

“Reflections on 40 Years of Faith Presbyterian Church”

Psalm 48

February 3, 2019

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This is the final Sunday evening service of my tenure as the pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church and I thought it appropriate to reflect on the forty plus years that I have been the pastor of this church. I was doing a little bit of mathematical calculation before the evening service; allowing for holidays and Lord's Days away, I figure I have presided at about 1,800 evening services over the last 40 years or so. We find this kind of interest in the past and surveys of the past often enough in the Bible. There is much to be learned from a review of events and all the more when they span an entire generation. We are taught in Holy Scripture that faith, gratitude, warning, and wisdom can all be found in the review of the past. What follows, I admit, is not a sermon; it is more of an address. But what are you going to do about it? Fire me?

As few of you will remember but many of you will not, Faith Presbyterian was founded in 1953, three years after I was born. But do you realize what a different world the 1950s were for Christian churches. Of course, most of you were not alive in the 1950s and for a great many of you, 1953 doesn't seem all that different from 1776! It was, in many ways, a different world. No wonder the ethos, the preaching, and the worship of this congregation then was so different then from what it is today.

The Reformed Faith was in tatters in the evangelical Christian world as a whole in the United States. There were certainly plenty of Christians who confessed it, but it was not the confident and well-supported faith it has become again in our time. The Presbyterian Church of 1953 was very definitely not the Presbyterian Church of Charles Hodge in the 19th century; not even that of Benjamin Warfield in the early 20th century. There were almost no national, public Christian figures who were identified as Reformed or Calvinists. No R.C. Sproul, no J.I. Packer. The fact that Dr. Sproul is dead and that Dr. Packer is now so old that he is no longer seen in public reminds us that a generation has come and gone indeed! The Christian Reformed Church, which was self-confidently Reformed was still, more than would later be the case, a Dutch enclave with few connections with the wider world.

There were few publishing houses providing the church with high quality materials. The reprinting of Puritan and older Reformed works had not yet begun. The ministry of Martyn Lloyd-Jones in London, which was to provide the impetus for that remarkable development, was still almost unknown in the United States. Most American Presbyterians of the conservative type had never heard of J.C. Ryle or John Owen, much less of Samuel Rutherford. Only John Bunyan was widely known and read and only his *Pilgrim's Progress*. The *Banner of Truth* magazine had not yet appeared as it would later in that decade and introduce Presbyterians, many of them for the very first time, to their Reformed heritage. Nor had begun that flood of scholarly studies in church history, in theology, in ethics, and in liturgical theology that, beginning in the 1960s and continuing into our own day, would restore the intellectual confidence of Reformed Christianity. If you could somehow go back and walk into the study of even our best read pastors in 1953 you would be struck by how little of real quality they had on their book shelves; nothing like what is available today. Even when I began my ministry in the late 1970s, there were a number of books

of the Bible for which there was not a single commentary of real quality by a biblical scholar of real weight. That has not been the case for many years. But it was the case in 1953!

Francis Schaeffer, who was likewise to serve as a catalyst to the recovery of Reformed and Presbyterian self-confidence and influence was still a Bible Presbyterian pastor in St. Louis, Missouri, and almost no one in conservative evangelical circles had yet heard of C.S. Lewis though he had been converted in 1930. Had they heard of him, the fact that he was an Anglican and that he smoked and drank would have put an almost insurmountable obstacle in the way of his influence in our conservative Presbyterian circles.

Among conservative, Reformed seminaries, there was only Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. No Covenant, no RTS, no Westminster in California, no Knox or MARS. And, of course, no one had yet imagined Third Millennium and other platforms of distance learning. There were some Bible conferences that were sometimes attended by Presbyterian folk, but these were very different from the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology or the Ligonier Conferences. They were taught, by and large, by Dispensationalist teachers from Dallas Theological Seminary or other such institutions.

Perhaps more interesting to you, there was no ESV, NIV, NKJV, and no NASB. Everyone in the conservative Protestant world still read the KJV, and, among our folk, a great many used the Schofield Reference Bible with its notes, most of them fine, but some teaching the Dispensational system of eschatology, the carnal Christian theory, and so on.

