

Great Trouble and Shame: Presbyterians in the South After the Civil War

A sermon by Rev. Neil Dunnavant, July 1, 2012

Nehemiah 1:1-7

Jerusalem, once the great city on a hill, the pride of King David and Solomon, the envy of surrounding nations, now lay in ruins. The year was 538 BC. The Babylonians looted, plundered, and destroyed the Holy City and took most of the Jews to Babylonia where they lived in exile.

The Temple was like a bombed out shell. The wall of the city was reduced to piles of rubble. The survivors, Nehemiah learns, are in "great trouble and shame." So Nehemiah leads a group of Jewish exiles from Babylonia to Jerusalem to organize a rebuilding effort.

"Through Nehemiah's energy, self-denial, and shrewdness, he brought new life to the helpless and pathetic Jewish Community in Jerusalem and may have saved it from extinction." (R.H. Pfeiffer in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 219)

Like the Jews in Jerusalem, the Southern states faced great trouble and shame after the American Civil War. The South was prostrate both politically and economically. Her cities – Richmond, Charleston, Columbia, Atlanta, Mobile, and others – were largely in ruins. Her countryside had been ravaged.

General William Tecumseh Sherman's march to the sea consumed everything thirty miles on each side – a sixty mile wide swath of devastation. It caused an estimated one-hundred million dollars in damages. Over 10,000 horses and mules were confiscated. Homes were looted, factories and mills demolished.

As morally troubling as it is to think of human enslavement, in economic terms, the value of almost four million slaves in the South before the war was estimated at four billion dollars – that is to say, four billion 1860 dollars. Tragically, today in the streets of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, one can buy a boy or girl for as little as \$100, perhaps one-hundred times cheaper in real dollars than a slave cost back in 1860.

Before the war, six of the ten wealthiest per capita states in the Union were in the South.

Twenty years later, not one ranked in the top thirty. It would take forty years for the value of land in the South to return to what it was worth in 1860. The South sent one million men off to war – one-fifth of her population. Over 250,000 never returned. In proportion to population, the South's loss of human lives was four times greater than the North's.

Almost all of the battles took place in the South. The two great exceptions were Gettysburg, where each side lost over 23,000 men for a total loss of 46,286 men; and in the border state of Maryland, a total of 22,717 men died at Antietam.

The churches, of course, struggled during and after the war. Many Presbyterian churches were dismantled or burned to the ground. In one Southern Presbytery, every house of worship had been rendered unfit for use. There was no money to pay pastors. Young men called to the ministry had no money to attend seminary. Missionaries sent by Southern churches to work with the American Indians or in foreign lands could not be paid.

Before coming to Greensboro in 2003, I served a church in Fincastle, Virginia. One day, going through some papers in our historical room, I found the original handwritten letter of resignation by Rev. James S. Grasty, who served that church during the Civil War era. In the letter, he deeply regretted having to leave, but fully understood that they had no way to pay him. For the sake of his family, he accepted a call to the church in Yanceyville, North Carolina, where they had the means to compensate him.

The first goal of the Presbyterian Church in the South was “the building up of its crippled and broken-down churches.” (Thompson, p.94) In 1861, as the war was starting, the Southern presbyteries withdrew from the churches in the North and formed their own separate denomination, a separation that lasted until 1983, the year I was ordained.

We are all creatures of our own times and blinded by the prejudices and cultural opinions of our era. Southerners in general, and certainly Southern Presbyterians, did not believe that slavery was sinful. To the contrary, most Presbyterians at that time believed that slavery was fully sanctioned by the Bible. In fact, in an official Southern Presbyterian pronouncement, the church strongly condemned the teaching that slavery is inherently sinful, calling the teaching against slavery “unscriptural, fanatical, condemned by the Word of God and the voice of the church in all ages and one of the most pernicious heresies of modern times” (Thompson, p.77).

This brings up the whole troubling issue of how the Bible is used to justify or condemn all sorts of things at different times, depending on the times.

We need to take a deep breath to contemplate that almost one-hundred fifty years have passed since the end of the Civil War. And to face the truth that something perhaps all of us condemn as immoral and in violation of the very basic rights of all humans (slavery) was thought by many at one time a part of God’s plan for civil society.

Perhaps we also need to keep in mind that humans in general do not hold up well or behave with dignity and clear thinking during times of great catastrophe. From 1865 to 1877, the South was plunged into almost unimaginable catastrophe.

