

Introduction

The constitution of the Presbyterian church U.S.A. presents us with six Great ends, six basic purposes of the church. These “great ends” are at the very foundation of who we are and what God is calling us to do. They are printed in the bulletin, listed on page 176 of your Presbyterian Handbook, and for the last six weeks, have been the focus of our worship service and coffee-hour conversations. This week marks the end of that process. Now be honest. I can almost hear one or two of you silently cheering! “Does this means that next week we can forget all about our basic purposes and finally get back to ‘normal,’” whatever that is? No way Hosea! Because these so called “great ends of the church” are not simply something we talk about, they are something we do. They are not just meant to be preached, they are meant to be practiced. They are not and end in themselves but a means to an end—that of being a vital, faithful, welcoming congregation—committed to following our Lord Jesus in our personal lives and in our life together. Evangelizing; sheltering..nurturing..and spiritual-fellowshipping; worshiping; truth telling; and social action all culminate in the sixth great purpose of the church—the *exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world*.

I

Our problem seems to be with the word exhibition. When you think about it, an exhibitionist Presbyterian is an oxymoron. Everybody knows that we do things decently and in order, thank you very much. When it comes to “*the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world*” we are almost paranoid that someone in the congregation might get carried away. Let’s be frank, we are sometimes better known for our **inhibitions** than our exhibition the Kingdom of Heaven. For example, take some of the great purposes we have already discussed, like *The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of humankind*. We are far too inhibited to preach on street corners, hand out tracts, or knock on doors. So, just what are we doing to share the good news? *The Maintenance of Divine Worship*. Frankly, our unspoken definition of “divine” inhibits worshippers from raising their arms, clapping their hands, leaving their seats, or sounding their praise. Amen? *The Promotion of Social Righteousness*. We are active in promoting the local food shelf, soup kitchen, and homeless hospitality ministry. Yet, something inhibits us from active involvement in promoting fair wages, adequate housing, and affordable health care. The reality is that from evangelism to worship, to social action, we are a quiet congregation—everything in moderation. Yet, *the Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven* is one of the great purposes of our church. So what are we to do? What will it take in order to shed some of our **inhibitions** and be more faithful about the **exhibition** of God’s kingdom to the world?

II

Well, Charles Partee, professor of Church History at Pittsburgh Seminary has an idea. Listen to this.

Declining membership is a major problem for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and doubtless will remain so until our leaders figure out why persons decline to be members. Quite naturally, various groups of Presbyterians blame these problems on those who do not share their primary interests: The church is too liberal or too conservative there is too much or too little social action; too many or too few prayer meetings; too much or too little liturgy, and so on and on.

The fact is that the Presbyterian Church is in sharp decline for one simple reason—church suppers have gone “down the drain.”

When I was growing up, the real reason for becoming and remaining a Presbyterian (other than being eternally elect) was that their church suppers were the best in town.. The explanation of this situation was obvious. Reformed theology rejects the concept of “luck”—including “pot-luck”—and therefore, Presbyterian church suppers were predestined to be splendid. I admit there is a one-dish exception which is omnipresent, biblical and should be avoided. In 2 Kings 4, Elisha serves a meal to the sons of the prophets and they complain, “O man of God, there is death in the pot!” They could not eat it. Devoting considerable research to this topic, I have established that death in the pot goes by the modern name: tuna casserole.

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In the old days we could tell we had fellowship by watching the fine ladies and important gentlemen of the congregation perspiring in the kitchen in enforced cooperation of a common project. It was a salutary exercise in our common humanity to hear the head cook (usually a woman) order the bank president (usually a man) to get the rolls out of the oven. At least I think that's what she meant. What she actually said was, "George, get your buns moving."

In our congregation the preachers were mostly poor, the choirs were always worse and Christian education was a pitiful joke, but the church suppers were wonderful. On that fact each of various factions could agree, and disagreements needed to be amiably resolved because everyone knew that if the McClintocks were not treated fairly and kindly, they would take their casserole and go over to the Methodists.

I am not sure what happened to reverse this trend (of regular family night supers). Maybe everyone got too busy to cook and too important to serve. In any case, when I first saw store-bought bread on a Presbyterian church supper table, I knew the Presbyterians had lost all sense of shame and would soon be in serious trouble.