Television was still in its infancy so there was very little if any Christian television and no one had yet heard of the charismatic movement. Billy Graham was a rising phenomenon, but not yet on television. Old line Pentecostals lived in a world of their own. *Christianity Today* did not yet exist and the new journals of Christian thought and cultural criticism were still decades away. No *Christianity Today*, no *First Things* or *Touchstone*, and if there were, the very idea of consorting in Christian enterprise with Roman Catholics would have kept our people at a distance. So much of what helps us today think through our faith and its implications was simply not available to Christians in 1953.

The evangelical Protestant world of 1953 was still primarily fundamentalist, by which I mean several things. Fundamentalism was the product of its origin in the battles for control of the large mainline Protestant churches, battles that the fundamentalists had decisively lost. Like southerners after the Civil War, the “lost cause” became a preoccupation. They tended to relive those battles again and again. From them they acquired an adversarial spirit that was then transferred to their relationships with other Christians. It was not an accident that Faith Presbyterian Church came into being as the result of a division among conservative Presbyterian Christians who held every single belief in common. It would have been difficult to say what convictions or principles divided the new church from the old, and, at the time, no one spoke of any difference in belief, doctrine, or practice. The division was of another kind altogether: personal, circumstantial, a struggle for control.

Furthermore, fundamentalists, having cut their teeth on the battle against theological liberalism, found it easy to define themselves by what they were against. Their view of Christian behavior

was to an unusual degree negative and defensive – focusing on worldly behaviors to be avoided by Christians, the famous five in particular (smoking, drinking, card-playing, dancing, and going to movies). And, having lost the battle for their old churches, having lost their great institutions, they withdrew in a variety of ways from the larger world of religious endeavor and from the culture as a whole. The word they coined to describe themselves was *separatist* and it defined them perhaps to a greater extent than they realized. They were defined by what they had separated themselves from. One of the things that many separated themselves from, wittingly or unwittingly, was fine Christian worship music. Musical worship declined steeply, there being little published of real quality by Christians like themselves. Christians learned less by reading since there were fewer things to read written by people like themselves. The preaching tended to be revivalist because that was the world they inhabited and they knew no other. As a result believers more and more lost a defining sense of their own theology, apart, perhaps from their eschatology, usually to some extent Dispensational, with the pre-tribulation rapture its defining feature. That, of course, further encouraged a still greater lack of interest in the development of a Christian culture. “Separation” was the principle of their life, usually separation even to the second degree: one did not shake the hand of someone who had shaken the hand of a liberal.

On the other hand, there were strengths in these churches as well. First and foremost they loved the Lord and they loved his Word. Many of their leaders had participated in the costly struggles of the first half of the 20th century and had stood up and been counted for the Bible when unbelief was capturing the historic Protestant denominations. They had paid a great price for their stand and, perhaps partly for that reason, were even more committed to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. It was this principle and this conviction in the founders of our church in 1953 that, in my judgment, made possible the better things that were yet to come. The Bible was always going to be our authority and when people read and listen to the Bible as the Word of God, errors will sooner or later be seen for what they are.

What is more, they were Presbyterians. They may not have enjoyed to the same extent the wonderful blessings that come to those who know enough to appreciate the strengths of the Reformed tradition – intellectual strengths and spiritual strengths – but they were Presbyterians. They may not even have really understood what that term meant in the deeper, richer sense; but they founded a Presbyterian church. Our church was established on the theological foundation of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. They certainly didn’t have, they hardly could have been expected to have, a sophisticated understanding of that theological tradition, but, as it were by spiritual instinct, they hung on to the tradition from which they had sprung. That loyalty was to become immensely important in later years.

Moreover, they were mission minded and evangelism minded. Their withdrawal from the culture did not mean that they did not think it important to present the gospel to unbelievers both here and around the world. One of the features of those days, of course, was the evangelistic meeting or, usually, a week or several days of meetings. In addition they all understood that the Christian life was a matter of walking with the Lord, loving and serving him. All manner of good things are possible when you begin there.

