

Sermon for Sunday, May 31, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"A WEARY CHURCH AND A TIRED FAITH"

I Corinthians 2:1-5

Text: "...that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the
power of God." I Corinthians 2:5

I left St. Louis on May 19th for Houston, Texas, to attend the meeting of the General Assembly of our denomination. We were meeting at the same time and at the same place as the Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church and many of the sessions were held jointly. There is a great deal of talk and a great deal of effort directed towards uniting the two denominations. There are those who feel that the Presbyterian witness in America will be enhanced if the two churches unite. Others of us, however, feel that uniting two cemeteries will not create a resurrection. And in many respects both churches are really spiritual cemeteries. For example, last year the United Presbyterian Church reported a loss of over 40,000 members and that does not count fifty churches or so which have pulled out. Their real loss was closer to 100,000. As a matter of fact, in the last 12 years, that denomination has lost close to a million members. In addition, giving to the national level has seriously declined and at one point they were on the verge of bankruptcy. Certainly that has the smell of death about it. Our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church, U.S., has also lost members and the real dollar value of giving at the national level has steadily declined. There has been no church growth for either denomination.

In addition to the giving statistics and the growth statistics that we can look at in a tangible way, both denominations have evidenced serious spiritual decline. Let me give you two examples. In the Washington, D.C. area, the Union Presbytery there recently received a minister from another denomination who rejects the deity of Christ, who rejects the vicarious, substitutionary doctrine of the death of Jesus on the Cross and who rejects the resurrection of our Lord. No matter what the church may claim it believes about Jesus, when it permits a man to be a minister in the church who rejects those beliefs, in effect it is rejecting those affirmations of faith. At the same time, in the United Presbyterian Church, a man was refused ordination because of Biblical grounds he did not believe in the ordination of women. If you are a student of the Bible, you know very well that a person who believes in the infallible Word of God can come down on either side of the issue. But in this case, the church had no room for a man who came down on what the church considered to be the wrong side of the question. So, we have a church which on the one hand accepts a man as minister who rejects historic, Christian doctrine about Jesus, but on the other hand rejects a man on the women's ordination issue. In effect the church is saying it doesn't matter what you believe about Jesus as long as you believe the way we want you to on women's ordination. Now, personally I have no problem with ordaining women. But at the same time I realize that a person in good faith, who believes the Bible as firmly as I do, can differ with me on that issue. But there is no question as to what the Bible says about who Jesus was, what he did, and what it means. Somehow the church has gotten its priorities mixed up dreadfully.

This morning I want to share with you how I view our denomination and what is going on in it. I want to confess in the beginning that I am very biased and what I have to share with you is probably very colored by my own feelings. When I ask myself what is wrong with my denomination, I am reminded of a story. It seems a lady of a pentecostal background came to worship at a Presbyterian church. She was accustomed to expressing her religious joy and fervor in a very loud and happy fashion. When the Presbyterian Pastor prayed, she raised her arms and loudly "amen-ed" him. When the choir sang, her spirit was so moved she stood up, danced in the aisle, shouted, "praised the Lord!" Well, the Deacons came down and warned her to be quiet, but she was so full of joy she could not restrain herself. When the preacher began to preach, she got carried away and stood up and shouted, "You tell 'um, brother." Well, the Deacons just couldn't handle that so two of them went down, got her under the arms, and began to carry her out. She began to cry out, "Oh, I can't stand it, the honor of it; I can't stand it, the honor of it." "What do you mean, 'the honor of it?'" My Lord was carried by one ass and I am being carried by two." Well, in my humble opinion, the problem with our denomination is that we are being carried along by too many asses!

For example, in the first place look at the ministry commitment of the denomination. What do you think is the first business of the Church? Is it evangelism? Is it world missions? Is it new church development? Is it working to build Christians up in the things of the Lord? Well, you may think so, but not our leaders. Instead they are concerned about social issues. Their priorities are to make statements criticizing our government over El Salvadore. Their commitments are to work to build a new world economic order which is socialistic in character. Their commitments are to criticize the free enterprise system as oppressive and sinful. Their commitments are to push for abortion and to support every radical group that comes along.

At the Assembly this year there was one area of the convention center given over to display booths. There the various agencies of the United Church and our Church had stalls to promote their activities. One such booth was given to a group called "The Presbyterian Gay Caucus." The newly-elected moderator of the United Presbyterians has openly affirmed his support for the ordination of homosexuals. Well, I will tell you how I feel about that. Certainly I think people who have homosexual tendencies have rights. But I also think that the general society has rights as well. Homosexuality is a deviant behavior. It is detrimental to the ultimate good of society and is destructive in nature. And while I would defend certain rights of homosexuals, above all I would defend the rights of society--the rights of my children--not to be subjected to such a deviant behavior. There are people who commit adultery and claim they couldn't help themselves. Others steal and say they felt a compulsion to steal. Others rob and rape and commit crimes and say they are the victims of their environment. Maybe we ought to have a booth at the assembly on behalf of adulterers and thieves and rapists. But I tell you the greatest right is the right of the ordinary citizen to be protected from such violations. Our church leadership is standing up and speaking out for all kinds of rights for all sorts of people, but nobody is standing up for the rights of ordinary, law-abiding citizens who work hard and try to serve the Lord. Nobody is standing up for the lost and crying out for their salvation from eternal death. Why, do you realize our entire denomination at the national level has only one person assigned to evangelism? I tell you that is a travesty on the mission of the Church. Our church leaders marched in protest

