



Christ Presbyterian Church New Haven

July 2, 2015

Dear CPC community,

Like the summer whirlwinds of a hot and humid storm, the ecclesiastical encyclicals, pastoral statements, pundit commentaries and personal innuendos have been churning and spinning ever since the recent “landmark” ruling by the Supreme Court concerning same-sex marriage.

The reactions have been as legion as they are varied, ranging between the polarities of ecstatic happiness to doomsday gloom. But as Wesley Hill observed in his Blog on June 27th, “for those of us who continue to believe that marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman... [we are] asking what it looks like to be faithful to Christian teaching now that the state’s definition of marriage diverges so widely from the church’s biblical and traditional definition.”¹

Here again, we discover a bi-polar, if historically predictable, reaction by traditionalist Christians.

On one end, there is the position of strategic retreat. Now to be fair, the strategic retreat position (in varied manifestations) is not necessarily to acquiesce into a position of fortress entrenchment. Rather, it is more often affirmed as a missional, even cultural transformational, strategy of “church” as a “city on a hill” in order to keep “the light of faith burning through the surrounding cultural darkness.”² The focus is less on legislation and more to do with personal conversion. As articulated once by Duke theologian Paul Griffiths about the same sex marriage (quoted by Wesley Hill),

What the pagans need on this matter is conversion, not argument; and what the Church ought to do to encourage that is to burnish the practice of marriage until its radiance dazzles the pagan eye.

The reaction on the other end is to engage the issue head on, politically and culturally, in the various legislative and cultural halls of the public square. As referenced by David Brooks,

¹ “The ‘Benedict Option’ and the Dazzled Pagan Eye,” in [Spiritual Friendship: Musings on God, Sexuality, Relationships](#), Posted by Wesley Hill, June 27, 2015.

For biblical definition: By positive decree-- Gen 2:24, Mark 10:7-9, Eph 5:24-27, Heb 13:4. By negative decree-- Lev. 18:22, 24, 28, 30; cf. Lev. 20:13, Rom 1:26-27) 1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

For traditional/confessional definition: *Westminster Confession of Faith* 24.1 and *Westminster Larger Catechism* # 139.

² Quote by Rod Dreyer, author of taken from How Dante Can Save Your Life,”) taken from David Brooks in “The Next Culture War.”



Several contributors to a symposium in [the journal First Things](#) about the court's Obergefell decision last week called the ruling the Roe v. Wade of marriage. It must be resisted and resisted again. Robert P. George, probably the most brilliant social conservative theorist in the country, argued that just as Lincoln persistently rejected the Dred Scott decision, so “we must reject and resist an egregious act of judicial usurpation.”³

Both reactions are conceding what those of us living in Southern New England conceded many decades ago, that Christianity is in decline in America as we are now thoroughly entrenched in a “post-Christendom” reality (notice I said “post-Christendom” not “post Christian”—more on that later). As David Brooks has recently described it:

The share of Americans who describe themselves as Christians and attend church is dropping. Evangelical voters make up a smaller share of the electorate. Members of the millennial generation are detaching themselves from religious institutions in droves... American culture is shifting away from orthodox Christian positions on homosexuality, premarital sex, contraception, out-of-wedlock childbearing, divorce and a range of other social issues. More and more Christians feel estranged from mainstream culture. They fear they will soon be treated as social pariahs, the moral equivalent of segregationists because of their adherence to scriptural teaching on gay marriage. They fear their colleges will be decertified, their religious institutions will lose their tax-exempt status, their religious liberty will come under greater assault.⁴

According to the four dissenting justices against the ruling of the majority five, much of the fear is foreseeably justified.⁵ For instance, whereas most concur that the recent ruling on same-sex marriages will have no direct (legal) impact upon the liberty of churches in the exercise of their religious convictions, it most likely will directly/legally impact the religious liberty of individual Christians, private Christian businesses and/or religious organizations, again in the exercise of traditional convictions about same-sex marriage. Chief Justice John Roberts writes:

The majority graciously suggests that religious believers may continue to “advocate” and “teach” their views of marriage. The First Amendment guarantees, however, the freedom to “exercise” religion. Ominously, that is not a word the majority uses. Hard questions arise when people of faith exercise religion in ways that may be seen to conflict with the new right to same-sex marriage—when, for example, a religious college provides married student housing only to opposite-sex married couples, or a religious adoption agency declines to place children with same-sex married couples... Unfortunately, people of faith can take no comfort in the treatment they receive from the majority today.

