

“Spiritual Reinterpretation and the Formation of Independent Presbyterian Church”

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“A church which tries to remain neutral by keeping silent, or a church that resorts to compromise in order to save itself, will to that extent forfeit its redemptive power and influence among men.”

Presbyterian General Assembly, 1949

When the issue of segregation in Presbyterian churches had become one which could no longer be avoided, the above statement was issued by the General Assembly. No one expected the race problem to be resolved overnight; however, the Church believed the problem would eventually be overcome. Though the issue of race had a profound impact upon the Church during early to mid-1900s, it was not the only itch that needed scratching. In a broader sense, the matter on many Presbyterians' minds was how does a church deal with the social issues of its day? This seemingly simple question has boggled the minds of Presbyterians for years and continues to do so today. To better understand the complexity of the issue, it is useful to look at a controversy which arose at Second Presbyterian Church (2PC) in Memphis and ultimately led to the formation of another “independent” Presbyterian church.

In 1965, the General Assembly had expected to hold its annual meeting at 2PC. A few months before the meeting was to take place, an amendment was added to the Presbyterian constitution stating: “No one shall be excluded from participation in public worship in the Lord's house on the grounds of race, color, or class.”¹ Having maintained

¹Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 505.

a policy of segregation for many years, 2PC did not readily accept this amendment. As a result, the Moderator for the General Assembly in 1965 decided it best to move the Assembly from 2PC. This movement was not well-received by the church, thus throwing 2PC into turmoil.

2PC eventually recognized the amendment; however, the damage had already been done. The church was split, and on March 7, 1965, roughly three hundred members of 2PC left to form their own “independent” Presbyterian church. In Independent church’s words:

On March 7, 1965, a group of God's people met together to organize a new Presbyterian church in Memphis. Many Memphis families had realized a pressing need to 'preserve and perpetuate' the historic Presbyterian profession of faith in our city. Believing that at the time there was no existing Presbyterian denomination in Memphis that was faithful to the historic Reformed Faith and to the great Presbyterian doctrines of grace, these early members chose to remain an independent church, and so named their church²

The above statement from Independent offers no indication that racial problems were a point of contention leading to the formation of the new church. Why then was this omitted from the church’s official history? How much of a factor was the racial issue in actuality? How has this affected the church? These are all questions possessing no simple answers. In order to better understand exactly what happened between 2PC and Independent, the background of the Presbyterian Church must be explained.

Presbyterians, The South, and The “Negroes”

According to E.T. Thompson, the early 1900s in the southern Presbyterian Church was a time when spirituality was reinterpreted and used to help shape the minds of a new

²Independent Presbyterian Church, Independent Presbyterian Church, 2007, June 2007 <<http://indepres.org/templates/cusindpres/details.asp?id=30618&PID=244346>

generation of theological students.³ Three key issues would act as catalysts to jumpstart this reinterpretation of the church's spirituality: the war, the great depression, and race relations. These three issues would remain on the agenda for many years and would shake the foundations of the faith. As a result, the Presbyterian Church slowly began to make the shift from looking at the world in strictly evangelical terms to focusing on the social issues of the time. Thus, the reinterpretation of the church's spirituality led to a focus on the social teachings of the Bible.

While all three social issues were important to the church, it was the race issue that evoked the most attention, especially in the South. In 1929, the first statement against discrimination was announced by the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) General Assembly: "The churches stand for the removal of discrimination which prevents equal opportunity of development of all races and for equal sharing of rights and privileges."⁴ This statement was certainly not a solution to the problem of race; however, it did prove to be useful for two reasons.

The first reason was that it officially announced to the presbyteries that the Church was serious in its dedication to social issues. Though it would be a painstakingly slow progress, the church was at least moving forward with this statement, marking the beginning of what can be called the "spiritual reinterpretation" movement. This "spiritual reinterpretation" movement of the church was recognized first in 1935, although it would not be entirely understood and acknowledged until 1966. In this year, the General Assembly adopted a paper which explicitly stated that the responsibility of the church

³Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 505.

and individual Christians to concern themselves with the political, social, economic, and cultural life of the world was rooted in the Scripture's revelation of God: a Creator, Judge, Savior, and Lord.⁵ The statement made in 1929 concerning the church's stance on the removal of segregation was the first step that would lead to recognition of the "spiritual reinterpretation" movement in 1935 and eventually to a complete transformation in 1966.