Could we, somehow, go back to those early services in 1953, we would find ourselves in some significant respects, in a different world. If they were to join our worship service, if somehow

that were possible, they would find themselves in a different world. But, it was the world inhabited at that time by most American, conservative Presbyterians, indeed by most American evangelical Christians. Our loss of theological focus and conviction meant that we shared much more with the general evangelical population of Christians in the United States in the 1950s than in some ways, we do today. Their worship services were different from ours today, the preaching they heard Lord's Day by Lord's Day also in some respects. But it was believing Christianity and it was that inheritance the founders of our church passed on to us.

Now I say all of that because it was the weaknesses of the church's theological and spiritual position at its founding that led some 24 years later to controversy and still another division. The church was divided and the majority left – the result of the fact that it took a two-thirds majority vote to approve the recommendation of the session to leave the denomination – then the *Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod* – in order to forestall the impending discipline of the church's pastor by the presbytery. That story is too long to tell. Suffice it to say that the church I came to pastor in 1978 was the remnant of that evangelical, semi-dispensational, fundamentalist congregation, Reformed or Presbyterian in name but not in intelligent conviction or ethos. It was more a Bible church than a historic Presbyterian congregation. That was hardly the fault of the founders of our church. Most of the churches in our Pacific Northwest Presbytery at that time were the same. And so it should come as no surprise to learn that virtually all of them passed through troubled waters as they made their way from American Bible churches – which they were in fact if not in name – to Reformed congregations. Faith, Tacoma was simply the first of them to suffer for having a name and a theological and spiritual tradition that were at odds with its actual church life.

Looking back it is quite easy to see that, however wrong the split in 1977 may have been – and you should remember that the folk who gave this church to you had remained; it was the others who left – there was a silver lining in that cloud. It liberated the church from the weight of its past and opened before it the possibility of new things. The previous life of the church had been discredited and one result was an openness to new things on the part of the people who stayed.

Start simply with the sanctuary itself. When I came in 1978 the ceiling was covered with acoustical tile that absolutely defeated congregational singing. Floor to ceiling curtains covering the windows on the south wall contributed to the deadness of the room. So did floor to ceiling slats of Alaskan cedar on either side of the chancel. Recessed can-lighting in the ceiling, with bulbs difficult to replace, meant that there were virtually always bulbs that had burned out but had not yet been replaced. There was a choir loft behind the pulpit, as there was in virtually every American Presbyterian church built after the mid-1800s. The table sat on the floor of the sanctuary. Over the years the transformation of the sanctuary kept pace with the transformation of the church's worship on the Lord's Day.

The choir was moved to the balcony almost at once. Unbeknownst to us at the time, but an important demonstration of the Lord's kindness, we were eventually to discover that the high balcony had the best "voice" in the room. Kneelers were installed in the pews, Faith being perhaps the first church in our denomination – now no longer the RPCES but the PCA – to have done so. It was a happy providence that a member of our congregation in Edmonton, Alberta, the owner of a church furniture company, manufactured and installed the kneelers. Then the

sanctuary was completely remodeled, new windows emphasizing height and light replaced the old, the ceiling was replaced, chandeliers hung making “light” a principal visual feature of the new sanctuary. Height and light everywhere in the Bible are images of the Lord’s presence and transcendence. The choir loft was removed and the front of the sanctuary, the “east end” as the chancel is technically described – even though ours is the west end of the church – was remodeled with a larger pulpit and room for a prominent table. The baptismal font likewise became a permanent piece of the chancel furniture. Only later still did Ken Kvale favor us with the beautiful font that now graces our east end. Baptism had fallen on hard times in the congregation in its previous existence. Baptism of infants was still practiced somewhat, but no one was entirely sure why. All of those changes were made to accommodate the transformation of the church’s worship; no longer that of an American Bible church; now the worship of the mainstream of historic Christendom.