³ Quoted in David Brooks, *The Next Culture War*”

⁴ *The Next Culture War*, NYT Op-Ed, June 20, 2015

⁵ For a general compendium summary of dissenting opinions, c.f. “TOP 10 QUOTES FROM THE DISSENTING JUSTICES ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE, June 26, 2015 @ Gospel Coalition web site: <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevinwax/2015/06/26/top-10-quotes-from-the-dissenting-justices-on-same-sex-marriage/>



And again Justice Thomas:

Religious liberty is about more than just the protection for “religious organizations and persons . . . as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling and so central to their lives and faiths.” Religious liberty is about freedom of action in matters of religion generally, and the scope of that liberty is directly correlated to the civil restraints placed upon religious practice”.

Arguably more odious and problematic for the missional Christian and Church, there will be the indirect, popular effect of the recent decision as indicative of a mind-numbing mob-like turn of events in popular opinion. For embedded in the language of the majority opinion, there is every reason to expect a continued escalation in pop-cultural resentment, and perhaps worse, cultural dismissiveness against traditional-biblical Christianity.

Based on the majority decision, and especially some of its language, Justice Alito argues that the ruling will be used to “vilify Americans who are unwilling to assent to the new orthodoxy. In the course of its opinion, the majority compares traditional marriage laws to laws that denied equal treatment for African-Americans and women. The implications of this analogy will be exploited by those who are determined to stamp out every vestige of dissent.”

This indirect, popular, effect is likewise anticipated by Chief Justice Roberts:

Perhaps the most discouraging aspect of today’s decision is the extent to which the majority feels compelled to sully those on the other side of the debate. The majority offers a cursory assurance that it does not intend to disparage people who, as a matter of conscience, cannot accept same sex marriage. That disclaimer is hard to square with the very next sentence, in which the majority explains that “the necessary consequence” of laws codifying the traditional definition of marriage is to “demean or stigmatize” same-sex couples... It is one thing for the majority to conclude that the Constitution protects a right to same-sex marriage; it is something else to portray everyone who does not share the majority’s ‘better informed understanding’ as bigoted.

Likewise, as a result of the gigantic swing in cultural orthodoxy that has transpired over just the past 15 years. Judge Alito predicts how

those who cling to old beliefs will be able to whisper their thoughts in the recesses of their homes, but if they repeat those views in public, they will risk being labeled as bigots and treated as such by governments, employers, and schools... By imposing its own views on the entire country, the majority facilitates the marginalization of the many Americans who have traditional ideas.

These opinions beg to question, what from a missional perspective will be required of us?

Such resentment will make it necessary for the biblical Christian to become a cultural heretic—but will she/he be willing and prepared to accept the cultural, even vocational, marginalization and oppression commensurate to being a cultural heretic? Is our fundamental identity “not of this world” such as to be set free from the fear of human negative opinion and adverse temporal



consequence? And are we preparing the next generation to set their minds and hearts on things of consequence and with meaning “from above, not on things that are on earth (Col. 3:2)?

Moreover, the cultural bias will make it more difficult for unbelievers to receive the gospel from those churches and individuals who affirm and even affiliate with traditions that don't affirm same-sex marriage and a host of other “post-Christian” values? Perceived as being *irrelevant* (what side of the century did you wake up on?) or worse still, *mean* (how could you oppose love and happiness for the growing number of people who at no fault of their own, are born LGBT?).

Given these sentiments, how might the proclamation of the orthodox Christian gospel meet the challenge of unpopularity within the American context of spiritual democratization wherein the audience is sovereign? Herein, we who live in a post-Christendom era, take courage and instruction from our fathers and mothers of a pre-Christian era. Just ask the 1st century Ephesians, Corinthians or Philippians who also held to culturally heretical convictions and practices, and yet the church as the “pillar and bulwark” of the truth thrived, if not outward-culturally, inward-spiritually! Given then their example and the teachings of scripture, I would propose three take-away lessons.

1) Don't panic or despair the demise of Christendom. Christ's church will do just fine!

Residing in Carthage In the summer of 197 AD, Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullian (Tertullian for short) penned his now famous quote "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." And he would know! Most scholars agree that Tertullian's conversion to Christianity occurred around 195 AD during an era of both legal and social persecution against Christians and the Christian church, yet his conversion was not an anomaly.