Secondly, the statement in 1929 is extremely significant for race relations within the church. The statement marks the first time the Assembly took an outright stance against segregation. This issue of segregation being foremost in the South, it was made the main target. This statement helped shed light upon the unfortunate reality of African Americans being handicapped by their living conditions, for which the white people in the South were chiefly responsible.⁶

Shortly after the statement of 1929 was published, another factor helped further the cause of African Americans: the Second World War. In this war, many blacks fought and died for their country, although still being denied first-class citizenship back home. This fact did not sit well with many people in the church, and in 1943, it was brought to the attention of the General Assembly. The assembly pointed out that Christians who condemned the Nazi persecution of non-Aryans must "combat with all earnestness and power racial prejudice against Negroes in the South."⁷ This statement coupled with past ones along with years of debate, thus leading to the Assembly's most salient affirmation

⁴Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 506.

⁵Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 511.

⁶Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 530.

regarding the situation of African Americans. In 1949, the Assembly commissioned a report entitled “States Rights and Human Rights,” which emphasized five points:

1. The South’s insistence on states’ rights in opposition to federally enforced civil rights has deep and tenacious roots in Southern history and Southern feelings.
2. The present-day claims of American minorities to full civil rights have a sound moral and historical basis.
3. The South has made commendable progress in extending and protecting the civil rights of its minority peoples, but these rights are still widely denied or restricted by unequal treatment in many places.
4. Any sound program for safeguarding human rights must recognize the role of both education and legislation.
5. The Southern churches have a large unfinished task in the fields of education concerning human rights.⁸

If anyone had doubted the seriousness of the Assembly in the matter of race relations before, these doubts now ceased to exist. As a result of this paper, many ministers and their congregations became infuriated. One prominent minister from South Carolina stated that the report “contains the rankest communist doctrine I have ever read.”⁹ Another wondered why racial issues should be brought into the report when they didn’t have a thing to do with saving souls.¹⁰

Opposition to this paper continued to increase, yet the Assembly continued to stay involved. In fact, they adopted a more specific policy. In addition to the Assembly’s involvement, many ministers were getting involved as well. Those who spoke out found themselves at odds with members of their congregations and other ministers. At Jones

⁷Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 531.

⁸ Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963)532.

⁹Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 533.

¹⁰Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 533.

Memorial Church in Meridian, MS, Charles L. Stanford, Jr. preached on racial riots, saying they “have been the result largely of Christian preachers who have not been preaching the whole counsel of God to the people of God.” After the sermon, Stanford noticed that one of the elders refused the Lord's Supper. Following the evening service, he happened to drive past the elder's home and realized that his session was secretly meeting there. The next week, Stanford was given a resolution calling his sermon "untimely" and the references to alleged sins of the congregation “uncalled for.”¹¹

In 1953, the Assembly realized that desegregation was becoming a reality in society; therefore, they drafted another paper to prepare the churches. In this paper, it was stated that “the Church was to practice no discrimination,” and “enforced segregation of the races is discrimination.”¹² The Assembly thus drew a line in the sand and officially condemned segregation.

As expected, this paper also stirred up dissension amongst the churches. Because the statement was the first official one condemning segregation outright, it also met its first definitive opposition. Pastors and their congregations openly defied the Assembly and even passed around pamphlets and other types of propaganda opposing the Assembly's statements. However, there was just as much support of the Assembly's decision as there was opposition. Finally, as a result of the commotion caused by the first statement in 1949, an attempt to reverse the second statement was made. When the vote

¹¹ “Division and Reunion in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.,” Presbyterian Historical Society , R. Milton Winters, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2004, June 2007 <http://history.pcusa.org/pubs/journal/2000_spring/DivisionAndReunionPCUS.html>

¹²Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 538.

came through, the margin of victory was greater than when the first statement was made, thus showing the Assembly supported their original decision even more.

Even though the Assembly's policy of integration was clear and unmovable, not all churches accepted its policy. In 1957, roughly two years from the second vote approving integration, it was evident that resistance was still strong. On October 7, 1957, 2PC made this policy statement concerning integration: "Since this issue has been forced upon us by circumstances which repeatedly arise, and it being our conviction that one of the leading forces for integration is godless communism, which we believe to be the greatest present day force of Christianity, we feel that it would be inconsistent for us to contribute to or support any cause or institution that practices and promotes integration."¹³

Since African Americans did not readily attempt to attend 2PC, the statement made in 1957 was little more than words on paper. However, almost seven years later, on March 22nd, 1964, an African American student from Memphis State University, Joe Purdy, and two white students from Southwestern College attempted to enter a worship service at 2PC. In the months before, the group had visited a number of other churches and was welcomed without any trouble. But on March 22nd, the students were met at the door of the 2PC sanctuary by a church member who asked Purdy whether he was "African." When he responded that he was "American," Purdy and his white colleague

¹³ Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (John Knox Press, 1963) 540.

were denied admittance to the sanctuary.¹⁴ The statement of 1957 had finally been put into action.

