

Sermon for Sunday, January 8, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"WHEN AMBITION IS OKAY"

Text: "There is a popular saying: 'To aspire to leadership is an honourable ambition.'" I Timothy 3:1 (N.E.B.)

This morning as we come to the ordination and installation of Trustees, Elders and Deacons, I want to share with you something about the Presbyterian Church and something about being Presbyterian. The thing that is important above all to each of us is the Christian faith. Above all and before all else we as Christians have a commitment to Jesus. But the way that commitment finds expression in people's lives may come packaged in different ways. It may come in a Roman Catholic package, a Methodist or a Baptist package, but the best package of all is, of course, the Presbyterian one.

When you ladies go to the store and buy your laundry detergent, I strongly suspect there isn't that much difference among any of it but you buy the one that's packaged the way that appeals to you because psychological studies of buyer motivation indicate that the packaging has a great deal to do with what sells. When you go to buy a can of peas--you pick the peas off the vine and there can't be that much difference in the peas--but you begin to buy a brand you think is better. Well, I happen to think the Christian faith is the most important thing in all the world and I particularly like the Presbyterian package. It doesn't mean it is any better than any other package, it just means it is the package I like--it suits me!

There are those who prefer another package where the type of service and other things appeal to them. There are those of us who find a great deal of satisfaction and fulfillment in the Presbyterian packaging of the Christian faith. So, I want to talk a little bit about Presbyterianism and the Presbyterian Church. I am trying to say all of this to emphasize we must never elevate our denominational loyalties or our particular preferences above anybody else's and especially above the Gospel. Jesus is first! People then who worship Him and love Him can do this in different ways that appeal to them. But I'm proud of being a Presbyterian. I was not born and reared a Presbyterian. I am a Presbyterian by choice and, therefore, I think in many ways those of you who are born into the Presbyterian Church have missed something because those of us who came into the church from other places came because that was what we wanted and what meant the most to us. But we Presbyterians have a great history and a great heritage.

The western world and America owe a great deal to the Presbyterian Church. Let me just share with you what some of those things are. Today we Americans take for granted religious liberty and being religious. Most of us do not know or forget that that religious liberty was bought at great personal sacrifice. The brave men and women who initiated religious freedom in America were basically Presbyterians and they often paid the price for religious freedom. It was among the Presbyterians that revivalism broke out in America and that revivalism swept America and changed the very character and complexion of the American scene. So there was a contribution we Presbyterians made.

A second contribution we have made to America is the American form of government. The men who put together our Constitution and devised our system of government, took their ideas and concepts straight from John Calvin and developed a representative form of church government which is what we Presbyterians have. A third contribution we Presbyterians have made to the American scene is the educational emphasis in our country. Early on, the educational institutions in America were church related schools

schools. Besides that, as the American frontier expanded, as people moved southwest and westward, the church went along and it was the educated Presbyterian ministers who began the school system that has become such an accepted part of the American scene today.

You see, we Presbyterians have always honored education and, therefore, we have insisted that our ministers have a seminary degree as well as a college degree. Your Presbyterian minister in his black gown is dressed in academic garb because this is our heritage. It was the educated Presbyterian ministers who started the schools on the frontiers and much of what we have in terms of education in America today is a gift from the Presbyterians.

A fourth contribution we have made is to the whole western scene--to western civilization. It was the thoughts of John Calvin in his writing which laid the groundwork for the intellectual renaissance of Europe. It was out of the groundwork and thinking of John Calvin that the industrial revolution came. It was from Calvinism that the Protestant work ethic developed which is the backbone of industrial western civilization. This was a contribution from Presbyterians.

I think perhaps that the greatest contribution the Presbyterians have made to this country has been its laymen. Presbyterian laymen have made great contributions to America. Relatively speaking we are a small percent of the American population and yet our contribution in terms of leadership is all out of proportion to our size. Go back--see how many of our presidents, our great senators, our great congressional leaders were or are Presbyterians. As you go into any community you will find that many of the leading people in the professional fields--law, medicine, science, whatever are Presbyterians. So in every community much of the leadership that shapes and molds the direction of that community is Presbyterian and we have made these contributions to western civilization and to America.

In recent years the Presbyterian Church has fallen into disarray. It is struggling desperately. For example, in the United Presbyterian Church, which is sometimes called the Northern Presbyterian Church, our sister denomination (we are the Presbyterian Church, U.S. or the Southern Presbyterian Church) in the decade from 1967 to 1977 lost almost 700,000 members. In that same period, financial reserves of more than 50 million dollars were spent. Today the church is in desperate financial condition. They are getting ready to go into a 60 million dollar campaign to attempt to raise money to undergird the structures of their church.

We in the Southern Presbyterian Church have not fared quite as badly but we have not done well at all. During that decade we saw a tremendous influx of population into the south as people moved into the sun belt and industry moved south. Yet, in that period when the population in the south was literally exploding, our church has not grown at all. So then there have been evidences of serious decline in the money given to the denominations, in the growth of those denominations and in their impact on society. Back during the 1950s the Southern Presbyterian Church was organizing on an average, one new congregation a week in the south. Today that is no longer true. In the St. Louis area alone, the last time the PCUS started a new church was over 10 years ago. Now the question is, why? Why is this so? Well, there are a number of reasons to which we could point. One is that there has been a loss of theological identity. So many in the church, particularly among our ministerial leaders, no longer have any abiding theological commitment. This is evidenced in the fact that in the Northern Presbyterian Church they no longer have a single confessional document to which people are required to be committed but they have expanded it to 10 confessions which means

you can believe anything or nothing. In our own denomination we barely avoided taking that same disasterous step.