Early church historian Carl Sommer explains how “after A.D. 64, it was no longer possible for Christians to preach the gospel publically. The post-apostolic church had to devise other means of fulfilling Christ's command, and they had to do so in a way that would not recklessly endanger the entire Church.” And of course, we assume that without the protection of civil authority, or the endorsement of pop-culture, that church growth and conversion was sufficiently stunted, right? Wrong! Sommer further explains,

The knowledge that the Christians were serious people who were being wickedly oppressed by the government caused many people who were already having grave doubts about the direction their culture was taking, to explore Christianity further... the patient endurance of the martyrs caused many conversions on the spot, particularly among soldiers who were given the task of carrying out the executions.”⁶

And so don't despair or panic, as Russell Moore has reminded us:

The Supreme Court can do many things, but the Supreme Court cannot get Jesus back in that tomb. Jesus of Nazareth is still alive. He is still calling the universe toward his kingdom...the gospel doesn't need “family values” to flourish. In fact, the church often

⁶ Carl Sommer, *We Look For A Kingdom*, “Chapter 1: Baptism by Water, Spirit, Blood, and Fire: Becoming a Christian in the Early Church” (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007) P. 108



*thrives when it is in sharp contrast to the cultures around it.*⁷

Here at CPC, we have had the great privilege to hear first hand how the church is flourishing, especially in faith and spiritual vitality in places like Iran, Pakistan, China, Zambia, Liberia, Haiti, Ethiopia and more—all amidst circumstances with far less advantageous political, social and temporal circumstances compared to what we might even anticipate in near future of America, notwithstanding the demise of Christendom. As my first pastor once reminded me, what other institution in all the world has outlasted every political administration and national regime? What institution enjoys the promise by the Creator God himself:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Mt 16:18)

We are NOT afraid for the church. In fact, we are optimistic. The church never fairs better than when she is the church “militant” (present age) empowered by the certain hope of the church triumphant (the next and everlasting age).

- 2) We must assume the posture of “resident alien” in our calling as missionary Christians living in the world, trusting that our greatest missionary asset is being not of the world! As resident *aliens*, their identity and values transcended the world yet in a manner that drew them to the gospel.

1Pet. 2:11 *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.*

We know that the 1st century context for the recipients of Peter’s exhortation was that they suffered “various trials” (1 Peter 1:6). They were being “tested by fire” (1:7), maligned “as evildoers” (2:12), suffering “for doing good” (3:17) and “reviled” (4:14). And yet Christians were called to remain “in” the world but in a way that kept their identity in tact as being “not of this world,” whose home is in heaven (Heb. 10:13).

Without a doubt, the idea of “alien” implies a clear distance in relation to society, a distance from its values and ideals, from reliance upon its institutions and politics for the coming of the kingdom of God (the “of” of “Kingdom of God” is instructive, something only God in his power can accomplish!). Reflecting on 1 Peter, Miroslav Volf has observed how “unlike models that call for a transformation of culture or a Christendom-like alliance of church and state, Peter expects the gospel to always be highly offensive and never completely embraced or accepted by the world. This is a caution to those Christians who hope to bring about an essentially Christian culture.

The idea of “resident” implies that they remained engaged in culture. Volf likewise observes how Peter “nonetheless expects some aspects of Christian faith and practice to be highly attractive in any pagan culture, thus influencing people to praise. They were to be fully involved in its life, working in it and praying for it. At the same time, they were not to adopt its culture or lose their

⁷ Russell Moore, “Why the church should neither cave nor panic about the decision on gay marriage.” The Washington Post Op-Ed, June 26 at 11:03 AM



distinctive identity as God's holy people."⁸

As Christians, we must make our peace that we are going to be "fools" for Christ in a post-Christian world. (c.f. Paul's "Fools Speech" in 2 Cor. 11-12.) We will be forced to re-evaluate our values and confidences even if "anti-American" wherein our trust is not in the power, prestige and privilege that can be gained by socio-cultural-economic appeasement but in Christ! And yet again, we must remain engaged in the world for the sake of the world (not a culture-war perspective). That is, we seek to serve the world, albeit again even if by values that the world doesn't readily appreciate.

- 3) Finally, we must make the gospel first. That is, our first aim is not to make a Christian nation or culture, but to make Christians. We therefore set our focus on Christian conversions, knowing that the result will be the "re-conversion" of such divine institutions as the sanctity of life, sacredness of covenant based (vs. consumer based) marriage, multi-cultural equality (if not sameness), etc.

There is a very important order to salvation in scripture wherein justification proceeds sanctification." It's an order that is beautifully illustrated by Christ's interaction with the women caught in adultery.

