

PRESBYTERY OF GREATER ATLANTA

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“Postmodern. Post Denominational. But Not Post Presbyterian”

Scripture Lesson: I Kings 18:20-39

By

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The setting is Mt. Carmel. Over here is Elijah, prophet of Yahweh. Over there are the prophets of Baal. Elijah flings down the challenge, “You call on your God, I will call on my God. The God who answers by fire is God.” This showdown came in a day when the faith of Israel no longer enjoyed unquestioned allegiance from the people — just as we mainline churches today no longer enjoy a leg up in status in Western society. In Elijah’s day, Biblical faith had to prove itself on display out in the open in a demonstration of power before the world. In the same way, our world says to today’s church, “Show us something. Where’s the fire? What difference does your religion make in the real world?”

Post Christendom

In recent times a couple of new words have entered my vocabulary. The first is “Post Christendom.” Over the past century the society out there has moved right out from under the church bringing to an end a thousand year era in Western Civilization known as “Christendom.” Under Christendom, Christianity was the assumed consensus of culture and it was generally considered right for everyone to do “the Christian thing.” The downside of holding up Christian ideals in a society where people weren’t truly changed by the gospel was there was a lot of hypocrisy of course — and sometimes cruelty. Look at how an unwed mother was treated in a small town or the persecution of a homosexual person. Often, under Christendom there was tolerance for racism and the abuse of power. Because of

these and a host of other factors, the influence of the church has declined since the beginning of the 20th century and has plummeted precipitously since the end of World War II.

To grasp this you need only step out your front door and think your way around your neighborhood. Forty years ago, you’d look at the houses on your street and think: Methodist, Episcopalian, Church of God, there’s someone who hasn’t found a church home yet so I’ll invite them to my Presbyterian church, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Baptist, Baptist — at least in the South they propagate like rabbits!

Today, chances are you’ll be thinking, “There’s a Hindu family over there and a Muslim family next door.” There may be a family that you’ve never met, but they have a bumper sticker that has a picture of a fish with legs that is labeled “Darwin” and that fish is swallowing this little fish with a cross inside it which symbolizes the church. Now, that will be an interesting conversation. There may be a house with two women and their automobile bumper sticker says, “A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.” Then on the corner is a family that seems pretty traditional, after all they have 1.2 children.

This is the new world in which we do church. This is our world in which Christianity was once privileged and is now being moved more and more to the margins.

Let me give you a close to home example — our own beloved hometown newspaper,

The Atlanta Journal Constitution. When I first came to Atlanta seven years ago, my Saturday morning ritual was to go outside, pick up the newspaper, flip through the sections and pull out “*Faith and Values.*” Then I’d sit down with a cup of coffee and the AJC and read through the news of the Atlanta churches.

Have you tried that lately? There is no more “*Faith and Values*” section. Well, not exactly. The news of religion has recently been demoted to a subcategory of the Saturday entertainment section in the newspaper. So now you look for the “*Living*” section and several pages in, down below the fold, you find the news of the churches next to who’s singing at Smith’s Olde Bar. Now I know you may expect me to want to start a Presbytery-wide letter writing campaign to change all this, but no way. This is one of the greatest things ever to happen to the churches of Atlanta.

I mean how cool is it that somebody flipping through the AJC on Saturday looking for a place to go on Saturday night may instead find worship times for Sunday morning?! Under the old system an atheist could go through and pull out the *Faith and Values* section and drop it in the trash. But if he or she does that now, they are not going to know what’s on television tonight.

Instead of being isolated and on a pedestal like in the old days, we’re now embedded in the patterns and the rhythms of our city’s life amidst concerts and plays, and movies and restaurants. We’re now positioned in our post Christendom world to be salt and light as Jesus calls us to be.

Missional

And that leads to the second new word to enter my vocabulary of late and that is the word “*missional.*” Now it seems everybody has their own spin on the word *missional.* “*Missional*” is not a campaign for churches to give more money to missions, as some would have us believe. Nor is it Christians having tattoos and meeting in bars in a super hip

lifestyle, as others would have us believe. *Missional* means nothing less than that the organizing principle for all we do in the church is to serve God’s mission to the world.