For seven subsequent Sundays the students returned, bringing larger crowds every time. Every time, 2PC denied these students and their followers entry to the church. When the episode at 2PC began to receive national coverage, the church was forced to make a statement. Addressing the congregation on April 29, members of the church's Session read their statement: "In this current series of demonstrations, representatives of your Session who have been confronted by this group of demonstrators, have seen no acceptable evidence that any of the group have a sincere desire to worship in our sanctuary, prompted by genuine spiritual motivation. It is apparent from speech and action that the purpose is to promote the cause of social mixing of the races."¹⁵

Because of 2PC's statements concerning the controversy, the demonstrations continued. The process went on with multiple demonstrations and multiple statements from 2PC for about a year until the General Assembly decided not to meet as guests of 2PC, due to 2PC's refusal to welcome African Americans into their church. As mentioned before, this caused quite a stir in the church; not long after, Independent Presbyterian was formed. It appears as though Independent was formed as a result of the General Assembly's refusal to meet at 2PC. But, the formation of Independent was not so simple.

The Formation of Independent Presbyterian Church Part One: Race

¹⁴ Stephen R. Haynes, "A Church, A College, and A Cause: Southwestern and the Second Presbyterian Controversy," Rhodes College, 4.

¹⁵ Stephen R. Haynes, "A Church, A College, and A Cause: Southwestern and the Second Presbyterian Controversy," Rhodes College, 5.

Walking into Independent Presbyterian Church is likely to stimulate a feeling of déjà vu if one is familiar with Memphis-2PC. From the shape and decor of the church, to the dress of the ministers and deacons, to the type of cars in the parking lot, Independent appears to be merely the Walnut Grove version of 2PC on Poplar Avenue roughly three minutes away. This is ironic, especially considering Independent was formed in order to part from 2PC. Though Independent did divorce itself from 2PC in regard to certain issues, it remained very similar to the mother church in other matters.

Today, Independent and 2PC resemble each other theologically and in many other ways. They are roughly the same congregational size (Independent: 2,100 and 2PC: 3,500). Many of Independent's members work at 2PC and vice versa. One female employee who works in accounting at Independent stated, "If you work for the accounting department of either church, it is policy that you cannot attend the church you work for." Though the affiliations with the Presbyterian Church are different (Independent is part of the Presbyterian Church in America, while 2PC is part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.), these two branches are very similar. Interestingly enough, they are the two most conservative branches. Without knowing the history of these two churches, it would be impossible to tell one had actually split from the other. So if the two are so closely related, why did the need arise for the churches to split?

Many have postulated that it was the controversy involving race which caused the divide. This seems the most logical explanation, given the events surrounding the formation of Independent. Since 2PC did not allow African Americans in the church, the General Assembly was moved, thus bringing much shame upon the church. This in turn was displeasing for a number of the members and a few of the elders, thus, Independent

was formed. It appears obvious that the chain of events causing the church's split was due solely to racial matters; however, this was not the case.

Though race was not the only factor involved in Independent's break from 2PC, it indeed was quite important. African Americans were never a noticeable part of the church when it was founded, and they are not a significant portion of the members in the church today. Observing worship services at the church demonstrates the fact that the church was, and is, a white, middle- to upper-class church. This all-white church demographic did not occur by chance. Though the church does not have a policy of segregation today, it had a very clear one at its formation.

Independent's segregation policy was one of many created by the church as a result of racial troubles at 2PC. When Joe Purdy and his colleagues attempted to enter the sanctuary at 2PC, neither he nor his colleagues had any idea of the enormous impact they would have on the church itself. At this point, Purdy and the other demonstrators had gained support from major organizations, particularly the NAACP. Fearing confrontation and an unavoidable negotiation with the NAACP, as well as the threat to move the General Assembly from 2PC, many of the deacons felt it was time to amend 2PC's policy of segregation.

In a letter dated November 19, 1964, numerous deacons of 2PC wrote a letter to the clerk of their session discussing the events which had unfolded as a result of Purdy's attempt to worship. Beginning the letter, they stated, "As officers who are in part responsible for our Church's witness, for its spiritual health and its nurture of the young lives in its keeping, we feel that a maintenance of our present policy of barring anyone from general worship services inevitable will bring calamitous injury to Second Church

in all of these aspects. We ask that the present rigid, untenable policy be altered.”¹⁶ The letter goes on to predict more demonstrations by the groups wishing to integrate the church, which would cause additional clashes in ideology between the two groups and eventually cause a “great rift in Second Church.”

