

REPORT TO THE PRESBYTERY OF GRAND CANYON

November 15, 2003

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The word of the Lord from Genesis 4:16: “Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”

Here’s a question to ponder. How can Grand Canyon be an ideal presbytery in a world of total depravity? Another way to pose the question is this: Is it possible for Grand Canyon Presbytery to function in a fully efficient, healthy, spiritually sound, cooperative, and generous way when close to 100% of our members are flawed and sinful individuals?

Recently I re-read a book that I first read more than three decades ago. It’s called *The Peter Principle*, by Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull. The premise of the book is that in a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to the level of her or his incompetence. Now I know that we Presbyterians don’t like the word hierarchy. We insist we are connectional, not hierarchical, and technically this is correct. There are, of course, adaptations of this principle for volunteer organizations, such as the Presbyterian Church, where paid and unpaid people work side by side in partnership. And whether we like the word or not, we do function with administrative levels of authority that seem a lot like hierarchies to the average person. Theoretically, people who stay in an organization long enough, according to Peter and Hull, eventually reach a level of incompetence, unless they consciously adopt creative strategies for avoiding movement to other positions they’re not suited for.

When I first read the book, I was working for a major insurance company, and I observed the Peter Principle in operation there when people who were really good at their jobs were regularly promoted to other jobs completely different from the ones they were good at. It happened to me, with the unanticipated result that I left the company to go off to seminary. But that’s a story for another time.

A third of a century later I have re-read this book with different eyes. Those of you who follow the comic strip Dilbert know that it chronicles the Peter Principle in action in the world of business today. However, what fascinated me this time was seeing how the Peter Principle is alive and well in the institutional church. It’s not that everyone is incompetent. Rather, at any given time, people who truly love their work and do it well function side by side with people whose gifts are not well matched for ministry.

I don’t want to make too much of this. In business, optimum efficiency is important so that profits will be high. Efficiency is not necessarily a goal in the church. Faithfulness in relationships and demonstrating the power of the Gospel are more important than monetary rewards. There is an essential part of who we are as a church that requires the participation of many kinds of people, some of whom may not be very skilled at ecclesiastical chores. A lot of what the institutional church does is to invest time and money in people and ministries that are not by any secular standard profitable.

I'll leave it for others to judge whether I've reached my level of incompetence as a presbytery executive. I confess that this is the level at which I feel called to serve, and following the advice of Laurence J. Peter, I'm always searching for creative ways to insure that I will never be considered for a position in any higher echelon of the church. But that, too, is another story.

The point is that if we hold a basic assumption that we are all cracked earthen vessels, how can we expect the church and, in particular the presbytery, to function perfectly? Why do we judge ourselves so harshly for failing to be a presbytery in Eden, when, we're really a presbytery in the land of Nod?

Ah, but what if we were a presbytery in Eden? What would that look like? I have my own fantasy list. In the Prelapsarian Presbytery of Grand Canyon, we are all busy enough to feel needed doing things we're good at, but we have plenty of unpressured time for prayer and spiritual reflection and fun. In the presbytery in Eden, no one feels the need to caucus with like-minded people for strategic advantage or to gain power. Rather, everyone enjoys mingling with and learning from people with different views. There is general agreement about matters of polity and theology but no rigid enforcement of orthodoxy. There is plenty of money for our program needs and plenty more to give generously to mission beyond the bounds of our garden.

In our presbytery in Eden, people genuinely care for one another. Our sanctuaries are secure places for anyone and everyone to gather for prayer and adoration of God. Our sanctuaries are also places where suffering strangers who stagger into Eden from Nod can safely reveal their wounds and receive care. In our sanctuaries and in our meetings no one need be afraid or feel excluded. In this fantasy presbytery, anyone who covets power and control is automatically disqualified from having them.

Speaking of power and control reminds me of a request I have periodically made in jest to our Council. Do you remember the old radio and TV program Queen for a Day? I have asked the Council to make me Bishop for a Day, granting me the authority of a bishop for one day each year. Just one day -but what a day that would be! Boy, could I make some changes! I'd prepare myself for weeks, ready for action at the stroke of midnight!

I know, of course, that neither the Council nor the Presbytery can grant such authority, and in truth, I really don't want to be a bishop. I've invested too much of my life in giving away power rather than accumulating it. I much prefer the collective bishop that is the presbytery when meeting.