against Viet Nam and make resolutions about El Salvador. But I have yet to hear one word about Afganastan or Cambodia or the activities of Cuba. I for one am beginning to wonder whose side our leaders are really on. God may be neutral about the free enterprise system, but I can't believe he is neutral about insurrection and killing.

In the second place, look at the ecumenical commitment of our denomination. I for one believe that the Lord wants us all in one Church. I believe that a denomination ought to cooperate with other denominations who also seek to serve the Lord. But the question is, what kind of a Church does the Lord want us to be in? For example, there is the World Council of Churches. We belong to that. It has committed itself to radical social action and has given large sums of money to revolutionary groups of a Marxist character who seek to overthrow their governments. Then there is the National Council of Churches. It has given its support and aid to almost every radical group in the country. Yet, because President Reagan wasn't the president they wanted and because he represented social policies they were opposed to, they refused to send him congratulations upon his election. It reminds me of the pastor who was ill in the hospital. The Elders sent him a get-well card that said, "By a vote of 9 to 7 the Session voted to send you this card."

Yes, ecumenical commitments. In our denomination, the leaders and those who control many of the courts of our church have exercised every ploy possible to force us into union with the United Presbyterian Church. The philosophy has been, union at any cost. The constitution of our Church has been twisted and misused to suit the purposes of those who have certain goals.

A moment ago I said I was not against ecumenical cooperation with other churches who loved the Lord, who seek to win people to Jesus, who try to be the people of God. But does our church have ecumenical relationships with such conservative, evangelical churches? The answer is, "no." For example, there is such a conservative, evangelical organization called the National Association of Evangelicals. They believe in the things the members of this congregation believe in. But do you think our denomination would become a member of that organization? Of course not! Only in recent years after much struggle have they even agreed to send observers to the meetings, let alone participate with them. I know you will be pleased to know that our Session supports that conservative organization and our congregation is a member of it.

Finally, look at the commitment of our denomination in dealing with those who disagree with them. I have always thought that the clue to a man's character is revealed in the way he deals with those whom he perceives to be his enemies. There are, indeed, many evangelical and conservative congregations in our denomination who do not agree with our leadership. What happens to those congregations? Well, when there is a change in the minister, frequently the Presbytery controls who the new minister will be--or at least strong pressure is put on the local congregation and frequently they end up with some pastor who supports the leadership. The fact is, they don't like opposition. Again, suppose a church rebels against the direction of the denomination--suppose it gets fed up and decides it can no longer in good conscience be a part of the denomination and decides to withdraw. What happens? Well, in the United Presbyterian Church, in two cases I know of personally, the Presbytery has put armed guards at the doors of the local church to keep

the people out and changed the locks. They have just taken over the property. In other cases, they have made the local congregations pay large sums of money to them in order for the church to keep its property. For example, the Memorial Presbyterian Church over on Skinker, a member of the United Presbyterian Church, voted recently to withdraw from that denomination. I understand the Presbytery plans to take them to court in an effort to take their property.

In our own denomination, our Assembly this year is sending down a change in the property chapter of our Book of Church Order and asking the Presbyteries to approve it. If it is approved, the chapter will say that a local church holds its property in trust for the denomination. And if the congregation votes to leave the denomination--even if it votes unanimously to leave--the denomination gets all of the property.

Well, that is the way our leaders deal with those who disagree with them and who no longer wish to be a part of what they are doing with and to the Church.

There is great weariness across our denomination. There is unrest, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction. In our Scripture this morning St. Paul says that our faith ought not to rest in the wisdom of men. Surely that is a large part of the problem in our denomination today--we are being led by the wisdom of men. But St. Paul says that our faith ought to rest in the power of God. He goes on to say that when he went to Corinth, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." That is the mission of the Church. It is to lift up the crucified Jesus that lost people might know that he died for them. As long as I am pastor of the congregation, that will be our business, too. We will know nothing in St. Louis but Jesus Christ and him crucified. Our faith will rest in the wisdom of God. As St. Paul put it, the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (I Cor. 1:15) For me, it is time for Christians to stand up for the faith. It is time for Christians to decide, "who is on the Lord's side, who will serve the King." Our closing hymn this morning is entitled, "I Believe in a Hill Called Mt. Calvary." Yes, a hill where Jesus died on the cross for you and me. If that is not true, then nothing in the church makes sense. If that is true, those of us who believe in that hill need to stand up and say so.