Roving groups – both black and white – terrorized the population. The carpetbaggers (Northern opportunists who moved to the South to exploit the chaos) and scalawags (Southerners who cooperated with the Northern opportunists) ransacked what was left of the economy. A severe draught following the war truly seemed like the wrath of God starving out an already emaciated, utterly defeated people.

Northern societies and charities organized large quantities of food shipped to the South and prevented thousands from starving to death. The Northern Presbyterian Church helped the Southern church to recover. They sent money to rebuild churches, pay pastors, and print religious materials.

But when it came to reuniting the Presbyterian Church from the split caused by the war, things did not go well. The North demanded that Southern pastors repent of their defense of slavery and of their rebellion against the Union. To the North's perspective, the Southerners were traitors who had broken away from their loyalty to the Union. But the Southerners believed their conscience had been violated, a sacred right to live as they best saw fit to live without having an outside force impose values upon them. It is the old and complex argument of local governance versus centralized authority.

Almost all Southern clergy refused to repent, still insisting that slavery is sanctioned by the Bible and that the Southern states should have been free to make their own decisions on their way of life. The Episcopal Church quickly reunited with their Southern brethren because they came with a spirit of "let bygones be bygones," with no formal repentances or oaths. As one Southern pastor wrote, If Northern Christians should come down from the throne of judgment and reason kindly and talk to us in a neighborly fashion as our equals, our Brothers in the common infirmities of human nature, who may themselves be wrong at least, they would find us ready to answer in kind." (Thompson, p. 145)

Of course, there were some Southerners who opposed the war. In my own family – my mother's family and my father's family – there were deserters who refused to serve in the war and who hid in caves, swamps and thickets until the war was over. Poor people farming small plots in the middle of Tennessee and Northern Alabama, they refused to fight for the interests of wealthy plantation owners who looked down on them anyway as poor whites – their inferiors in every way.

As many as 10,000 Southerners (including many Presbyterians) were either so demoralized or upset after the war that they left the country and moved to Mexico and Latin America. Many Presbyterians went to Brazil and started villages and churches there. A book was published in 1936 called *The Confederate Exodus to Latin America*.

One of the great issues was how the white and black Presbyterians would work together, and would they be able to worship together in the same churches as they had before the war? This was tragically not to happen. Most whites believed that African-Americans were inherently inferior to them and could never aspire to positions of equality, much less rule, in Southern society. While white congregations welcomed their black neighbors to church, they were still required to sit in the balconies. And they were not given equal rights to participate equally and fully as members or as elders. The whites even wanted to control the oversight of the all-black congregations.

In the end, whites in general created policies used to bolster the political, economic and social interests of their own race. As Ernest Thompson said so well, It is odd that the disciples of Calvin did not see that the innate sinfulness of mankind would prevent the white race from using their unchallenged power for the benefit of the blacks and therefore for the final good of the South itself. The inherent inferiority of

the Negro accepted, it followed that social equality must be rejected as leading inevitably to inter-marriage and the eventual ruin of the white man and of his culture and civilization in the South. (pp. 198-199)

Some preachers even argued that the animals coming into Noah's ark two-by-two is proof that races must stay separate. Almost always, any generosity or concern of whites toward blacks was in the spirit of superiority, segregation and paternalism. In blunt summary, Thompson concluded, "After the war, the black population's readiness to receive the Gospel from his former masters rapidly disappeared." (Thompson, p.203)

And so I will conclude with these reflections. It takes our best prayers, our best thinking, our best spiritual discernment to separate the God Almighty Truth from cultural prejudices or rationalizations aimed at promoting and protecting our own selfish interests.

Even today, as we are all gathered here in the sanctuary and Life Center on July 1, 2012, there are issues of justice or decency or godness that we are blind to because of our time and place. These may be issues about economics, health care, war and defense, sexual ethics, or certainly, race relations. Perhaps our grandchildren or great-grandchildren will ask us why we allowed such and such to happen, or why we didn't do more to stop this or that.

And I hope that we will have the courage and humility to respond honestly and to admit our sins, our faults, our blindness, our weakness.

As we prepare ourselves for Holy Communion and give thanks for our lives in this great nation over the Fourth of July holidays, let us remember that our highest forms of both spirituality and patriotism are expressed when we are most honest, most humble, most clear-headed and clear-sighted, trusting that God will open our eyes to do what is best for all God's people all the time, casting aside all manifestations of superiority, segregation, and paternalism. Amen.

Thompson, E. T.. Presbyterians in the South, Vol. 2. Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1973.

Buttrick, G. A.. The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.