The letter is also interesting, because it provides the unique standpoint of the situation from the perspective of the deacons. What becomes clear from the letter is that while there was disagreement concerning the issue of integration, almost all were in agreement that the approach the demonstrators took was deplorable. It is evident the deacons felt as though the demonstrators were promoting a social cause and had no intent to really worship. “Christ’s church is not a social institution,” continues the letter, “and we must not fall into the grievous error of so considering it.”¹⁷ In conclusion, the letter points out the reality of the situation: “We must be realists enough to be aware that the hard push of these liberals will in the end accomplish its purpose.”

Clearly, many of the deacons acknowledged the fact that a move to integration was almost inevitable. Though not pleased about the idea of integration in the least, many of the deacons realized that the more demonstrations there were, the more likely the church would be torn apart. Seeing the writing on the wall, the deacons sent out the letter in hopes of avoiding a church split. Unfortunately others also ‘saw the writing on the wall’ and realized 2PC would eventually give in to integration. Though it would be some time before integration at 2PC would happen, a certain group of around three hundred refused to be around when it did.

¹⁶ Second Presbyterian Church, letter, November 19, 1964.

¹⁷ Second Presbyterian Church, letter, November 19, 1964.

There is little evidence of race-related issues causing the split between Independent and 2PC. None who were around during the split speak of race being an issue; a few outright deny it; and others just remain complacently unaware. Even Independent's website fails to mention race as an issue when discussing its history. It is clear, however, that race was an important factor in the split. One piece of evidence supporting this belief comes from the original constitution of the church. In Article 3, Section 2, it is stated that, "Believing that the scriptures teach that the separation of nations, peoples, and groups will preserve the peace, purity, and unity of the church, it is, therefore, the will of this Church that its members and those visiting the Church, its worship services, and all of its activities, shall be compatible with the congregation."¹⁸

In addition to the church's constitution including a policy of segregation, the Commercial Appeal, Memphis' largest newspaper, mentions a policy of segregation of the church the day of the church's formation on March 15, 1965. "In a closed congregational meeting," starts the article, "after worship services in the Plaza Theater, the group voted to adopt the name of Independent Presbyterian Church of Memphis. Shortly after the meeting got under way, the foundling church adopted a segregation policy that will be included in its by-laws."¹⁹ Clearly, segregation played a substantial role in the formation of Independent, especially since it was one of the first statements of policy on which the church voted.

The Formation of Independent Presbyterian Church Part Two: Elder Rotation

¹⁸ Independent Presbyterian Church, Constitution, March 15, 1965.

¹⁹ "Nine Elders Resign at Second Presbyterian," The Commercial Appeal 15 March, 1965: pg. B9

Besides the racial controversy, another reason Independent seemingly split from 2PC was over the issue of elder rotation. One issue that points to the split not solely being based on race, was the timing of the two churches dividing. The same day the article describing Independent's split from 2PC came out, another article was printed regarding the resignation of nine 2PC deacons. The article reports that on Sunday, the day before, 2PC had voted on a change of policy limiting elders to a certain number of terms. Up until this point, an elder who was elected served until his death. The new system of rotating elders was viewed as "liberal" and as a result, the nine elders resigned. As stated in the paper, "Second Presbyterian Church decided on the new policy (rotating elders) two weeks ago after the session failed to alter its segregation policy."²⁰ In essence, the congregation forced the elders out of office because of their refusal to alter the present segregation policy.

Again, while the split did not occur due to one issue, rotating elders was a causative factor of why the two churches split. When asked whether the split from 2PC was race related, one member of Independent replied, "It was not so much an issue of race. Maybe three or four people cared about it. Rather, it was mainly over the issue of rotating elders that the church (Independent) was formed."²¹ While this may not be completely true, it does highlight the fact that many today believe the issue forcing the split was rotating elders.