Another reason is there has been a loss of conviction about Jesus Christ. Many of our spiritual leaders, including ministers, no longer believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation. They have become syncretistic, believing that many different religions have answers from God. But Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the light". There are many who no longer believe that. Another reason for the decline is the loss of confidence in the unique contributions that we Presbyterians have to make. That is not to say we have the best contribution or the only contribution but that we have a significant contribution. There are those today who say, "No, let's make everything the same. Let's have one giant Protestant Church and do away with denominations." That has had a dramatic impact on the confidence of the contribution that we Presbyterians have to make.

Again, there is ^a no loss of faith in the integrity of what scripture says. For example, the Bible gives us an order for the home but there are those today in the church who are saying that God's order for the home is no longer valid. Then, for example, to give another illustration the Bible says that certain things are sin. Fornication--that is sex before marriage--is a sin. Yet there are those in the church who are saying it is all right for a young man and a young woman to live together outside of marriage. But the Bible says that's sin. The Bible says adultery, that is sex relationships with another person when you are married, is a sin. And yet there are those today even in the church telling us that it is all right. The Bible says that a homosexual relationship is sin and yet the church is groping today with a solution to this problem. There are those who are saying that a homosexual relationship is a valid life style. Now that's not what the Bible says. It says fornication is a sin. It says adultery is a sin. It says homosexuality is a sin. It does not condemn the sinner, it condemns the sin. It seems they are saying the Bible is not to be believed.

Another problem that is causing erosion of faith in the church is one sided emphasis in the church. For example: the largest number of Elders in the church are white male. The ruling board of our church, called the General Assembly Mission Board, has sixty people on it. Yet half of that Board's members are ministers. There are only 5000 ministers in our denomination and there are something like 400,000 white male Presbyterians and yet half of the Board is ministers. The other half of the Board is made up of women and minority groups so that the largest group of Ruling Elders in the denomination have about 8 to 11 members on that whole Board. Now the problem is that gets things out of balance. The church doesn't work very well when things are out of balance. Take again an emphasis being pushed--and I could use many illustrations but I am only using this one--there is a tremendous emphasis today in the church on criminal justice. Now all of us know there have to be instances when an individual because he may be of a minority group and because he may be poor, is abused by the criminal system. That is inevitable. But, by the same token, you and I know, and we read it in the papers every day, of how criminals because of the system are able to be out on bail awaiting trial and continue to commit the same crimes for which they are awaiting trial--rape, murder, robbery, whatever. Where is the balancing emphasis on the rights of victims? Who is crying out for justice to victims? When you get out of balance, it doesn't work very well.

So, then, those who are in leadership positions in our church, because of over

emphasis on certain segments of society, in the process say to great other segments of the society, what you are and what you feel and what your needs are, are not important and don't count. That gets the wheel out of balance. As a consequence of this, lay people have been voting about how they feel and they have voted in two ways. Number one, by not giving their money. In every denomination today--major main-line denominations--giving to national denominations has gone down seriously. In every Presbyterian Church I know about, with one or two exceptions in this community, are in serious financial problems. You voted financially here in this church as to how you feel about this church. Would you like to know how the vote was? In 1977 we had a budget of \$560,000. By December 31 when we closed the books you had already over-given that budget by \$45,000 and money for 1977 pledges is still coming in. That's how you voted. Across the country, laymen are voting about how they feel about their church by not giving their money. A second way laymen are voting is with their feet. They are leaving the church. As I indicated, the United Presbyterian Church in 10 years lost almost 700,000 people. Can you imagine how many people that is? People are voting with their feet.

It is kind of interesting how you voted here. We have had to build a two-level parking garage to take care of our people and we have gone to three services. I don't know if you are aware of this but from 270, all the way into town, as far as I know we are the only church growing. We are the only church with good financial security. Those things are important but I want to say to you men who are being ordained and installed today, we Presbyterians have a proud heritage and this church has stood for Jesus Christ. We have stood foursquare for theological integrity. We have stood foursquare for lifting up Jesus Christ. We have stood foursquare for being Presbyterian. We have stood foursquare for integrity in the Bible, and we have tried to have a balanced emphasis that claims to touch as many lives across the whole society for Jesus as we can. I'm praying to God that you'll continue to give us that kind of leadership. Above all what the church needs today is brave men and women who are voting with their lives and who are committing themselves to Jesus Christ and saying we will serve and honor Him.

Across the denomination Central is one of the great churches and eyes are watching us to see what God will do with an old church, located in an old neighborhood, but where obviously the Spirit of the Lord is moving. I charge you before God to give us the kind of visionary spiritual leadership that we can raise up a light to the whole denomination to say, "Come follow us as we follow Jesus." I pray that all of us together will be so committed to Jesus Christ that we will raise up a light in this community to reach out into the spiritual darkness to touch lives for Jesus Christ. You see God has given you and this church so much--a new building, financial resources leadership--but let me warn you as seriously as I know how, the Bible says, "to whom much is given, much is required".