

### Hope Held Together in Christ

Sometimes we like to make things more complicated than they are. And we Presbyterians are sometimes the butt of jokes on this score. Perhaps you've heard this joke: How many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb?

1. One to change it.
2. Another to reprimand the first for changing on the theological grounds that lightbulbs are predestined to go on and off and humans should not interfere with providence.
3. A third to bring the issue to the session.
4. The session to divide and bring it to presbytery.
5. A committee at presbytery to also divide and bring the issue before general assembly.
6. A committee and two subcommittees at general assembly to draft a report, do a study, and come up with a position.
7. General assembly then votes and passes the resolution.
8. Before the change can be implemented, the disgruntled minority then votes to leave and form the Presbyterian Church of Non-Lightbulb-Changing.
9. A professor to write a scathing indictment against the politics of the presbytery, inspiring every armchair theologian to flood popular blogs with responses. (thanks to u/RunIrish for the last one.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/ReformedHumor/comments/30hyit/how\\_many\\_presbyterians\\_does\\_it\\_take\\_to\\_change\\_a/](https://www.reddit.com/r/ReformedHumor/comments/30hyit/how_many_presbyterians_does_it_take_to_change_a/))

Now those who know me and my love for the way we Presbyterians do business, know that I'll be the first to defend our hallowed principle that in the Presbyterian church no single individual is imbued with any meaningful power and influence as far as policy making and decision making goes. But I'll also admit that we can get carried away by taking this principle too far when it comes to things like changing light bulbs and the like.

Interestingly enough though, John Calvin, the 16<sup>th</sup> century French Reformer who is credited with devising our Presbyterian ways of doing things actually was onto something with regard to this human tendency to make things more complicated than they actually are. He along with the other Protestant Reformers, most notably Martin Luther, had a very basic concern over how the Christian religion had evolved by way of the Rome-based Catholic Church. Chief among the many concerns that they had, in a nutshell, Calvin and the other Reformers were alarmed that Christians were being asked to do certain things and to even make cash payments in order to be assured of being in a right relationship with God. Whatever the motive or rationale for these practices, they developed over the centuries since the beginnings of the Christian religion. The church, wittingly or not, had moved away from the stunning simplicity of the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus and said that there was more to it than simply professing faith in Jesus. The Reformers declared that, based on the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, it is by faith alone—faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior—that we are saved and put in right relationship with God. And furthermore, scripture alone, is the church's sole source of authority.

So John Calvin, fully aware of how people can stray from these truths, developed this clunky way of exercising authority through groups of people who hold each other accountable. Calvin would be the first to acknowledge that this makes for slow change in our system of governance. And he would argue that that's a good thing—a more conservative way of making decisions—that keeps the focus where it should be.

While the Protestant Reformation took place in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we can infer from the Bible itself that there were those in the first century who were trying to make the basic good news of God's grace more complicated. In the letter to the Colossians from which we read the opening words this morning, it becomes clear that the apostle Paul was addressing this very issue. Even though Paul, who was a prolific starter of new Christian churches during his lifetime, was not the founder of the church in Colossae, word had gotten back to him about some developments in that church that merited his writing a letter to them addressing his concerns. At the heart of his concern is that the Christians in that community not be led astray by those who were calling for more than simple and profound and straightforward affirmation of faith in Jesus in order to be put right with God. They must resist any and all forces to make it more complicated than that.

Paul makes this case in many places in other parts of his letters to churches in addition to the church in Colossae. In so doing Paul has given us a treasure trove of scripture that serves to keep us on track to this day. Even though the Protestant Reformation rocked the Christian world 500 years ago, there have been countless other times and occasions over the church's 2000 year history in which interpreters of the Bible have seen fit to remind Christians to keep on keeping on with regard to faith alone with scripture as our sole authority.

So here we are in the year 2019. How are we doing regarding our faithfulness to adherence to this basic affirmation of Christian theology? How are we doing at not making it more complicated?

I'd like to suggest today that there are two answers to that question.

The first answer is that I think that those in our community of faith here are doing a pretty good job as far as how we live out our faith in the here and now. In fact, if Paul was writing a letter to us today he might say: "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Bozeman: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. This you learned from Sheldon Jackson and those who followed him, our beloved fellow servants. They are faithful ministers of Christ on your behalf, and they have made known to us your love in the Spirit." (Col. 1:2-8 modified)

Sheldon Jackson, by the way, is the Presbyterian missionary who founded this church in 1872.

In this congregation's 147-year history, the people of First Presbyterian Church have been a consistent and faithful witness to God's love and good news in Jesus. Because of the faith of those who have gone before us and our generation, we are grateful heirs of this good news. We continue to strive to share that in all that we say and do here in our community and wherever our travels take us.

The second answer to how we're doing at keeping the main thing the main thing has to do with how we relate to and present ourselves in the wider culture around us. In our nation today, the Christian church is no longer at the center of who we are as nation.

While many if not most of the founders of the United States were Christians, those founders sought to protect the sanctity of religion from abuse or appropriation by the state. Because our nation has held to a strict separation between the affairs of the government—the state—and the affairs of the church, we have the freedom to be the people we believe God is calling us to be. And, of course, this freedom applies to the adherents of all religions whether it be Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Indigenous or even those who resolutely practice no religion.

We who affirm our Christian faith must be ever vigilant in ensuring that Jesus is at the center of who we are and to whom we give our devotion. If we ever see or observe those who stray from that Christ-centered identity and begin to associate Christianity as being aligned with forces that call for devotion to other focal points whether that be particular governmental or political leaders or particular policies that are not in accordance with our Christ-centeredness, then we must, like the apostle Paul, call our fellow Christians to account.

In such a situation we must be strong in asserting, as Paul did. "For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light." (Col. 1:9-12)

It is good for us to regularly recall how it is that we came to be a disciple of Jesus in the first place. Jesus called, and we answered. For some it is as straightforward as that. For others it is so much a part of who they have been for as long as they remember, that the thought of not having Jesus at the center, results in a feeling of emptiness and void.

It is our call and renewal of that call that binds us together as fellow disciples and followers of Jesus. And in that common calling we find hope for our continued living within the community of the church. Let us renew that common bond that we share as we hold one another in love and in accountability.

Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever! Amen. (Rev. 7:12)