The idea of the split occurring because of a system of non-rotating elders is an intriguing one which is heavily advocated by many people. In order to understand that it

²⁰ "Presbyterians to Form New, "independent" Church," The Commercial Appeal 15 March, 1965: pg. B14

was not merely the issue of rotating elders which caused the split, one must look at the broader picture. Many of the elders at 2PC were old and had been elders for a long time in the church. Also at this time were young members, particularly deacons, who had different ideologies than those of the older elders. One of the main differences in ideologies concerned the issue of race. This is most evident in the letter written by the church deacons to the clerk of the session: “We have seen in recent times throughout our land that inordinate preoccupation with racial pride can lead to sinful pride and wrongful action...it is pride that without question is the very root of much that is sinful in our hearts.”²²

The letter is then signed at the bottom by twelve deacons of 2PC. These were the younger, more progressive deacons who still held to the cause of a conservative, faithful Presbyterianism. However, they realized something progressive must be done in order to save their church. Obviously this did not sit well with the older elders, and conflict ensued. Eventually, it would be the younger group which would win out the conflict, and it would be the older elders who would resign. These elders did not go easily, and as a result, 2PC was split.

Other scholars outside of 2PC and Independent have commented on the split. One scholar, R. Milton Winters writes, “This was greatly embarrassing to the congregation (losing the General Assembly), and a group of elders and 340 members withdrew to form an independent Presbyterian church which espoused segregation and later drew ministers from the Presbyterian Church in America. Meanwhile, Second Presbyterian instituted

²¹ Anonymous Independent Presbyterian Church Member, 6 June 2007.

²² Second Presbyterian Church, letter, November 19, 1964.

elder rotation, opened its doors to all, and the General Assembly accepted its invitation to meet there in a subsequent year.”²³

Winters realized the importance race played in the rotating-elders issue. He highlights this by emphasizing Independent “espoused segregation”. It can thus be concluded that the issue of rotating elders would not have occurred without the influence of the race problem. As mentioned though, it was not solely the race issue nor the rotating elders issue that forced this split. What really forced this split was what Independent called “the old-time religion.”

Do You Really Want That Old-Time Religion?

“Many Memphis families had realized a pressing need to 'preserve and perpetuate' the historic Presbyterian profession of faith in our city,” says the opening statement of Independent’s history posted on its website. As the Independent’s history hints, it was the elders’ and the congregation’s progressive thought in regards to the social issues of the day. Most of the older members of the church pride themselves on their conservative beliefs. “Second left and went with a younger crowd,” starts one of the older members of the session, “and the reason the split occurred wasn’t important. It was the conservative approach to scripture that was important.”²⁴ Judging by statements such as this one, it can be said that 2PC’s decision to get involved in social matters forced an ultimatum upon those wishing to remain extremely conservative. As a result of this ultimatum, Independent Presbyterian was formed.

²³ “Division and Reunion in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.,” Presbyterian Historical Society , R. Milton Winters, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2004, June 2007 <http://history.pcusa.org/pubs/journal/2000_spring/DivisionAndReunionPCUS.html>

Looking at the controversy from the perspective of conservatism versus progressivism shows that a split was inevitable. It could have been any single issue or a combination of issues that caused the split. It just so happened that the racial controversy and the rotation of elders situation were the ones that manifested themselves at this time within 2PC. In this way, the issues merely acted as catalysts, eventually forcing division between two groups having different opinions on how a church should respond to change within itself and society.

“Do You Really Want That Old-Time Religion?”, the title of the sermon preached by Rev. Leonard T. Van Horn at Independent’s first worship service, says it all. In a bulletin marking the one year anniversary of the church, it was said that the sermon, “was a plea for the old line Presbyterianism held so dear by the people God had gathered together.”²⁵ Under the umbrella of this hard-line conservatism, fell the issues of segregation and rotating elders. In order to maintain their conservative beliefs, Independent felt it necessary to keep segregation and also have elders who serve the church for life on their session. All of this points to the heart of conservative belief at this time: that the church had “no right to interfere w/ civil relations of society.”²⁶

By looking at Independent’s split from 2PC, it is easier to understand the spiritual reinterpretation happening throughout the nation in Presbyterian churches. It seemed the question on everyone’s mind, particularly Southern conservatives, at this time was, “How does a church remain faithful to its Christian beliefs while also remaining faithful to its

²⁴ Anonymous Independent Presbyterian member, 6 June 2007

²⁵ Independent Presbyterian Church, bulletin, 16 March 1966.

²⁶ Ernest Trice Thompson, The spirituality of the church; a distinctive doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (John Knox Press, 1961) 24.

conservative social stances?” For 2PC, this eventually meant integration and rotation of elders, or changing with the times. For Independent, this meant just the opposite. While it is easy to point fingers and say who was right or who was wrong, as many did at the time, it is much tougher to remember one’s true conviction which is remaining loyal and faithful to God. As one minister said in regard to the controversies surrounding this time in the Presbyterian Church’s history, “Let us not pray that God is on our side, rather pray that we are on God’s side.”²⁷

Evidently, from viewing the 2PC controversy, certain individual churches were at a crossroads in their theology during the early to mid 20th century. In fact, the entire Presbyterian Church was at a crossroad when it came to the issue of a church remaining socially conservative or progressive. Finally, in the mid 1960s, the church officially announced that its spirituality had been reinterpreted; the church refused to keep its head in the sand in regard to social issues. While churches such as 2PC were progressing with the changing times, there were churches like Independent that wished to keep the “old-time religion.” Many factors led to the desire for this “old-time religion,” one of which was a very limited social strata in the Presbyterian Church at this time.

