

Sermon for Sunday, June 23, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE CHURCH AND HOW SHE FARES"

I Peter 2:4-10

Text: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." I Peter 2:9

Our meditation this morning is a report to you on the 114th meeting of the General Assembly of our denomination--the Presbyterian Church, U.S. I have chosen for my text this description of the true church, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

Back in 1861 as the Civil War began to burst in fury upon the nation, the Presbyterian Church divided--north and south. The Presbyterian Church in the south was known as the Confederate Presbyterian Church. After the war was over it was renamed to become the Presbyterian Church, U.S., sometimes called the Southern Presbyterian Church. It was a fairly small denomination limited basically to the sixteen southern states. It is that denomination to which you and I belong. We are a part of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.

The northern part of the church eventually became known as the United Presbyterian Church, USA or the Northern Presbyterian Church. Over the more than 100 years that we have been separated we have grown farther apart in many ways. That was because in the northern church the liberal element gained control of the denomination as far back as the 1920's. By the 1930's there were conservatives or evangelicals being persecuted and excommunicated from the church. As a matter of fact, Dr. Knight who teaches our Bible class downstairs at 9:30 is a member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, which came out of the United Presbyterian Church back in the 30's due to persecution of evangelicals.

So it has been that in the years since 1861 the United Presbyterian Church has moved off in a very liberal direction. In the southern church we have maintained a much more conservative and evangelical stance. As time has gone on the things that separate us have become more pronounced. Now there are those in the Southern Presbyterian Church who have seized control, who are of the liberal disposition and who would bend the direction of our church toward that of the United Presbyterian until hopefully, in their minds, at some point the two churches would merge.

For those of you who are not Presbyterians, who are visitors this morning, let me apologize to you for talking about family affairs. However, as Christians who belong to a particular denomination it is incumbent upon us as good Christians and good Presbyterians to know what is going on in our church--to understand some of the dynamics of it so that we can be aware and knowledgeable Christians. So if we talk about family things this morning, we hope you will forgive us and if you'll come back we won't do it next Sunday!

Some of you have been reading about the meeting of the General Assembly in the papers. You may have been surprised as your pastor was, to discover that he is a major power broker in the Southern Presbyterian Church! The papers do not carry all the information nor do they always put the emphasis on what is most important. They put the emphasis on what is spectacular. For example, one paper carried a major article about a meeting of Presbyterian homosexuals who had a caucus in Louisville while the two assemblies of the UP Church and the Southern Church were meeting together there, and you would have thought this was some big event. Actually, there were

thirteen people there and I think twelve of them were observers. For example, one article in a local paper talked a great deal about union. One would gather that the two churches were going to unite some time this year. Actually we do not even vote on the question of union until 1977. You also saw a great deal about a new confession that our church is writing and you may have gathered we are changing our faith. Nothing could be further from the truth at this point. We will not even vote on the new confession until next year and then it must go down and be approved by three-fourths of the Presbyteries and then approved again by a subsequent Assembly. The likelihood of that happening is somewhat remote.

So, this morning I am here to give you the true facts from my bias standpoint and I have come with news. I have some good news and some bad news and some great news.

Let me share with you first the good news. Last year and this year there have been a group of conservatives in our denomination who have just been fed up with the liberal control and manipulation of the church and so they decided to pull out and form a new church. They have done this and the new church is called the National Presbyterian Church or the NPC. Unfortunately for those of us who are evangelical this hurt our leadership position in the church. It hurt our strength. They pulled out of some key areas and we no longer had a voting majority there. However, I am happy to report to you that in spite of this significant loss at the Assembly this year, the conservative voting strength was stronger than it has been in a good number of years and we were very pleased about that.

One of the first issues before the Assembly was the election of a Moderator. Those of us who are evangelical committed ourselves to a man named Lawrence Bottoms. He is a black and our commitment to him assured his election. We did not elect him simply because he was a black although many of us felt it was appropriate that our church, after 114 years, would elect its first black Moderator. We voted for him because he is a man of God, a conservative, evangelical Christian who loves the Lord and has his theological head screwed on right.

Two of those running against him were both what I would describe as radical liberals. I told Dr. Bottoms before his election that he would win over the other two on the first ballot and I told him what the vote would be and only missed it by nine votes. We have a great man of God as the Moderator of the Southern Presbyterian Church. I hope in the near future that it will be possible for you to hear him from this pulpit.