I have great admiration for the congregation in the early years of my ministry here. They were not well taught believers, but they were faithful. The changes that were introduced – a new hymnal (the first edition of *Trinity Hymnal*), kneelers in the pews, a choir singing from the back of the church, a minister wearing a robe, and on and on (changes that were more radical and unprecedented when they were made than they would be today) – in many congregations would have led to the undoing of the church. We lost no one as one change was made after another. These were intrepid souls willing to be convinced. And so it was that the old church grew into a new, better version of itself.

When I arrived, the Lord’s Supper was, as it was generally in American Reformed evangelicalism, a ceremonious ritual of infrequent observance. I had grown up with quarterly communion and it was not until we began learning about the history of Christian worship and the history of Reformed worship that we realized how little there was to commend infrequent communion. In the 1950s our pastors didn’t have the books that would have taught them that quarterly communion originated in Geneva only because Calvin was unable to convince the city fathers that the Lord’s Supper should be observed every Lord’s Day as the climax of the weekly worship of the people of God. He went to his death bemoaning infrequent communion but, by then, it had become a habit and we all know how hard habits are to change! At first we introduced a monthly Lord’s Supper. Then twice a month, alternating between the evening service and prayer meeting for the second observance. Upon the remodeling of the sanctuary in 1991 we went to every Sunday communion, alternating between the morning and the evening services. Then, some years later, we altered the manner of distributing the elements and began the form of ritual we now use, with the congregation coming forward to commune. At the same time we added wine to the elements, one change we would have struggled to make without undo controversy in those earlier years. Again, many of changes we now take for granted were much more radical at the time we made them.

The evening service was a fixture in the Lord’s Day schedule of most Christian churches in America in both 1953 and 1978. The congregation was used to the practice of coming to church twice on the Lord’s Day. Though the practice of a second Lord’s Day service was firmly fixed in evangelical practice, by the time of the troubles in 1977 only a tiny fraction of the congregation, even a tiny fraction of the officers, actually attended the evening service on a regular basis. But over time, the evening service became an increasingly important part of our liturgical life as a

congregation. I remember very well, not so many years ago, before we planted Resurrection Presbyterian Church in Puyallup, people sitting in the narthex because the sanctuary was full of evening worshippers.

I cannot tell you how grateful to God I have long been for a congregation that returns to church of a Lord's Day evening. Selfishly, I should say that I shudder to think of how much less of the Bible I would know were it not that I had a congregation that turned out in strength for evening worship and put me on my mettle to do my best work. We certainly would never have worked our way through Ezekiel or Kings, had I only the morning sermon to preach on the Lord's Day. As the evening service disappears in American evangelical Christianity and in American Reformed Christianity – even in our own PCA presbytery – it is all the more credit to this congregation that it comes for worship and to hear the preaching of the Word of God twice on the Lord's Day as God's people have done virtually from the beginning.

When I arrived in the middle of 1978 the Church's cupboard was bare so far as candidates for office in the church was concerned. Our three elders then were good men and faithful elders, all now with the Lord, but we had no prospect of adding to their number. I remember distinctly the pain I felt upon learning that a young man who been with us for less than two years, but for whom I had high hopes that he might be our first new elder, was leaving us for a job back east. But as the years passed the Lord sent us sterling men whose leadership as elders and as deacons provided spiritual authority, energy, and stability to the church's life and ministry. Troubles must come the Bible tells us, but they can be handled without danger or serious loss if the church is led by godly and wise men as Faith Presbyterian has been for so long. The Lord first sent us an experienced elder from the Philadelphia area, Jack Paist, who with his wife Marion, came to our area to retire. His coming, I have long believed, was a turning point in the history of our church as his life and work became an example for me and then for our younger men to emulate when they were elected to office. I loved and admired him and do not want his name to be forgotten. He was an important part of the history of this congregation as certain other individuals have been, as will always be the case in the life of the church. I appreciate that congregations cannot always know the work that officers do behind the scenes, or how that work is done, but I am in a position to tell you that this church has been distinctly favored by the Lord with the officers that he has provided her. Without such men, for example, we would never have begun Covenant High School in 1992 or managed the major rebuilding project completed in 2005.

