

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning”

(Psalm 30:5)

Richard Gibbons, Senior Pastor

First Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina

For many of us attending the Fellowship Gathering in Minneapolis later this month, the questions uppermost in our minds will quite naturally relate to the purpose, focus, and direction of the PC(USA). Such questions are of course not new. They have been asked multiple times by sessions and congregations across our nation in recent years. Yet I cannot help but wonder if there is now a new urgency behind such questions.

In listening to the responses that came from the changes in our ordination standards back in May, I consistently hear from across the theological spectrum that “the system is broken.” Yet each time the issues have been discussed, the focus has been on refining and recalibrating “the system.” From within me, however, I hear another voice. A deep, passionate, consistent yearning for a fresh perspective which will liberate me from the restrictive, burdensome mechanism of yet more meetings, agendas, and votes. Please do not misunderstand me; my days are often filled with such things and I fully realize the value of them. However, they have value only if they are enabling ministry and not restricting it. So let us ask the question, is that which “is broken” capable of self-renewal?

While we are asking the difficult questions, let us probe a little further. Are we willing to support and encourage those who are actively engaged in creative dialogue while demonstrating the leadership resolve to tackle the sensitive and uncomfortable issues we are facing? Can we, without being unnecessarily aggressive or stridently polemic, ask the question which is dominating the thinking of so many? Can we as a denomination endure as “a house divided against itself”? This last question is difficult and complex at multiple levels. Yet the question must be asked. We cannot afford to minimize it, marginalize it, or ignore it. It will take a courageous, prayerful, and determined focus to wrestle with the immensity of it. But wrestle we must. Much of our thinking and deliberation in Minneapolis will focus on this issue and if ever we needed to be open and sensitive to the leading of God, it is now. If the answer to our question is no, what then does the future hold? Yet before we consider travelling down a road for which no road map exists, it is always helpful to consider our current position.

Author, lecturer, and management guru Charles Handy helpfully writes, “The paradox of aging is that every generation perceives itself as justifiably different from its predecessor, but plans as if its successor generation will be the same.”¹ Many of us would agree that the world we inhabit today is very different from previous generations. Os Guinness, with considerable insight, comments upon the culture we inhabit by writing, “under postmodern conditions, words lose their authority and become accessory to images. The past is no longer a heritage, but a debris-strewn ruin to be ransacked for a bric-a-brac of beliefs that is as incoherent as it is inconsequential . . . The grand flirtation with the meaninglessness of modernity goes on, but in a party mood. Religion is no longer transcendent, but a recreational pursuit of the connoisseurs of ‘spirituality.’ Art, homes, life-styles, ideas, character, self-renewal, and even belief in God all become auxiliary to sales and the ceaseless consumption of styles.”² The result of such a paradigm shift in our

¹ Charles Handy, *The Age of Paradox*, (Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 1995), 35.

² Os Guinness, *The American Hour* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

culture is reflected in our denomination's wilfully, knowingly, and deliberately removing biblical standards from our requirements for ordination.

Please understand that when all the subtle nuanced arguments are complete, when all the qualifications and caveats have been expressed and the footnotes are in place, a radical departure from biblical standards has now taken place. Resist the temptation to underestimate the significance of what has occurred. The empty clichéd sentiments of denial and doubt have been disguised in the drab deceit of so called "progress." As a denomination we are now examining the Scriptures through a cultural lens rather than examining the culture through a biblical lens. A defining moment has arrived.

So what then does the future hold? My prayer is that as we move towards our time together in Minneapolis, we will ask the difficult questions. I also hope we will come with "great expectations," daring to dream that across our nation God may be moving in unsuspecting ways. Come, praying courageously that in the midst of much sadness over the direction of our denomination, we would hear the quiet, consistent call of God, a call that tenderly seeks to move us beyond the institutional bereavement of living in denial while clinging to the past. Ask the searching question, what is He calling us to today? Dare we discern His purposeful intent and seek for a divine focus? Are we willing to move away from the now neutered "what is" and resolve in our minds to respond to the regenerating creative call of "I am"? If we are willing to contemplate the possible answers, it will be costly and painful. It will leave us deeply disturbed with the insipid stagnation of the status quo.

Yet, within that discontent ultimately lies a desire for intimacy with Him. We know that His presence brings renewal and refreshment to His people. His word regenerates and sustains. His grace enables us to be submissive to His will, to be challenged by His holiness, nourished by His truth, open to His love, and committed to ministry for the long haul. So let us not be afraid, held hostage by the laryngitis of denominational pundits and the "paralysis of analysis." Let us move forward, emancipated from the tranquilizing addiction of cultural accommodation and the moribund impotence of appeasement. The time to ask the tough questions is now. The time for prolonged prayerful engagement with the living God is now. The time to be biblical in our focus, missional in our thinking, and intentional in our action is now. **"Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning"** (Psalm 30:5). The alarm clock is ringing. Good morning, America.