God is a sending God

To be *missional* in this new Postchristendom society, I would like to suggest, requires that we repattern ourselves in three ways. **First, we need to go from being attractional to being missional.** An attractional church understands its whole purpose as getting people in through the doors — have pretty carpets, nice facilities, lovely stained glass windows, exciting programs, fill the seats. Certainly there’s nothing wrong with that. But the *missional* church exists to prepare and equip God’s people to go out and serve Jesus Christ in their neighborhoods, schools and work places. What’s exciting about this new understanding is it goes back to the core dynamic of the Bible—that God is a sending God. In the beginning all was darkness and chaos until God sent forth his Word. “*Let there be...*” Suddenly there sprang order and beauty and form in the galaxies. A pile of inert dust lay there, until God sent forth his breath and the dust rose up as man/woman, a living soul. Then later this sending God sent his servant Abraham to bless the world. Then God sent his people out of Egypt into the promised land. Then in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son into the world. His Son sent his Spirit upon his disciples. And this sending God who sent his Son who sent his Spirit in our day sends us out these doors into Atlanta and the world to serve his agenda bringing healing and wholeness and witness to the world. Of course, we love when people come to worship, but our be-all and end-all is the *Missio Dei* — the Sending God whose Son commissions us saying, “*As the Father has sent me, I am now sending you.*” In this new world we’re moving from being attractional to being *missional.*

Our world is not compartmentalized into “sacred” in here and “secular” out there.

Second, we need to focus our ministry beyond the church gathered to the church scattered. Through the years as a pastor I’ve had a certain kind of counseling conversation. Someone will say to me, “I hate my job. It is so godless out there in workplace. I feel aimless and without any purpose. I want my life to count for something. I sense God calling me into the ministry.” As much as I respect this person’s feelings, they could not be more erroneous in their understanding of the arena of God’s activity. In the Bible only a tiny number of people are called into a religious setting to serve God. Can you name one Bible hero who was a priest? Ezra certainly was a distinguished figure, but not exactly in the top tier. Aaron, Moses’ brother, was hardly heroic. He caved in to the Israelite’s demands for a golden calf. As for great heroes, Abraham was a rancher and businessperson, Joseph was a government administrator, Caleb and Joshua were generals, Nehemiah was sort of a FEMA administrator who rebuilt a devastated city from the ground up. I read somewhere that of 45 divine interventions mentioned in the Book of Acts, 39 are in the agora or marketplace. Our world is not compartmentalized into “sacred” in here and “secular” out there. God does not recognize one square centimeter of this universe that does not belong to God. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given unto me.” God cares passionately about the lives our members live in the world, Monday through Saturday.

Churches need to go from being cruise ships into being aircraft carriers

I heard someone suggest a naval metaphor: that churches need to go from being cruise ships into being aircraft carriers. The typical church today is a cruise ship, like the Love Boat. We all get together to have a swell time with the pastor as cruise director. We love each other. We love our ship and, of

course, we love God too.

Extending the influence of God’s kingdom

On the other hand, the church as aircraft carrier means people come on board to receive a deployment beyond the mother ship. Our mission is to launch God’s people out into “enemy territory.” Of course, the military image is faulty because our enemy is not flesh and blood, but realms of injustice and exploitation, the abuse of power, hopelessness, unbelief, materialism and all the false gods that stand against the righteousness of God’s kingdom. In this model, we, elders and pastors, are like naval officers who train the pilots to launch and establish air dominance, thereby extending the influence of God’s kingdom throughout the city. Each goes out to fulfill her or his mission to extend the reach of God’s love, authority and kingdom in Atlanta and beyond.

Now there are some amazing missions our members fly into the most unlikely territory. I want to read you an email I received a few weeks ago from a young man who lifted off from aircraft carrier Peachtree:

“Vic,

I’ve (only) met you once at church, (and) I’m certain you don’t remember me! :) Anyway, my name is John Armbrust and I graduated from Duke in 2004 and have been teaching in Atlanta the past 3 years through a program called Teach for America. During my time in Atlanta (I just moved to L.A. a few weeks ago), I attended Peachtree and during the summer of 2005, I was one of seven teachers who went over to Lahore, Pakistan to help train teachers for the Presbyterian Education Board of Pakistan. Well, this is where the story takes a strange twist.

I play poker as a hobby, and I was lucky enough to win a seat to the Main Event of the World Series of Poker (\$10,000 buy-in) last year for (only) \$33. I missed out on winning lots of money last summer, but during my time out there, I wrote numerous emails to friends and family, and they had the time of their lives watching me progress through the tourney, and they all "wanted to be a part of it again..."

So this summer, I sold "shares" of myself. Basically, for \$140, you could have 1% of whatever I won at the World Series of Poker's Main Event. Well, through a combination of good skill and good fortune, I finished 18th out of 6,458 entrants...which was good for \$381,302!!!.... That's a lot of money for a teacher!! So the story gets even more interesting...