Having been influenced by William Still's prayer meeting at Gilcomston South Church of Scotland during Florence and my three years in Aberdeen I was determined that we should have such an outward-focused prayer meeting here. Prayer meetings were still a staple of congregational life in American evangelicalism in 1978, but they were almost universally supported by only a tiny fraction of the church and tended to be inward looking and, frankly, dull. I grew up in such prayer meetings and understand only too well why they were of so little importance to the life of the congregation. I too struggled to believe that anything of great importance was happening there. We began slowly. I never imagined imitating Mr. Still's three hours every Saturday night, but I hoped for a prayer meeting that would cover a lot of ground and concentrate on the extension of the kingdom of God. But while we had a few loyal prayers from the outset, it was hard work to establish a consistent practice of prayer as kingdom work. We were not used to it. I remember very well one evening early on when one of our number

prayed quickly for everything left on our prayer meeting agenda in hopes that by doing so he would bring the meeting to a close! It took some years of practice before we were able to pray for an hour virtually without pause and to pray for matters not only close to home but in far flung places of the world. I think I can safely say that without the prayer meeting we would never have enjoyed the connections we have made with ministries around the world and with so many people in those ministries whom it's been our privilege as a congregation to get to know through the years. We would never have had the connection we eventually made with Khen Tombing's work in Manipur or those of Hope Russia or gained the living sense we have of belonging to the world-wide kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. Without the prayer meeting and its concentration on such ministries, its knowledge of what was happening in places far away, a petition now and again in the Sunday service would hardly suffice to knit us to those saints or create a living fellowship with them.

Only eternity will tell what blessing the Lord granted this congregation through the prayers of the mid-week meeting, but I know that the prayer meeting imposed a kingdom-minded ethos on the congregation that almost nothing else could. So many missionaries have told me through the years how impressed they were by the prayer meeting, how rarely, if ever, they had seen anything like it. We owe much to the stalwart saints who have through many years manned the war room every Wednesday night. May I say that I have some concern for the prayer meeting because our younger men and women are not joining us on Wednesday night in numbers sufficient to ensure that the next generation will be as committed to this ministry as the previous generation has been. Hard working meetings for prayer, as we learn in Acts 12, were a feature of apostolic Christianity. I think we would all say that we want our church to resemble in every good way the churches founded by the apostles. Well, they had prayer meetings!

Early on the congregation had neither the means nor the habit of ministry to those in need, either to those in the congregation or to those in the community. The church had no deacons fund until a year after I arrived. The diaconate had largely lost its special calling to oversee the church's charity in almost all of our American Reformed churches. The renewal of diaconal ministry in our churches over the last generation has been one of the most significant developments in our conservative Presbyterian tradition. After all, the Bible is emphatic about the Lord's concern for the poor. Over the years here at Faith a considerable diaconal ministry developed and nowadays much more money is given away every year to address financial need than was required to meet the entire budget of the congregation in 1978!

I could go on, of course, telling the story of the life and development of the church over these past 40 plus years. But let me stop there and offer some reflections.

Things happened and changes were made piecemeal, as they occurred to me or to the officers and as new people came to our congregation with new ideas and interests. We had no template before us in 1978. Some things that we thought important to do years later I had never thought of doing when I first became the pastor of the church. I admit – it seems obvious to me now – that a different minister would have produced different, perhaps very different results. You take for granted the portraits in pencil of the six heroes of the Reformed tradition that grace the back wall of the sanctuary in the old narthex: Luther, Calvin, Knox, Rutherford, Bunyan, and Jonathan Edwards. They were heroes of mine. Had you had another pastor I doubt those pictures would

hang where they do, reminding us of our past, our great spiritual tradition as we enter the sanctuary for worship, or perhaps a different set of portraits would hang there instead. Indeed, had I been a young pastor in 2008 instead of 1978 it is very possible that those portraits would never have been drawn or hung. I wasn't thinking the same thoughts in 2008 that I was thinking in 1978. And what is true of the portraits is true in more important ways.

