessional people. We know we fall short of God's grace and we confess that as a fundamental part of our worship and our prayer life. For us, confession is a practice and a discipline that opens our souls to God and to each other. Confession is not to be measured and shared carefully. It is meant to be as generous as God's grace.

At the end of our two days together, the fifty or so participants in his sessions were asked to practice this kind of apology. What does it feel like? Can we actually do it without sounding – or being – defensive?

Time didn't allow everyone so inclined to practice this kind of deep apology. And it wasn't just whites who did. Some black folks confessed their resentment and disappointment. Some whites confessed their evasion of the issue – that, one way or another, they had benefitted from a white-dominated culture at the cost of those whose skin was not the same color.

As for me, I considered and rehearsed my confession in my head and was prepared to speak when the co-leaders called time. One question remained, though. A co-leader asked whether someone would model this kind of confession to a group of other conference attendees. I would, I said. Then I learned that she meant the entire conference, as part of a report of what we had been doing and talking about in our track.

When the time came, I said I appreciated the opportunity. I said my name is John Cleghorn and the Cleghorn name has been around since 82 A.D. Since coming to America in the mid 1700s, Cleghorns have been on the right side of history. Other times, we have been on the wrong side of history.

It's possible, I said, that some family members were Tories at the time of the revolution.

My great, great, great grandfather was an agent for the state of Georgia to the Cherokee Indians. He built meaningful relationships with them, it's said. But, inevitably, the story ends in the Trail of Tears, when the Cherokees were relocated to Oklahoma by order of the white man's federal government.

My great, great grandfather, as I have told you, owned a slave and, along with other family members, fought for the confederacy.

But my parents shared these stories with me, the historical context for all of these generations, but also the truth, the right and the wrong. Other members of my family tree practiced radical progressivism in their day and fought for the civil rights of others.

Still, it is impossible for me to deny that, in some way, I personally have benefitted from those times when my family gained at the cost of others of different races, African-American and Native American included. And, personally, I have said and done things that were, at some level, rooted in racism.

All of this I confessed. And for it I apologized for the harm done to others and how my actions or my family's actions, intentionally or not, contributed to racist structures and systems in society.

Was that confession and apology helpful? Did it further healing among my Presbyterian brothers and sisters? I don't know. I pray that it did. A few thanked me but that is not why I did it. I did it because my faith required it. My faith also enabled it.

As Christians who are part of a broken world, we all live in the tension of what has happened and what will be. As Christians, we are formed by the law of the Old Testament, which makes clear what God expects of us, and the grace of God when we fall short, shown most clearly in the life, death and resurrection of Christ our Lord, the cost for our sins.

The law tells us, as we heard in the scripture from Numbers, that a wrong done to anyone else is an act of unfaithfulness to the Lord. It reminds us that sin is anything that separates us from God. For any sin in which we take any part, large or small, we are called to confess.

At the same time, we are redeemed by the grace of the gospel. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, we see in this world a poor reflection of what it means to be people of God. But in Christ, God offers perfection, a day when people of every difference and variety will see face to face, just as we will see God face to face.

The path to that day is shaped by faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love – love, we pray, that teaches us, whatever our story is, to be strong enough to confess and generous enough to forgive.

Amen.