There were two papers that the more liberal element had before the church for consideration that were very dear to their hearts. One of these papers was on the issue of amnesty. They were saying that what we must do as a nation is to forgive across the board all those who had refused to be a part of the military during the Vietnam conflict or who had deserted from the military during that conflict. Now there are those of us who feel that the Christian ought to be loving and forgiving and that we should be characterized by grace. On the other hand we felt that the military and our government made adequate provision for those who could not conscientiously serve in the Vietnam conflict to give equivalent service in other means; and when they refused to do that and disobeyed the law of the land to offer them blanket amnesty, without question, would undercut the moral structure and the law that binds our nation together. Therefore, we were opposed to that paper for that reason. We managed to get the paper sent back to the committee with the instruction that when the paper is represented it will be presented with the opposite viewpoint along side.

Another paper that was dear to some of the commissioners there was a paper on universalism. Universalism has become a major issue in the church today as the

gospel is being diluted. People in the church and some of our leaders are saying, "We don't believe in Hell. We don't believe in such things as eternal condemnation. We believe that ultimately every man will be saved." There are those of us, however, who take scripture very seriously. Our Lord himself said, "Those who believe in me are not condemned but those who believe not are condemned already." We take that very seriously and the Bible, particularly in the book of Revelation speaks of the judgment upon those who persist in their rejection of God. So on Biblical grounds we rejected the universal position and for another reason also. God makes us real persons--free to say, "yes", and free to say "no". According to universalism, ultimately we all have got to say yes and this destroys the integrity of my personhood. It takes away my right, if I desire, to say no to God. We rejected that paper. It was received by the Assembly as information. It will be available upon request but in effect the paper has been buried.

Another problem that we have had in the Southern Presbyterian Church has been that fact that assemblies adopt position papers on such things as abortion and other controversial issues which raise the ire of many people who oppose the positions that their church takes. Now actually, the church does not officially take a position. What happens is that a group of people called an Assembly meet together and they say, "We believe this." It is what we call an en thesi deliverance. It is not them speaking for the whole church. It is not the official position of the church. It is what an assembly said at a particular time. Lots of people don't understand that. We have had the Assembly pass an action whereby each paper will be prefaced by a statement that says that it is only the opinion of that particular assembly and spells out the limits and authority of that paper.

Another problem we have had in our denomination--and some of you may be members of this church because it happened to you in your church--is that there are many young radical-type liberal ministers who through their ministry have begun to run their people away--their churches are going down, membership is going down. Many of them desperately need to move but nobody wants them. Since they have a control element at the Assembly they appointed a committee to study the church's use of her ordained ministry and they came back with a report that in effect would have radically changed the Presbyterian system of the movement of ministers. In effect they would have changed it to something like the Methodist system where there would have been a sort of bishop-like control to move ministers about. Fortunately, we were able to pull some of the teeth of that report and it has been referred back to committee.

Another problem we have had in our church has been the group that pulled out last year and this year called the National Presbyterian Church. Those of us who are evangelical felt that what we as a denomination ought to do was to recognize them as a true branch of the church of Jesus Christ and to enter into a normal relationship as we would any other denomination. I was able to speak to the Standing Committee on this matter and I shared with them that here in St. Louis we have seen the papers filled with a fight among the Missouri Synod Lutherans, the moderates and the conservatives--that this fight has made the church look very bad to people outside the church and I said here is our chance to show the world how the church, in spite of problems and a pull out, can act in love and grace toward those who have removed themselves from us. Here is a chance for the church to demonstrate in concrete fashion how we love one another. Even though we extend a hand and it be rejected we still extend the hand not because we are accepted but because Jesus commands us to love one another, and so the process has begun of entering into relationships with the National Presbyterian Church.

As a consequence also of the pull out of this group, there were those who wanted to change the property law of the Presbyterian Church so that the Presbytery would

have more control over local church property. Fortunately, we were able to defeat the key clause of that proposed change and the property clause remains basically as it is. This congregation retains control over its own property.

Let me say a word about the new confession that is being proposed and the plan of union. The new confession is made up of a number of confessions. A new one plus some old ones. I don't know yet how good the new one is--I have not had a chance to study it thoroughly. That for me is not the real issue. I don't see how I can give basic allegiance to five or six confessional statements. That is not the historic position of our denomination. We have one confession. So I'm opposing the principle of the idea of multiple confessions. How in the world can you give loyalty to a variety of confessions?

On the plan of union there are some very objectionable features to it which I will share with you some Sunday but basically it is not a good plan of union. Let me state to you that in order to pass those two things--the new confession and the plan of union--it would be necessary for those favoring it to have a three-fourths vote of the Presbytery. Those of us who are opposed need only to have one-fourth. We would only have to have fifteen Presbyteries to defeat it. We can now count at least twenty and perhaps as many as twenty-eight against it so whatever the papers say--whatever the liberals might say the possibility of a new confession or of union is, it is not very likely and they know it.