That children as young as four and five years of age regularly share the Lord's Supper with their parents is now a commonplace of our worship, something almost to take for granted. But it is not so in a great many PCA churches and I was ten days ago speaking at a conference in a Reformed church in which it is customary for covenant children not to come to the Lord's table until eighteen or even twenty years of age. But having little children at the Lord's Table was not something I was thinking about in 1978. My conviction on that point came later. But in the case of another minister it might never have come. So much depends upon the minister, for good or for ill. It has always been so and is so today. No doubt had your minister been a better evangelist than I am perhaps we would have enjoyed more conversions through the years than we have. We have had conversions, to be sure, I can think of them one by one, summoning up faces and names, but we longed to have more. Still we have had hundreds of baptisms here. I have baptized the very young; I have baptized a woman, a Jewess, who was 85 years of age when she became a Christian. But you take my point. In ways both good and bad the church reflects the convictions and the character of its leadership. It is and must be so. It will continue to be the case as Pastor Nicoletti assumes the leadership of the church.

I cannot say that I had this church as it now exists – with its worship, ministry, and congregational life, its connections – clearly in my mind in 1978. But as time passed, as the Lord sent us people with gifts and graces, as my own convictions developed, as changes in society forced us to consider our responsibilities as Christians in new ways – think of the founding of Care Net and Covenant High School – the church grew and changed, I hope in most ways for the better. But what a mystery of providence it all is. Had I never spent three years in Aberdeen at Gilcomston South Church, we might never have had a prayer meeting; had I never read and been persuaded by Christian Keidel's article on paedocommunion some years after it was first published in 1975 in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, we might not have children communing with us as we do; had I not become convinced that it was wrong for Christians not to kneel for certain prayers, we might not have kneelers in our pews – most PCA churches do not, we're the only one in the Pacific Northwest Presbytery and one of only a very few in the entire denomination; had I embraced some other theory of preaching than that which emphasizes the systematic exposition of the books of the Bible, and on and on, Faith Presbyterian Church would be a different congregation than it is today. Perhaps a very different congregation. Perhaps not a worse congregation, perhaps a better one, but certainly different. The Lord has woven your life together with mine and this is the result, for good I hope more than for ill. And so it is in the life of a marriage, a family, and a congregation. It cannot be otherwise, because God works through human beings. And, of course, I was as are you, also a product of our times. It cannot be otherwise in that respect either. It was time for Christians to rethink the nature and practice of Christian worship, the place of children in that worship, posture in prayer, the importance of a prayer meeting, diaconal ministry, and so on. Had I lived in another time, no doubt some things of great importance to me now would never have occurred to me.

Do you see how impenetrable are the mysteries of God's ways, how little we really understand how profoundly we are shaped by our times and circumstances – whether the fundamentalism of the 1950s, the renewal of Reformed theology in the 1960s and 70s, the era of the internet from the late 90s onward, and so on, and not only our times but our particular, individual circumstances: an article here, a conversation there that redirects our interests and understanding. Out of all of this our sovereign God has formed and shaped a church, this church, and that is what he will continue to do in the years to come under a new ministry. But running as a silver thread through the tapestry of our history is the Word of God that abides forever. What is the life of the church but the alternation of those times when the voice of Holy Scripture has for whatever reason and in whatever respect been muted and not clearly heard, with those times when once again, in this way or that, it is heard clearly once again. As it is in the individual Christian life, so it is in the life of a congregation of Christian people and so it has been here over these past forty years and more.

What will the future bring? Well who knew in 1978? But if we remain a worshipping community after the fashion of the best liturgical practices of historic Christianity, if we are a congregation given to prayer, if we are serious about attending to the Word of God – as the evening service both demonstrates and cultivates – and if we practice with enthusiasm both love for one another and for the lost, and generosity to the poor – chief among the virtues that God loves to reward, Faith Presbyterian Church will remain and become in still new ways, ways perhaps we have not yet imagined, a church the Lord will preserve and protect, bless and use; a healthy, happy place for Christians and their children to live and serve.