

A Tale of Elephants and the Mouse: Presbyterians, 10-A, and the World Church*

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Once a small mouse was playing around the feet of a family of elephants. The mouse suddenly decided to run down the hill away from the elephants. The elephants did not follow the mouse.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) in 2011 is just over one half of one percent of the population of America and America is approximately 5% of the population of the world. We are a very small blip on the radar screen of world Christianity. Sixty percent of the world's Christians are now in the Global South, which is comprised of South America, Africa, and Asia. Paul wrote to the churches of his day and affirmed, "You (plural) are the body of Christ." He also said, "You (plural) are the holy temple." In our day the interconnectedness of each part of the larger body of Christ is more profoundly a reality than at any time since the earliest beginnings of the Church in the middle of the first century. What can be said about Presbyterian world mission and 10-A?

From 1955 to 1995 it was my privilege to serve as a missionary academic, teaching New Testament in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cyprus. For the last sixteen years I have continued in full-time ministry teaching New Testament in this country, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. I lecture primarily for Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, the Armenian Protestants, and the Armenian Orthodox. For the last 13 years I have been honored to serve (as a Presbyterian) as the Canon theologian of the Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh. The air I breathe is that of the larger body of Christ, which is the world Church. It is out of this background that I offer these brief remarks.

The recent decision to change our ordination standards is a rejection of Scripture and tradition as understood by more than one billion Roman Catholics. It is also an offense to more than 300 million Eastern Orthodox in their various communities in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and around the globe.

Western Christianity has been the "superpower" of the Christian world for more than a thousand years. Across the centuries we were able to define what it meant to be a Christian. This is no longer the case. As is well-known, the numerical center of the Christian world has moved South and East. That "global South" is becoming more and more important for the larger body of Christ and they (along with the Catholics and Eastern Orthodox) will see us as having departed from Scripture and tradition as the Church everywhere has known it

for two millennia. Our relationships with them are now freshly damaged.

I am particularly distressed by how our decision will be received in Africa. In one hundred years, Christianity in Africa has grown from 5 million to 385 million people. In the process, African Christians, often at a high personal price, have set aside polygamy. They rigorously opposed their own culture in loyalty to the witness of the New Testament and historic Christian standards of sexual practice. How can we now face them?

Add to this is the reality of our “partner churches” around the world with whom we have served in mission for the last 160 years and longer. They are quickly discovering the change we have made in our ordination standards and they will understand it as betrayal. Many Anglican Archbishops in Africa describe the American Episcopal church as having “walked apart” from what the Church has believed and proclaimed for nearly two thousand years. The same judgment will now be made of us by our partners in mission. This has serious implications for our ability to continue in mission with them.

The countries of the world where we are serving are self-governing. The only way foreigners can live and work in those countries is with work permits and residence cards. These documents are only granted at the request of national Church leaders who invite said “foreigners” (read: missionaries) to serve among them. A significant number of those churches will now be reluctant to welcome our missionaries and accept responsibility for their presence. Furthermore, some (many?) of our missionary colleagues will be deeply uneasy about continuing to serve under our banner. Those who do opt to remain in ministry under the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) course will have accepted the burden of being sent by a Church that has passed 10-A. Most of us are in mourning.

Furthermore, there is the reality of Islam. In the spring of 2003, I was invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury to participate in a Christian-Muslim bridge-building conference of fifteen Christians and fifteen Muslims from around the world. The week-long conference took place in Qatar in the Arabian Gulf. The Iraq war had just begun and I flew there with some anxiety as to what I would have to face.

The conference was co-sponsored and paid for by the Sheikh of Qatar who attended the opening day with a large delegation of top government officials. Sheikh Qardawi, the Imam of Qatar, addressed us. He delivered an impassioned plea for understanding, cooperation, and mutual respect between Christians and Muslims. In his speech he affirmed, “The Bible and the Qur’an agree on many things.” He chose to focus on three points of concurrence. These were:

1. The Bible and Qur’an are for peace and against war. He pointed out that even the Pope was against the war that had just begun in Iraq.

2. The Bible and the Qur'an affirm the sanctity of the family and its importance.
3. The Bible and the Qur'an are united in opposition to homosexuality.

Over the past few decades, Islamicist preachers and broadcasters have delighted in Western scholarship that argues against the authenticity of the Gospel accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus. Now at last (such Muslim preachers often affirm) Christian scholars are admitting that the Gospels are corrupted (muharrif). Naturally, the only pure word of God is the Qur'an on which we must build our lives (goes their argument). Those same preachers have currently been given fresh ammunition with which to attack the Christian faith as a religion that violates its own sacred scriptures. I am very glad that the above mentioned conference is in the past and that I do not at present have to face those discussions. In short, 1.2 billion Muslims will shake their heads in disbelief and despise us.

10-A opens other options. What is wrong with polygamy? There are an estimated five million Muslims in the USA. Their sacred book and 1,400 years of tradition have affirmed the right of a Muslim man to have four wives and as many concubines as he can afford. We are inclusive aren't we? This is a justice issue - isn't it? American Muslims should have the freedom to live out their lives according to their traditions. We should apologize to the Africans and allow the Mormons to "come out of the closet" with their plural marriages. And on our side of the street, if our leadership had the polygamy option, this would help solve the problem of single moms and widows who might like to have a man in their lives. Why not? As long as we are discussing long-term committed relationships - what is the problem? Jesus said nothing about polygamy so he must have approved of it. Paul does not discuss it. Ah yes, there is 1 Timothy 3:2 which affirms that a bishop should be the husband of one wife. But then Paul didn't write 1 Timothy anyway, so that can be overlooked. Besides, if the Bible can be set aside on one issue why not on another? Beyond that there are other options.

Paul told his readers not to become slaves and, if they were slaves, to seek freedom. Speaking pastorally Paul told slaves to obey their masters (because if they failed to do so they could be crucified). He did not endorse slavery. Women in leadership shine through in the New Testament from Joanna to Lydia and Phoebe. 10-A is in a category all by itself.

Regarding our relations with Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, the Global South, our partner churches, and the world of Islam, we have created huge cracks in the ground beneath our feet.

I take comfort in the fact that, numerically speaking, we are a shrinking mouse in the midst of elephants. The elephants will not be influenced by the mouse. But

as regards the larger world beyond our borders, our world mission efforts and relationships have suffered a staggering, self-inflicted blow. Is there any way that those efforts can be rejuvenated and those relationships restored?

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