III

Perhaps Prof. Partee is right. Maybe the supreme need today is for our congregation to "exhibit the Kingdom of heaven to the world" by being a Christian fellowship around the table. The early Christian community was first of all a fellowship not an organization.

And it was said a long time ago that you cannot have God for your Father without the Church for your mother. Our Christian congregation is a place where we need to offer everyone the experience of God's mother-love. Maybe that is the key. The "*exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world*", means first of all the exhibition of the love of God to one other, to the stranger, to the shut in, and above all, to the shut out.

IV

Because the world is dying for us Christians to be an exhibition of God's love. People right here in the Plattsburgh are eager to connect with a Christian community where they will feel welcomed, accepted, valued, nurtured, and engaged. Visitors often comment that we have a friendly congregation, and that is important. But there is a big difference between being friendly and being a friend. Every fast food restaurant trains it's staff to be friendly. What people really want is not just friendliness but friendship. And that takes commitment. We sing "*what a friend we have in Jesus*," not because Jesus smiles at us and says "have a good one" as He walks out the door, but because he is always there with us and for us. Maybe that's why the Quakers call themselves the "Society of Friends." They understand that the only way to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world is to exhibit true friendship. The book "*We Die Alone*" is a true story set in Norway during Nazi occupation. Jan, is a resistance fighter who has suffered unbelievable hardship in fleeing from the Nazis.

Hungry, exhausted, snow-blind, and delirious he stumbles into the home of a man named Marius and collapses on the floor. After the initial shock, the women of the house rally. They spring into action and tend to his physical deprivation. But Jan remains restless, anxious, and fearful, so that even in his exhaustion he cannot sleep. (Marius) wanted to find some way to sooth (Jan) and make him believe in his friendship; and on an impulse, when the women were not listening, he took hold of Jan's hand and said very emphatically and clearly: 'If I live, you will live, and if they kill you I will have died to protect you.' Jan did not answer this solemn promise, but its sincerity had its effect. He relaxed then and fell asleep." Later, Marius kept his promise.

V

And so must we. When you join the church, you promise to be Christ's disciple, to obey his word and show his love. You commit yourself to be a faithful member of this congregation, giving of yourself in every way. Now, we can preach sermons, print pamphlets, and fill the airwaves with talk about the love of Christ, until a cow jumps over the moon. But most people in the world are longing for an **experience** of God not an explanation. Outsiders look at the church and say "don't just tell me about the love of Jesus, show me." "If I'm a waif, don't talk of faith, making me safe. Show me. At the end of my rope, don't talk of hope, or how I can cope. Show me.

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When push comes to shove, don't talk of love, sent from above. Show me." Jesus is God's ultimate show and tell. God loves the world so much, that he didn't just tell us, he showed us. In Jesus God walked with us, talked with us, prayed with us, partied with us, suffered with us, and suffered for us, saving us from our loneliness, selfishness, and fear. And so it is that, as Christ's body in the world today. We are being called to exhibit the kingdom of heaven by walking with the poor, talking with the lonely, praying with the sick, partying with the happy, suffering with those who mourn, and sharing our secret with those who ask. "*The secret* (says St. Paul) *is simply this: Christ in you (Christ in me) bringing with him the hope of all the glorious things to come.*" There is no way we can exhibit the love of God to the world until we get back to this basic. St. Paul continues: "*To be mature is to be basic. Christ! No more, no less. That's what I'm working so hard at day after day, year after year, doing my best with the energy God generously gives me.*" (Colossians 1:27f.) It's all about discipleship. "**You are my friends**" (says Jesus) "**if you do what I tell you.**" (John 15:14)

Conclusion

When it comes "*the exhibition of the Kingdom Heaven to the world*" God is calling us, His church, to be exhibit A. In other words, our final purpose is to practice what we preach. What we preach is Christ—crucified and risen. All we can do is participate in exhibiting the kingdom of heaven to the world by being thankful for the saving love of Christ within us, and letting it show. However, we will only fulfill our purpose if we are willing to commit ourselves to working hard at being faithful disciples: "day after day, year after year, doing our best with the energy God generously gives us."