In general, those who were a part of the Presbyterian Church in America during the 1950s and 1960s were classified in middle- to upper-class income brackets. This is understandable and according to E.T. Thompson, “As of ‘61 the Presbyterian church has more members in middle and upper income brackets than any other Southern church.”²⁸

²⁷ Ernest Trice Thompson, The spirituality of the church; a distinctive doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (John Knox Press, 1961) 45.

²⁸ Ernest Trice Thompson, The spirituality of the church; a distinctive doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (John Knox Press, 1961) 18.

The membership of the church was kept in the family; most members of the Presbyterian faith had parents and grandparents who were Presbyterian. This type of organization in the church led to one major problem: all social situations, particularly economic ones, were viewed from the point of church members' own interests, rather than Christ's.²⁹ This is extremely problematic for anyone who is not a part of the Presbyterian Church, especially those of lower income.

Because the church focused only upon the needs of itself, it lacked a definitive relationship with the community. This view was widespread across America and was particularly evident in the controversy at 2PC. More than likely, those who formed Independent viewed the plight of the African Americans as a problem which was not theirs to worry about. Though some may have sympathized with the African American's struggle, many in the church felt it was best to worry about themselves and leave others' problems alone. In Independent's original constitution, it is written, "the laws and principles of civil and ecclesiastical authority must be kept separated and interpreted and applied by this Church to avoid conflicts with the authority of Scriptures."³⁰

Since the scripture was the utmost authority for Independent Presbyterian, it was what the church turned to in order to help them with these separatist beliefs. One passage used by the church to support its view of minding one's own business was 1 Peter 4:15, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief

²⁹ Ernest Trice Thompson, The spirituality of the church; a distinctive doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (John Knox Press, 1961) 18.

³⁰ Independent Presbyterian Church, Constitution, March 15, 1965.

maker.”³¹ It was the line referring to the “mischief maker” that Independent focused upon most. In their view, this line warned against those who meddled in the business of others. By using this Scriptural passage, their social belief to remain unconcerned with the needs of the surrounding community was justified using the Bible.

Obviously the choice to remain blind to the surrounding community and the issues that plagued it was not involuntary. Many in the church knew what was happening outside its walls and chose to do nothing about it. Those who knew about the economic and social situation of the African American felt as though no good could come from meddling in the black person’s situation. A large number of those who supported this view also felt that God made certain classes lower than others. “We stand,” says James Henry Thornwall, the strongest exponent of this view, “upon the platform of the Bible. God’s Word recognizes the relation of master and servants as a relation that may lawfully subsist. The church is not a moral institute of universal good, whose business is to wage war upon every form of human ill...It has no commission to construct society afresh.”³²

Not all turned a cold shoulder to the causes of the African American. Many felt something needed to be done, but they also felt that their actions would be counterproductive to the cause of African Americans. As John Holt Rice said, “I am convinced that anything we can do will injure religion, and retard the march of public feeling in relation to slavery.”³³ Therefore, a number of people sided with the idea that

³¹ Michael D. Coogan et al., eds. The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 3rd ed., (New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

³² Ernest Trice Thompson, The spirituality of the church; a distinctive doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (John Knox Press, 1961) 46.

³³ Ernest Trice Thompson, The spirituality of the church; a distinctive doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (John Knox Press, 1961) 20.

something would be done if all could be converted to the Christian faith. A number of those in the church aligned themselves with this view that the church had a responsibility for shaping a Christian civilization. Once the church succeeded in doing this, they believed everything else would fall into place. Though different in nature, both arguments represented the idea of the time, which was to ‘let it be’ when it came to social matters. All this helps to explain the long silence of the Presbyterian people on social issues. It also helps to explain why the Presbyterian Church was one of the last to have a committee on social action.³⁴ More so than anything else and more importantly, these views help to explain how complicated “spiritual reinterpretation” was for the church. Though it was officially recognized in 1966, it was not complete then, nor is it truly complete today.

