

## ***The Future: Going Where No One Has Gone Before (50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the International Presbyterian Church)***

### ***Revolutionary Values***

Like so many of you, my life changed through the life and work of both Edith and Francis Schaeffer. The first book I read after my conversion, other than the Bible, was Schaeffer's *The God Who is There*. It changed my life. It not only offered an alternative to my disappearing within a kind of middle class American spirituality, it gave me the sense that God would truly change the world through changed people like us. It served as a kind of launching pad for the rest of my life. I began, in small and halting ways to believe that God was an ultimate revolutionary overturning a world we had ourselves turn upside down, through what Schaeffer termed "true truth," the truth that pervades every area of life in every part of the globe.

Today, as I reflect on the IPC, I am struck by just how profoundly God works, particularly despite our own habitually lowered expectations and inadequacy. Somehow God always finds a way, his way. Today is an opportunity to reflect on just how good God is and how much he has provided, but there is something more, much more. We also need to look forward and upward. I believe with all my heart that what we have experienced thus far is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. As we consider the future, let me suggest two revolutionary values that should guide our endeavours. The first of these is a God-sized vision and the second is a radical reliance on God.

### ***A God-Sized Vision***

The last few years have seen us re-embrace the idea of the church militant. We have, through a variety of means, come to expect that the Church indeed is meant to grow, in numbers, in size, in scope, and particularly in its vision for Christ and his Kingdom. We are, and there is magic in these words, an International Presbyterian Church. What a concept! No longer do international borders have to serve as a barrier to the expansion of the Kingdom. Yes the Reformation and its aftermath serve as an anchor for us, but the metaphor itself can be a dangerous thing. Anchors help stabilize the ship and keep it from foundering on the rocks. On the other hand, anchors all serve as drags. They impede motion. The national church served a great purpose. It safeguarded what Luther, Calvin, and Knox suffered to give us. It protected the Biblical church.

Times are changing fast. Today, we are facing a rapidly shrinking, cosmopolitan world. The world has come to the West and the West is found all over the world. Things are far less predictable, but they are also far more exciting and accessible. Tight, insular churches interested in keeping a foreign world out are already in the process of being bypassed or overwhelmed with pluralism, postmodernism, and above all, diversity. This is where we come in. Think about our name, the International Presbyterian Church. Words are so powerful, but we often gloss over their import because they become so familiar to us. Consider the word "International." There is a revolution contained in those 13 letters. It is revolutionary because for the first time it gives Presbyterianism the opportunity to not only be part of the international community but form that community. Far from being an anachronism, and a throwback to an earlier time, sidelined by newer expressions, it seems to me that God has placed the IPC right at the crossroads and the forefront of a rapidly spinning world. Because we have a heritage that goes back to the

Reformation, it can be assumed that we remain in that past. The point I want us to see is that the IPC is actually facing the future and not just the past. We are, therefore, in a unique position to be used by God, because we have been singularly framed for just such a time as this. The IPC values the transformation of the world by the Gospel. It also cherishes a multicultural diversity and a fraternal, rather than restrictive identity that produces churches eager to take the gospel to a rapidly changing world. We are, in other words, part of a global family or worldwide web, if you prefer, as an expression of God's present and future Kingdom. In other words, this Presbyterianism is now and it is tomorrow, not just a revival of some better yesterday.

Consider the implications of this. Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christianity* prophesies the re-assertion of religion as the dominant social and cultural force in the world. His work outlines the triumph of faith systems, particularly Christianity over secularism. It is, however, a Christianity bubbling out of Africa, Asia, and Latin America not the West. It is diverse, often not doctrinally orthodox, passionate, and morally rigorous. Its members already populate cities such as ours and already account for many if not most of the conversions experienced. Staid, inflexible, culturally westernized churches are and will be bypassed by this flood of eager evangelists. It is possible to see in all of this a threat to our system of truth and church government. Some do and they are already shoring up their defenses. We have, however, another choice. Rather than seeing in all of this a confusion of tongues, a second Tower of Babel and a curse, we can view it as a major step in God accomplishing his Great Commission. Rather than just sending us into the world to make disciples, God is blessing us by bringing the people here. Babel scattered God's creation. Now, it seems to me, is God's time for gathering together this same creation. How exciting it will be for the IPC to be a diverse church, envisaging the nations all being part of one Body. Can you not see how perfectly God has positioned us for all of this? We have an opportunity to work with God's international family, the Church with our own growing bodies of truth and diversity.