Another important thing that happened at the Assembly was the selection of programs for our priorities. The priority for this year is evangelism and next year it will again be evangelism and programs are now being implemented to turn our church back to the basic business of the church which is to lift up Jesus Christ. Another significant thing that happened is, in the Presbyterian system we have what is called the parity of elders. Teaching elders are ministers and ruling elders are laymen and are equal in the courts of the church. Theoretically at every court level the number of ministers and elders ought to be equal. In fact it has become unbalanced because in many Presbyteries there are ministers who are not pastors of a local church but have some other function. For example, in the Presbytery of which we are a part the balance of power is actually held by six ministers none of whom are pastors in local churches. They don't have to answer to a Session or to a congregation. They are doing different things. Two of them are theology professors at schools that are not even Presbyterian; one is in the campus ministry, one is in the prison chaplaincy, and so on, but they hold the balance of power. A change will be made in the Book of Church Order which will offset such imbalance so that in the courts of the church we will have what we Presbyterians have always believed in--parity--equality of the teaching elders and the ruling elders. I think that is very important.

Let me say a good word about the young people. People of a more liberal position and I say this in all charity, but it is true, tend to use people and manipulate them to their purposes. About four years ago they worked it out so that young people could come as youth delegates from all the Presbyteries. Their intention was to use these young people to radicalize the Assembly, so that these young people would have the floor of the Assembly to get up and say to the commissioners, "This is what we young people want." The first year that was just the way it worked but unfortunately for those who decided to use the young people the whole thing backfired on them. The reason it did is because the truest believers, the greatest believers today, are our young people. It is our young people who are so on fire for Jesus Christ. I want to say that some of our young people radicalized the Assembly this year, but for Jesus Christ. In all the years I have been going to the Assembly I never heard anyone get up and read the Bible to the commissioners on an issue. One of our young people got his Bible and got up and said, "Gentle-

men, I want to tell you what the Bible says." He read it to them. That's the kind of young people we had there in many instances and I thrill in what God is doing among the young people.

That is some of the good news. That's not all of it but some of it. Now for the bad news. In the past our church has had a structure of boards and agencies. We had the Board of Women's Work, Board of World Mission, The Board of Christian Education, Board of National Ministries and so on. Last year we wiped all of those out and we formed one single GEB--General Executive Board. If you know anything about administration, you know right away that what we've done is centralize power. When you wipe out all those boards and you have one board instead, you centralize power. Now we are Presbyterians--we are not Congregationalist but by the same token we don't have the Episcopal system where the power flows from the top down. Traditionally power in the Presbyterian Church has flowed from the grass roots up. From the local church, to the Presbytery and that is where the base of power has been. Now it's been turned so that power flows from the top down. They claimed, of course, that they were doing this so that the church could be more responsive to the grass roots. But don't you believe it. Bureaucracy is being firmly entrenched at the denominational level. Bureaucratic control is already at work so the establishment of the GEB is leading to entrenched bureaucracy in our denomination. One evidence of it is the fact that we have established in Washington what is called a Washington Communications Office. Now that is a fancy name for lobbyist. Now actually the lobbyist that we have there that is lobbying for liberal political issues doesn't amount to anything. It is a two-bit, peanut operation--one man with \$50,000 for his salary, the secretary and his office and he doesn't have much left over. But it is the principle that is involved. What is the church's relationship to the political structure? That is the problem that we are wrestling with there. The fact that he is there is not significant politically but in terms of principle it demonstrates the power and the control that certain elements in our church have.

Now as a consequence of this and this is the really bad news, our church, our denomination is headed for financial disaster. One of our laymen who is on the GEB did a computer print-out on projected spending versus projected giving and he predicts by 1985 that we will be running an annual deficit of twenty-eight million dollars. We won't because we don't have that kind of money. We'll be bankrupt long before that. What is happening is that as spending is increasing, giving is declining. I don't have the figures yet on our denomination. I can tell you about the United Presbyterian Church on which I do have the figures. Last year at the beginning of 1973, the United Presbyterian Church had twenty million dollars in undesignated reserve. At this meeting of their Assembly, which met at the same time ours did in the same city, it was reported they were bankrupt. They had claims on whatever funds they had left in access of the money they had. In addition to that they were committed to supporting certain minority institutions. If they were to close their doors they would be liable for an additional eleven million dollars which they do not have. They are bankrupt. As a consequence of that their program, which this year is thirty-two million, next year they will have to be cut back to twenty-six million which means unemployment and a lot of other serious problems that they are having. The United Presbyterian Church is bankrupt. If we are not careful within a year or two our reserves will be gone. We too, will face that same difficult position. Somebody asked me, "Did you hear the UP Church is bankrupt?" I said, "Yes." They said, "Don't you want to unite with them?" I said, "No, you don't take a child with chicken pox and a child with measles and put them in bed hoping they will cure each other. What you do is make both children sicker." Both of our churches are experiencing symptoms of serious sickness and to put them together only intensifies the problem.