History Repeats Itself

While many churches were taking the “spiritual reinterpretation” movement seriously, others, such as Independent, were taking it with a grain of salt. As a matter of fact, Independent was the complete antithesis of this movement with its desire to get back to the “old-time religion”. Independent was troubled by the “liberalism” of other churches, and they were concerned with the power structures led by these liberal men. They had been praying for years for the “old-time religion” to be preached once again, and they were Presbyterians who wanted to return to the doctrines held by their forefathers in the Presbyterian Church. It is difficult to know exactly what all these old doctrines were, since it depends on its individual church’s interpretation. It is clear however, that for

³⁴ Ernest Trice Thompson, The spirituality of the church; a distinctive doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (John Knox Press, 1961) 26.

Independent some of these doctrines included elder's who served for life, a strict adherence to the Westminster Confession, and segregation of the races.

Today, the lifetime appointment of elder's and a strict adherence to the Westminster Confession are highly celebrated, while segregation is not a doctrine. However, the evils of segregation which are tough to shake off are still evident today. Though the church flourishes externally, boasting roughly two thousand members, internally it has had its struggles recently. When Pastor John Sartelle retired in 2005 after 27 years of ministering at Independent, the church set out to find a new pastor. In the summer of 2006, Rev. John Hardie was appointed to the position. Rev. Hardie ministered at Independent for only eight months, and then announced his resignation with "much pain and grief."

Much controversy surrounds the resignation of Rev. Hardie. It was said the reason for Hardie's resignation was due to his being young and therefore lacking experience as a senior minister. Many do not believe his lack of experience was reason for his departure. In November 2006, Hardie gave a sermon entitled "Undivided Devotion" and used a scriptural passage from 1 Corinthians 7: 24-40. This passage written by the Apostle Paul deals with the question of whether one should get married or stay a virgin in regards to the present time.

Since Paul believed strongly that Jesus was to come back very soon, he advocates the position of remaining a virgin so as to "not experience distress in this life."³⁵ Rev.

³⁵ Michael D. Coogan et al., eds. The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 3rd ed., (New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

Hardie took this passage and expounded upon Paul's idea that marriage will cause distress. In the sermon, Rev. Hardie takes the stance that when you are devoted to your wife, it is possible to lose some of your devotion to Christ. He then referred to 1 Kings 11 and discussed the fact that Solomon had many wives, and had intermarried with other races. Hardie then talked about how it did not matter that his wives were of a different race, what mattered was whether or not they were devoted to God (in Solomon's case they were not). He then related Solomon's situation to present times, saying "the Bible does not speak against interracial marriage, despite how Christians have used the Bible in the past. If there are any lingering vestiges of racism in our hearts regarding interracial marriage, please repent of that sin."³⁶

This statement provoked many people to anger and frustration. What troubled many in the church was that Hardie tackled such a controversial issue after being the head minister for only three months. That Wednesday night, seeing as how many members at the session meeting on Monday expressed concerns over his comments, Hardie decided to hold "A Family Conversation on the Gospel and Race". In this meeting, many members of the congregation professed their concerns and opinions on what Hardie spoke about the previous Sunday. After the meeting, it seemed as though all was well.

Gradually over the next few months, more resentment would develop against Hardie. Finally at the end of April 2007, Hardie announced his resignation as senior minister of Independent Presbyterian. Understandably, the church was thrown into

³⁶ John Hardie, "Undivided Devotion," rec. 26 November 2006, Independent Pres., 2006.

turmoil in regards to Hardie's decision, and on May 5, a member of Independent by the name of Blake Elliot wrote a letter to the members of Independent. The intent of the letter was to reveal the truth surrounding Rev. Hardie's resignation.

In the letter, Elliot lists certain facts about Rev. Hardie:

In April 2006, the Session of IPC unanimously endorsed the pulpit committee's recommendation of John T. Hardie as Senior Minister.

While the congregation raised questions of Rev. Hardie's lack of experience as a senior minister and limited experience as a teaching elder in the PCA, the pulpit committee (largely made up of ruling elders) and other Elders assured the congregation that they saw the same issues but ***believed whole-heartedly that John Hardie possessed sound theology and the leadership skills*** to carry out a bold vision and direction for our church for the next 20-30 years.

In the fall of 2006, Rev. Hardie unintentionally brought a firestorm of controversy when he made a Scriptural stand on the issue of interracial marriage. Criticism by some session members, deacons, and members ensued, ***thus exposing the sin of racism in our church.***

By the last month of John Hardie's pastorate, many staff members, both ministerial and non-ministerial, were in rebellion against John Hardie.