Jesus said... Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more. (John 8:11)

The order is likewise noted by John in his epistle wherein he observed how

Perfect love cast out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. (1 Jn 4:18-19).

The fact of the matter is that it is impossible to be sanctified without first being justified, since all good works done out of fear are not works of love but self-interest. The gospel therefore starts with the problem of "Sin" (capital "S") and the need to be reconciled to God, not to the exclusion of dealing with "sins" (small "s"), but dealing with "sins" in so far as there is the restoration of true faith, hope and love in Christ.

Another way to say this is that we need to preach and teach the whole counsel of God, but also in Godly proportions. What then is the overall focus of divine revelation in Scripture? Paul summarizes it as "Christ and him crucified." No, Paul doesn't preach and teach nothing but the cross, but he preaches and teaches everything as it must pass through the cross.

What does this imply about the topics we preach each Sunday, or the first order of conversation that we have with our non-Christian friends, or even how we would talk about such topics as sanctify of life and marriage? We are left with the privilege of framing everything in order to fit into the good news of the gospel. How would this change our conversations on the topic of marriage, for instance, as covenant based in order to preserve grace based marriage after the pattern of Christ and the church?

⁸ Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference"



It's to this final point that I want to return to the previously noted statement by Paul Griffiths concerning the focus on "conversion" that leads to "re-conversion."

What the pagans need on this matter is conversion, not argument; and what the Church ought to do to encourage that is to burnish the practice of marriage until its radiance dazzles the pagan eye.

Wesley Hill, a professing "gay Christian"⁹ and author of the highly recommended book Washed and Waiting offers then this powerful illustration of what such a conversion/re-conversion interaction might look like based upon a true story. About Griffith's idea, He starts out by admitting, "on the surface of it, I'm not sure how that strategy would work. How is it that Christians' purifying of their own male-and-female marriages will work to convince, say, a happily satisfied pagan couple to give up their gay sex and convert to traditional Christianity? The story is told:

Say you're a smart, capable American liberal, attending an Ivy League university. You may have some kind of nominal Christianity in your background, but still, by the time you're in your twenties, you're well catechized in modern mainstream American godlessness. Say, then, that you unexpectedly find yourself drawn to a midweek Eucharist at a nearby Episcopal church. You start going regularly, captivated more and more by the Gospel—the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—that you're hearing each week. Around the same time, you start taking the Bible more seriously, because, hearing it read in the weekly liturgy, you want to get to know better the Christ of whom it speaks and whom you're receiving each week in the Sacrament. And the more you study, the more you realize there is a canonical biblical theology of marriage. You start to see a coherence between the original creation of male and female (Genesis 1:26-28), the institution of marriage (Genesis 2:21-24), Jesus Christ's reaffirmation of that institution (Mark 10:2-12; Matthew 19:3-12), and the apostle Paul's insistence that it is a symbolic window onto the love of Christ for the church (Ephesians 5:21-33). And, before you know it, and cutting across the grain of your pagan past, you find yourself drawn in, captivated by this vision of Jesus, of discipleship to him, and of the meaning of marriage. Such, in brief, is the experience of the theologian Ephraim Radner, as he recounted it to me once, who now writes impressively in defense of traditional biblical sexual ethics. It happened to him. And it can happen again to people in similar places. Such is an example of what conversion might look like, how it might unfold.

Conclusion:

Let's keep our focus. Let's trust in the "ordinary means of grace" that God has given us wherein his presence is mediated through gospel centered and missional prayer, sacraments, preaching and one-anothering in the life of his body, the church. Keep asking and bringing people.

⁹ By "professing gay Christian" It is meant a Christian who recognizes his/her natural disposition of having same sex attraction, but as a matter of Christian sanctification a love motivated, and grace experiencing submission to God's design for marriage as traditionally-biblically defined between a man and a women.



Let's keep the faith. There is so much more that needs saying, so much about how we posture ourselves in our post-Christian culture, how we frame such conversations about life, race, sexuality, gender, marriage, war and on it goes by the logic and purpose of the gospel. But of everything that has not been said, what I think most needs to be said given the present age is the promise, even benediction of God to all who are by faith alone his covenant people. And it is as simple as profound.

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Mt 28:20)

That is,

"I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb. 13:5)

And again,

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Phil. 1:6)

Such then lets keep the faith with boldness and certain hope:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Cor.12:9)

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. Rev. 22:21

I am yours most affectionately in Christ,

Preston

(This pastor letter was reviewed and approved by the Session of Christ Presbyterian Church, New Haven)