The reason I mention this is that some among our fellowship tend to assume I have more power or control than is actually the case. I need to confess to this body that sessions, Pastor Nominating Committees, interim search committees, and presbytery committees regularly ignore my advice and do what they want. And maybe that's a good thing. Our system calls for my advice but not consent. An Executive Presbyter in the PC(USA) is not considered infallible, even when speaking *ex cathedra*.

Our polity is built upon the principle of checks and balances, which is in turn derived from our Calvinist understanding of human depravity. A certain amount of healthy suspicion is built into our church structure. We avoid investing too much power in too few people. We spread our decision-making around among as many people as is practicably possible. Now, of course, doing things this way is slow, inherently inefficient, and costs a little more, but it is consistent with our characteristic theology.

The ultimate power in the PC(USA) resides in our Constitution. But even that power is limited. The Confession of 1967 sums it up well in paragraph 9.40: “The church thus orders its life as an institution with a constitution, government, officers, finances, and administrative rule. These are instruments of mission, not ends in themselves.” Presbyterian polity, the paragraph continues, “seeks to protect the church from exploitation by ecclesiastical or secular power and ambition.” In other words, our polity was written to help the church survive in the Land of Nod. Such protection would not be needed in the Garden of Eden. Thus it is all the more important for us to offer safe refuge for those who are suffering from the conflicts and struggles of life in a broken world.

Of course, these conflicts and struggles occur inside the church, as well. We Presbyterians are known for our disputes. And the whole time we are being disputatious, we also cry out for peace. In his essay “On Mending the Peace of the Church” Erasmus wrote, perhaps tongue in cheek, in 1533, “We have put up with strife for too long a time; perhaps mere exhaustion may enable us to find peace.” An interesting observation. We may achieve peace ultimately because we are too tired to keep fighting. Not because we have reached agreement, not because we have reconciled, but because we are exhausted from the long struggles. Such truces do not last, however. They simply provide respite before returning to hostilities. Erasmus went on to say that the real task is to “establish peace in the Church with moderate advice and calm minds.”

So, how do we build and maintain a faithful and peaceable presbytery in the land of Nod? The answers to this question will vary depending on theological assumptions. Those whose theology tends more toward enforcing God’s law will paint the picture differently from those whose theology tends more toward dispensing God’s grace. The ideal may be an equal balance between law and grace, but few people are genuinely equally balanced in this regard. The vast majority of people invest more emotional energy in one or the other.

And most people make distinctions between corporate and individual sin. Thus, some who would be inclined to approach individual failings with grace may support legalistic means to deal with corporate misdeeds. And vice-versa. I believe compelling arguments can be made for applying law or grace in various ways in differing situations. Erasmus was onto something. Moderate advice and calm minds are needed to find lasting peace.

Of course there is a problem with moderation. It’s hard to nail down. I have friends whom I consider to be very liberal who identify themselves as moderates, and I have friends whom I view as very conservative who call themselves moderates. And in

all cases they sincerely see themselves this way. From this I conclude that a moderate position may be one that looks toward the center but is not *in* the center. Moderation is defined more by an attitude of goodwill than by any body of doctrine.

Returning to the question I asked at the beginning of this report about being an ideal presbytery, I suggest that it is impossible for us to function perfectly. If we were capable of achieving ideal perfection, we would not be Calvinists and thus would not need to be governed by our Presbyterian polity. We can do a fairly decent job most of the time, and it is certainly good to keep visions of the presbytery in Eden before us as something to strive for. But we must not let disappointment overwhelm us when that vision inevitably fails to blossom fully in the acrid soil of Nod.

Now, there is a way we can achieve a lasting peace through what Erasmus called mere exhaustion. We can fight among ourselves till all our strength is gone and our resources are depleted. This is the peace that descends on an empty sanctuary, when all the people have gone and won't come back. And we could take some satisfaction in such an outcome, because it would provide yet one more illustration of our belief in human depravity, as if we needed another illustration.

Or, we could accept the fact that as humans and as Presbyterians we will never get everything exactly right. Therefore, we are obliged always to hold open the remote possibility that, even though we are most likely completely correct in what we believe and do, there exists nevertheless a teeny wisp of a possibility, however distant, that we might, under some circumstances, be mistaken. Acceptance of this obligation, friends, can lead to more restful sleep at night. A sliver of humility can do wonders at relieving mere exhaustion.

Thank you for listening.