I believe in tithing, and I wanted to lead by example and find a good cause for my money, so I decided that I'd tithe my portion of the winnings ."

To make a long story short, John Ambrust wrote all the people who bought shares in his performance and asked them to tithe their winnings too....

John's email continues:

So, without going into gushy detail, there is no organization on the planet I'd rather support than the Presbyterian Education Board of Pakistan. Well, the dust is finally

starting to clear, and barring any large final donations, I've now raised over \$40,000 for the P.E.B. in Pakistan."

Can you believe it? John Ambrust flew a successful mission over Las Vegas! From attractional to missional. From cruise ship to aircraft carrier — launching and empowering the church scattered.

Today, what leads people to faith is experience.

Third, we need to move from logical arguments for faith to demonstrations of God's power. When I was young we were always looking for some distinguished scientist or a scholar who could provide a rational defense of Christian doctrine. Today, what leads people to faith is experience. I have a friend who until recently was in campus ministry and tells of having conversations with a brilliant young agnostic. And through a series of conversations, this campus pastor was able to answer each one of the intellectual challenges this young man brought against the Christian faith. He gave him books to read, had philosophical discussions and after several months this young man in the discussions would just be nodding, as in, "Yes, yes. I understand." Given this and given this and given this, ergo Christianity makes perfect sense. My pastor friend was so excited. He said, "So, Christian faith is clear to you?" The young man said, "Crystal." My friend said, "You believe Christianity is true?" "Yes, I do," said the student. My friend said, "Now you're ready to become a Christian?" The student said, "No." Somewhat stunned my friend said, "Why not?" The student replied, "I just can't see any difference it would make."

Show me how it matters

Today's generation comes to faith not up in their head, but down in their heart. Their motto is, "Hit me in the gut with it." Show me how it matters.

We have to show forth the difference Jesus makes

So, here we are right back where we began—with Elijah up on Mt. Carmel. All around us the world is saying, “What have you got? Show us something. Where’s the power?” Somehow in our lives we have to show forth the difference Jesus makes.

Our lives are what have to catch fire.

And there’s no getting around it. Up on Mount Carmel you and I have to crawl up onto that altar. Our lives are what have to catch fire. Paul says in Romans 12:1, “*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.*”

To be crucified with Christ means three things: the person on the cross is facing in only one direction, he is not going back and he has no further plans of his own.

What’s wrong with our denomination is a sickness I find deep within myself, and that is lukewarmness. I’m forced to admit more and more these days that real Christianity requires a far greater intensity of focus and humility than I want to give. Somehow we’ve got to define the normal Christian life back into what it was in the Book of Acts. Paul tells us what that was when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ and the life I now live is no longer my life, but the life Christ lives in me.” A.W. Tozier wrote that to be crucified with Christ means three things: “The person on the cross is facing in only one direction, he’s not going back and he has no further plans of his own.”

“I chose Jesus”

I met one of those people three weeks ago in Houston at our Presbyterian Global Fellowship Conference. Urgessa Biru, a Sudanese pastor, told in matter-of-fact tones how as a teenage boy when he became a Christian he was disowned by his Muslim family. He said, “I had to choose family or Jesus. I chose Jesus.” Then he went to the university where he was discriminated against

for his faith and finally given an ultimatum: convert to Islam or leave. He said, “I had to choose an education or Jesus. I chose Jesus.” Later, he migrated to Canada and at last received his degree and went on to earn a PhD. Then he sensed God calling him to return to Ethiopia to do ministry among the poor. He went back and before long found that in spite of his service to the poor, local religious leaders had given a fatwa calling for him to be killed. Urgessa went directly to the extremist leaders and said, “I have come back to Ethiopia to love you and to serve you. Please know that if you kill me, you will have done so because of my love and service to you.” Today a number of rural Muslim villages have opened their arms and are welcoming Urgessa’s ministry to their poor and hungry. There was something else I noticed that really moved me during Urgessa’s talk. The conference was using image magnification screens. Urgessa’s image was ten feet high so the fabric of his clothing was magnified. His dark suit coat was frayed with streaks of white perspiration stains showing through. I couldn’t help but think, “So that’s what wins on Mt. Carmel.” A life aflame with love for God. One who demonstrates in his own being the power of saying, “I chose Jesus. I chose Jesus.”

Let’s choose Jesus.