

Becoming the Church God Desires Us to Be

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Confession. Penitence. Contrition. Repentance. These words, if we're honest, are not ones that come easily for many of us. Perhaps that's why the Scriptures are continually repeating these words in one form or fashion. God is abundantly aware both of our proclivity for sin and our great reticence to acknowledge that reality. It isn't, of course, that we don't believe there are sins to be acknowledged, indiscretions to be forgiven, and wrongs to be made right. It's just that we rarely believe those sins, indiscretions and wrongs are our own. For as long as humanity has had breath we have found it easier to find, as Jesus described so vividly, the speck in our neighbor's eye rather than the log in our own.

There's a part of me that wonders whether or not that image isn't one that should continually be with us. While walking through most of our church buildings it is readily apparent that the cross is a primary symbol for us. However, I have recently been wondering whether we wouldn't be wise to have random logs strewn throughout our buildings as well — logs that are continually tripping us, and by so doing are a constant reminder that we are prone to self-deceit and self-righteousness. Perhaps this is especially true for those of us who are desirous of change in our denomination.

The problem for those of us yearning for change is that more often than not we are better at seeing what others are doing wrong (Louisville, presbyteries, etc.) and rarely able to see, much less admit, our own shortcomings. It isn't, of course, that Louisville or our presbyteries or whomever couldn't be doing a better job or have fewer failings. It's just that this is never, and I mean never, the right place to begin.

I am fully convinced that any discussion about how things should be done differently (be it a new church body, or presbyteries, or new ways to relate to one another) must always start with confession about where we have fallen short. Not an apology on behalf of others (i.e. "Lord, we're sorry that our denomination has strayed" or even, "Lord, we confess that we evangelicals have been quiet for far too long"), but an old-fashioned, Old Testament, prophet-like, roll around in ashes, gut-wrenching critique of ourselves. The amount of hope that true and radical change can occur is directly proportional to the amount of true and radical confession in which we are able to engage.

If our confession is merely a "passing the buck" then truth be told we will simply be trading one old wineskin for another. For this reason, as people prepare to gather in August, it seems it would be prudent for all to spend some time in these weeks (as well as at the August 25-26 Gathering) beseeching the Lord to examine our hearts. For there are many questions that the Spirit would long to hear us ask before we bestow upon others our great ideas as to what we should now be doing and where we should now be going.

Have we loved our neighbors (as Alan Roxburgh asks, can you name five things in your neighbor's house that you can't see from outside)? Have we been radically hospitable (if you're not sure what this means than make friends with someone from the Middle East and they will show you)? Have pastors had the courage to challenge the congregation to risk and fail? Have elders led the congregation by imagining

not simply how we can get more people inside our buildings, but how we can love those who are outside our buildings more? Have we changed the structures in our own congregations so that they are keeping people at “church” less and allowing them to engage with their neighbors more? Have we adopted Christ’s way of teaching in which, as disciples, our learning is always infused by what we have learned when we are out in the world following Christ (i.e. Luke 10)?

We don’t have to answer all these questions with a resounding “Yes!” In fact, if you did then you should probably go back over them again and make sure you really read them. We do, however, have to be willing to grapple honestly with these questions if we genuinely desire to experience change in our congregations. If we fail to take them seriously and decide instead to simply blame others for our decline, we will continually decline and continue to find someone or something else to which we attribute our struggles.

But when we begin with true confession, we will allow ourselves to be in the proper position to humbly ask where the Spirit is leading. It may be to a new body or new presbytery. Of course, it also might be simply out of our comfort zones and into our neighborhoods with new eyes. Perhaps it is all of the above. Starting with confession and an honest assessment of who we are, though, will be the only way we will become the church that God desires us to be. And that, as we can all agree, must be our hearts’ greatest desire.