

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 29 SEPTEMBER 2019



What Should a Church Look Like?

Peter Barnes

The apostle Jude said that he was very eager to write on one glorious subject – our common salvation – when he found it necessary to write also against those who were assailing the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

In his case, it was a matter of divine inspiration; in my case, it might look more like temptation. Nevertheless, it will be good for us to consider later what we are meant to look like as a church.

My diversion came with news from Union Theological Seminary in New York, which was established in 1836 by Presbyterians. On 17 September

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a tweet told of a chapel service where the congregation confessed to plants, acknowledging the harm they had done to them and so they felt compelled to speak directly in repentance.

There seemed two possible explanations for this: either the plants were mushrooms of the wrong kind or this was an anonymous Babylon Bee effort. [Babylon Bee is a Christian satire site.] However, the thread which emerged confirmed neither suspicion. On the contrary, one devotee tweeted: “We couldn’t be prouder to participate in this work.” Another ponderous tome (if a tweet can be called a tome) asked: “Do I treat plants and animals as divinely created beings?”

Union News braced itself against any criticism and affirmed: “The diversity and breadth of our chapel services is a huge part of what makes Union *Union*. And we wouldn’t change it for the world.”

So far there has been no message of forgiveness from the plants, so the whole exercise seems to have been in vain.

We are meant to confess our sins to God (1 John 1:9) and to one another (James 5:16). We are to

take care of all creation (e.g. Leviticus 25:1-7; Deuteronomy 20:19-20), but plants seem less than forthright in their willingness to forgive.

I could not help but recall the visits of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Union in 1930-31 and again in 1939. In those days it was the bastion of American liberal theology, and Bonhoeffer lamented that there is “no theology here” and that the students are “completely clueless”. His strictures on worship services were not mild. He referred to one as “simply unbearable”.

On another occasion, after hearing the professor of homiletics at Yale, Bonhoeffer considered that such preaching was likely to render people libertine, egoistic, and indifferent. He called the church itself “a temple of idolatry”. The text was not from Scripture, and it was all about “accepting a horizon”. So Union has been a long time in decline. Indeed, it has managed to fall off the horizon.

One cannot go through a General Assembly [such as the recent triennial meeting of the Presbyterian Church of Australia] without asking: “What are we to be as a Church?” The risen Christ speaks through the Holy Spirit to seven congregations in what was then called Asia (now Turkey) in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, and these seven letters tell us what He expects of the Church.

We are to be people of holiness and patient endurance who press on without becoming weary (Revelation 2:2-3). Not only are these attributes to be seen in us, but we are to be a people who are growing in love and faith (Revelation 2:19). In persecution we are to be fearless and unmoving (Revelation 2:10, 13).

About AD155 or 156 the local Roman proconsul tried to intimidate the early church father Polycarp of Smyrna by threatening him with the wild beasts, but Polycarp was unmoved. He then threatened to burn Polycarp at the stake. Again, Polycarp was unmoved: “You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little while is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly.” The frail and aged Polycarp was immediately led out to be executed.

In matters of doctrine and ethics, we are not to tolerate false apostles and teachers (Revelation 2:2b, 6, 14-15). Faith is not gullibility but includes the capacity to test what is right and good, and to be discerning. A tolerance or forgiveness which is too wide-ranging is simply wrong, and an affront to the gospel (Revelation 2:20-23). Above all, we are to be humble and zealous, and remember that we in ourselves are nothing (Revelation 3:15-17).

“Give me a man in love,” said Augustine, “he knows what I mean. Give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far away in this desert, who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the Eternal Country. Give me that sort of man; he knows what I mean. But if I speak to a cold man, he just doesn’t know what I am talking about.”

In short, Christ is looking for works, patience, discernment (Revelation 2:2), faithfulness even under persecution (2:10, 13; 3:10), biblical truth (2:14-15), discipline of sinners (2:20), true life (3:1-2), and zeal (3:19). He is grieved when we lose our first love (2:4) or compromise with the world (2:14, 15, 20).

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Small wonder that we are called upon so often to repent! There is nothing at all about confessing to plants. The much-maligned Puritans used to have a saying which gets to the core of the Church’s mission: “If Christ be anything, He is surely everything.” We are to reflect Christ in word and deed.



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