More than that, we have an opportunity to take directly the gospel to these people straddling the gap between their old faith systems and cultures and the new world. That old world offers nothing but tried and failed strategies or faith systems for coping with a fallen world. The new offers secularism, pluralism and materialism, all of which are ultimately barren. We can stand in that gap with a cross, the only answer to false gods and shattered dreams. My friends, this I believe with all of my heart, is our time. We have new work started that already points the way. We need today to pledge ourselves to seeing that work extended and enriched.

Be encouraged, God is bringing worlds and galaxies of worlds that do not know the saviour to us. We have new work in Western and Central Europe. Pray that God uses that as the tip of regional icebergs. We have, for the first time, churches with membership emerging from the darkness of the Muslim world that eagerly seek affiliation with the IPC. In Affinity, we have an extended family with whom we can partner to see the United Kingdom revolutionized by Christ. Through all of this, we can glimpse God's design as he weaves a web of faith that encircles the globe and renews his Creation. Perhaps, if you look around you, you will see small churches with redeemed, deeply scarred members. I see pictures of Christ, emerging from beneath the scars and filling Presbyteries in Britain, Belgium, Romania, France, Italy, Bangladesh, Turkey, Indonesia and nations that exist beyond my imagination.

### ***A Radical Reliance***

None of this vision, however, will be ours if we attempt to tackle the future with the idols of the present. How could we ever envisage a changed world if we

ourselves are not also changed people? Nothing illustrates this value better than Peter in the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman soldier in Acts 10 and 11. It is a rich story. Cornelius, the devout seeker, has to be shone the way to Christ, the end of his journey of faith. The person chosen to show him the way to Jesus, however, is a Peter that has himself to be converted from his own insular Judaism to a global vision of Christ. My point is simple. If we are to be used by God to change the world, we must be changed ourselves. I do not know if the proportions are exact, but I am convicted of the fact that a fallen world is turned right-side up as we ourselves are turned right-side up.

The point, I think, is that the ways of the world are not the ways of God and they should not be our ways. I am not talking about smoking, drinking, dancing or the like. The way of the world is the way of self. It is found in the dead hand of self-reliance and even in professionalism. In our own fallenness, we believe that somehow we hold the key to making life work. We create success and happiness. In other words, if we are good enough, if we are clever enough, if we are strong enough, God will bless us. If we only work hard enough and apply our God-given (our one and only concession to the divine) abilities to the problems of the world, people will see the light and the world will turn once again toward us. It is all too believable. God saves us and now we pick up our crosses and move on.

The problem is, of course, that it is either untrue or, at best, half true. What happens when (I did not say if) we fail. This explanation of life and God is such that failures can only be explained as our fault, because we did not try hard enough or smart enough or it is God's fault. As we struggle, we see in our impotence evidence of God's apathy or his absence. We cease to trust him and begin to erect altars to our own competence. When we succeed, we make a habit of worshipping at that altar. When we fail, we despair.

God, however, has selected another path for us. If we trust God, we are carried on his back. We seek answers not in ourselves, but in his power and in his grace. We fail all of the time. There is no weight so insubstantial that it fails to break us. Christ, however, is the rock, upon which the Church is built and we can live. We need, more than anything else, a radical dependence on him.

The implications for the IPC are manifold and immense. Trusting God's success means that we can fail. God won't fail. More to the point, God will use all of our failures to change us so that our churches change and changed churches will change the world. This is the mystery of grace. God always finds the way. Failure, therefore, should not inhibit effort, it should encourage it. The world either says, "You are a failure, why bother," or it says, "you are a failure, you must not let anyone know your shame." The truth is that what failure does is that it eliminates the distractions. It forces us to restrict our focus to God. Churches and the people in them too often suffer from a kind of attention deficit disorder. We lose focus and when we lose focus we lose both passion and coherence. Our voice becomes more noise in babble. A radical trust, on the other hand, becomes our foundation for planting more churches not less, for innovating more not less, and for risking everything to know Christ and make him known.

### ***Revolutionary Hope***

Will you commit with me to pray for this vision that not only, in God's design, can happen but must happen? Will you also join me in praying that God will change us so that we can be used by him to change the world? Let us use this time of celebrating God's faithfulness to serve both as our pledge of covenant renewal and our song of hope. Amen. Let us pray.