In addition to financial trouble, we are also declining in membership. Here again I

do not have the figures on our own church but in 1973 the United Presbyterian Church lost one hundred thousand members. That is one-ninth of our membership. In the past five years they have lost five hundred thousand members which is more than 50% of our total membership. I told somebody--I said, "Let's hold off union for five years and at the rate they are declining, we will be bigger than they are."

This points up two things. I don't mean to make light of it--it is very serious. The decline in membership in that denomination and our denomination means first of all that we have ignored the great commission of the church which is to evangelize and to lead people to a saving relationship to Jesus Christ and the church is in decline because it is not reaching out to claim others for Christ. The second thing it points up is that the layman who basically love Jesus, who basically feels in his heart what is right for the church is rebelling against the social action programs of the church and its failure to be evangelistic and he is voting against that in two ways. He is voting with his feet by leaving the church in droves--five hundred thousand in five years--and he is voting with his money in refusing to give.

You know the problem is that the people at power levels really look with disdain upon the laymen. They feel that, "We have the prophetic word of God and the people down there ought to do what we tell them to do." You people don't act that way. You have a mind of your own and you think for yourselves and so you voted in those two ways--by not giving your money at the national level and by leaving the Presbyterian Church.

The conclusion of all this is to say that the church is in the hands of a hard core control group whose theory is apparently to rule or ruin and they are doing both. They have no consideration for what you at the grass level really feel and care about. As a consequence the church is in very serious decline and as nearly as I can tell this trend will continue for the foreseeable future. That's the bad news.

Now let me share with you very quickly the great news. We Presbyterians believe in the church visible which is the institutional church. It's the church on the corner, it's the denomination, the Presbyterian Church, U.S., the United Presbyterian, the Methodist, the Baptist--that's the church visible. But in this church visible there are people who do not truly believe in God, who reject the chief corner stone. The Bible says that they will be destroyed. But the visible church is made up of people who may or may not be Christians. Now the invisible church--the true church of Jesus Christ--the church in which we really believe--is made up of all those believers in whatever visible church they belong who truly love Jesus Christ. In the Apostle's Creed when we say I believe in the Holy Catholic Church that is what we are confessing. We believe the true church is composed of those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord whatever visible expression of the church they may be a part of. Now I want to say that the visible church, the institutional church, cannot block the move of the Spirit of God. It is like a river where the bank caves in and temporarily blocks it, pressure builds up and the river will find new channels through which it will flow or else the pressure will eventually overwhelm the dam. So it is that the institutional church which ought to be a channel for the power of God is today attempting to dam and block the move of the Spirit of God. But God's Spirit cannot be blocked. Either the institutional church can be a part of what God is doing or it can block what God is doing. God's Spirit moves irrespectively. One of the exciting things today is the vitality of the church of Jesus Christ. All across this land there is lay renewal going on among the grass roots, there are small study groups, prayer groups, Bible groups. There is the charismatic movement all of which are expressions of an outburst of the Spirit of God as it reacts to the institutional church.

I'm excited about what God is doing today. In all my ministry I have never seen more people who have a deep spiritual awareness of their relationship to Jesus Christ. I am excited to see a Holy Catholic Church--the invisible church of Jesus Christ--on fire at the grass roots. You will remember the Reformation itself, burst upon history's page as a result of the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. The Wesley movement in England was a spontaneous outbreak of the Spirit of God against the deadness of the Church of England. So in our day there is a mighty move of the Spirit of God all across America in the lives of ordinary man and women and that is the church of Jesus Christ, and that is the church about which I am excited. It may be that the institutional church will have to die--that's all right--God's church will never die. I would say to you as I report the bad news you must not lose perspective by looking at the short view of history. Do not look at the short view of history. Look at the great span of history. Trust the Great Head of the Church, Jesus Christ in history's long perspective. The church and history both belong to Jesus Christ and we can trust Him. It may be that in our life time which is relatively short in times of history--the church may be very corrupt, it may be moving in the wrong direction, but understand that the true church--the Church of Jesus Christ--is very much alive and ultimately it will burst into the institutional church--the visible church and renew it and restore it. We can have confidence in the church, not because we like what is going on but because we trust the Head of the Church and what He is doing in the world.