The session of Independent Presbyterian Church is NOT united on the issue of whether John T. Hardie should remain the Senior Minister of Independent.

Blake Elliot then goes on to say, based on the evidence of these facts, it is his opinion that:

While the final reason for John Hardie's resignation was not entirely about the controversy over interracial marriage, one would be naive or dishonest if he believes that this was not the spark that started the fire. If Independent does not confess and repent of her long-closeted sin of racism, she will never progress in sanctification and become the beautiful bride of Christ she is called to be.³⁷

Obviously this letter opens up an enormous amount of questions around the controversy surrounding Rev. Hardie's resignation. One of the most important questions is did Hardie know about the church's history on the issue of segregation? When asked if

³⁷ Blake Elliot, Independent Presbyterian Church, letter, 5 May 2007.

Rev. Hardie knew about the church's history, one of the associate ministers responded, "Absolutely."³⁸ If he did indeed know about the church's history, then it is obvious his intentions were to call out the church on her "long-closeted sin of racism." What makes this matter more interesting is that some of the original charter members of Independent who were around when it had a strict policy of segregation are members of the session today.

The parallels between the 2PC and Hardie controversies are eerily similar. During the 2PC controversy the older deacons and session members held onto their beliefs of segregation and elder appointments for life, while the younger deacons and session members (and a few others) advocated integration and a system of rotating elders. In the controversy surrounding Hardie, it seems as though many of the older session members who were around when Independent was formed had problems with Hardie and his statements, while deacons and session members (and a few others) supported Hardie and also advocate a policy of implementing rotation of elders at Independent. Though not a member of the session, Blake Elliot advocates a system of rotating elders to alleviate the troubles that have resulted from the Hardie controversy, "Independent Presbyterian should adopt a new, rotating system for elders and deacons. We should do away with our current system of lifelong deacons and elders."³⁹

Another similarity between the 2PC and Hardie controversies which cannot be overlooked is the issue of race. In the 2PC controversy, Independent felt there was no reason to get involved in sociological matter. While 2PC adapted with the changing

³⁸ Anonymous Independent Presbyterian Church Minister, 15 July 2007.

³⁹ Blake Elliot, Independent Presbyterian Church, letter, 5 May 2007.

times, Independent put its head in the sand and refused to integrate its church, thus succumbing to liberalism. Today, 2PC is free of its guilt from its segregation policy that ended in the 60's. Obviously Independent is still struggling with these issues seeing as Rev. Hardie's sermon was the "spark that started the fire."

While it is possible that no one will ever really know what went on behind closed doors at Independent in regards to the Hardie case, it seems as though the evidence clearly shows the church has some serious past issues it can not shake. The session, deacons, and congregation all were in agreement that Hardie, though he may have been a young minister, was completely capable of leading a church. He seemed to live up these expectations, and approached every obstacle he faced with the class and dignity of a well-established Senior Minister. The only place it can be said Hardie made a mistake was by calling out the sins of the church too early in his career.

Instead of waiting to firmly establish himself, Rev. Hardie decided it was necessary to confront the church with its past in regards to race relations. Whether or not Hardie was out to cleanse the church of its sin is a matter of debate. One thing is certain though, and that is this issue would not have simply gone away. If it was not him to confront the church it would have been the next minister or someone else. Because of this, the logical conclusion to the Hardie case is that some members at Independent remain haunted by the ghosts of its segregation past.

What Can Be Done?

What can be done help a church like Independent? As Blake Elliot suggests in his letter, a system of rotating elders might do the trick. He also advocates removing the entire session and replacing them with new members. One of the elders at Independent had another suggestion. His hope was that one day the entire session, ministers, and deacons would get up, walk out the church and down the road to 2PC. Once they got there, he hoped they could go up to the front of the church and ask 2PC for forgiveness for the way they handled the controversy in the 60's.

While neither of these suggestions alone would be the solution to the woes of Independent, each one is a start in the right direction. The Independent controversy demonstrates the need of a church to confront the past, in both its successes and failures. By looking at the past, those in the future can learn from the mistakes made by previous generations. This does not mean completely forgetting the past; rather, it must be understood and built upon to promote a better future. To face past mistakes and change the future for the greater good is the highest form of “spiritual reinterpretation.” It takes courage to split from close friends because of beliefs, as did the people at Independent. But it takes even more courage to remain firm when beliefs are questioned, as the people at 2PC did. One truth is evident from the 2PC and Independent controversy: times do and will change. Deep-seeded beliefs do not always change, but sometimes they are forced to do so in a dynamic society.

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