

“Presbyterians, Lutherans, and the whole Church”

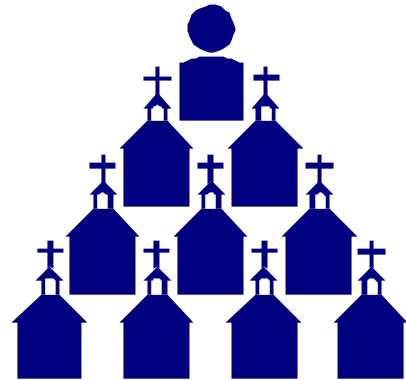
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(a sermon given at Calvin Presbyterian Church of Toronto as part of the preacher exchange among the ecumenical community of “Churches on-the-Hill” during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January, 2004)

I want to talk to you this morning about the Presbyterian Church.

Now, I know what some of you may be thinking: “What is this Lutheran guy – and a Latvian on top of that! – what can he tell us – who have been life-long members of the Presbyterian Church – what can he tell us about our dear Presbyterian Church?”

Well now, the answer may surprise you. I received a significant part of my academic education at Princeton University and a Masters in Divinity and a doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary. Princeton University was founded by Presbyterians and was closely associated with the Presbyterian Church. And Princeton Theological Seminary, since its founding in 1812, has been the “mother house” of American Presbyterianism.



That a Lutheran chose to attend a Presbyterian theological seminary should not surprise you. Princeton had a reputation not only for academic excellence, but also for ecumenical engagement. Under the leadership of then president James McCord in the 1970's and 1980's, the ecumenical percentage of faculty and students increased (some say to the detriment of its Presbyterian heritage – but that is another story.) When I began studies at Princeton Seminary, we had faculty from many denominations. Catholic Jesuits and Russian Orthodox, the usual protestant denomination, and a good number of Lutherans. Among my best friends as students were a Unitarian, a Coptic bishop, an Armenian priest, a Maronite Christian from Lebanon and several Anglicans. Among the 600 plus students, there was a large percentage of foreign students, giving their valuable perspective to the life of the church in the world.

Studying and living in this community I learned about the Presbyterian Church (that it was so well organized, that it would outlive Christianity!), about my own Lutheran church, and had the blessing of experiencing the richness and diversity of the people of God in the world.

But this morning I want to tell you about two Presbyterians who were faculty members and teachers when I studied at Princeton Seminary, and who greatly influenced me and countless other students whom they taught and befriended. I wanted to do this here, in this Presbyterian Church, within the community of The Churches –on-the- Hill, on this Sunday, when we celebrate our common faith and confession of Christ as Lord and Saviour, and when we also recognize the diversity of the Spirit's gifts within the communities and ministries of our 9 churches.

I want to tell you about two men of God who were my teachers. I have felt it a great blessing in my life that I have had, since Mrs. Johnson in first grade, excellent and gifted teachers. But in two people – bothe Presbyterians ! – I feel that, God has been especially generous towards me. And though I cannot in any way pretend that I have been able to do all that they taught, their personal piety and intellectual discipline have been my ideal.

(There were many excellent teachers at Princeton Seminary, and I have had the privilege of friendship with many of them. But I would like to tell you about two, as examples.)

The first one is Bruce Manning Metzger, the *emeritus George L Collard professor of New Testament Language and Literature*. Dr. Metzger was the foremost authority in the field of New Testament textual criticism, principal editor of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and author of numerous definitive works in the field of New Testament language studies and text. His list of honorary degrees took up more than a half a page in the Seminary Catalogue.

With his gentlemanly bearing, metal rimmed glasses, grandfatherly silver air and quick smile, he could be mistaken for a bemused accountant who had wandered on to the Seminary campus. He was the one who helped me get a position at the Institute for New Testament Textual Research at the University of Munster in Germany. When I asked Dr. Metzger about the city and university in Muenster, he replied in his characteristic way, that showed both his personal humility but also an acknowledgement of his accomplishments: "Oh, you'll love Muenster!", he said, "The last time I was there, they gave me a doctorate and I bought some lovely plums in the market!"

Dr. Metzger combined the great virtues of intellectual excellence and sincere personal piety. With rare exception, his many publications were dedicated to his wife, his children and his grandchildren.

Dr. Metzger could sometimes frustrate those students who were looking for clear and easy answers. When asked to venture an opinion on some point of debate among scholars of the New Testament text, Dr. Metzger would say that many fine scholars uphold a certain view, and then he would explain that view. But then he would also say that *other* important scholars have a differing interpretation, and with equal thoroughness also explain *that* position. And sometimes he would add that there is a minority of respected scholars, who hold a less popular, but interesting view, which he would then also explain. And finally, when exasperated students would ask: "But Dr. Metzger, what do *you* think?" , this great scholar would reply, "Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I favour one interpretation, at times another. It all depends on what day of the week it is!" When you are paying big bucks for an Ivy League education and you have just asked a question of the most renowned scholar in the world, *this* is not the answer a student expected!

But Dr. Metzger was teaching us all a valuable lesson: the Word of God is a living word, interpreted and even edited throughout many centuries, some of it is still obscured through the veil of ancient languages, faulty translations and incomplete, fragmented documents. There are no easy answers, and God's revealed word in Scripture requires our diligent study, our thought, our application to life and to a culture that is constantly changing and raising new questions every day. God's word speaks to different people in different places in different times – and none of us may be so bold as to say that we and we alone possess the definitive and final truth within His word.

But Dr. Metzger also understood that our calling as pastors, teachers and interpreters of God's word requires that we truly are to do as Jesus said: " `Love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your **mind**' " (Lk. 10:27)

God has given us a mind to use to his glory and the betterment of our fellow human beings and, indeed, all creation. While it may be true that faith and religion often appeal to our human emotion, the Christian faith demands much of our minds – it requires us not just to feel and emote, but to think, consider, to be *critical* in the real sense of the word and be able to evaluate and judge what is good and right, and what is not.

Dr. Bruce Metzger, by the example of his personal life and his academic teaching, taught us that piety and intellect are both necessary, particularly in the calling of public ministry.

The second person is Dr. Geddes Hanson, professor of church administration and himself an administrator in the Seminary. Geddes Hanson, or "Guy" as most called him, is a black man whose roots are in the Carribean. In the 1970's a black professor at a Princeton was not that common, a situation happily changed since then.

Dr. Hanson combined great insight, academic rigor, and just the right peppering of pithy language to make even the arcane subjects of church polity and administration seem alive and fascinating. He was the one who told me that the Presbyterian church is so well organized, that it will undoubtedly outlive Christianity itself!

Dr. Hanson once told us of his up-bringing in a poor section of Brooklyn in New York City. Surrounded by street gangs and petty criminals, his family struggled to provide direction and discipline, so that their children would have a better life. When Geddes Hanson would be tempted by the gangs and drug dealers, his father would sternly tell him: "We are Hansons. We don't do that!"

That was a lesson he retained in his life and taught in many variations to his students. And it is something for us to remember in our affirmation of our calling as Christians – people who bear the name of Christ into the world. When you are tempted to offer slick sound-bite solutions to complex problems, as do our politicians, Christians should say: We are Christ's people. We don't do that!" When others callously turn their back to the needs of the suffering, the poor and the oppressed, we should respond: "We are Christians. We don't do that!" When others are happy to despoil the land and waste our precious natural resources, we should say: "We are Christians. We don't do that!" And then, most importantly, having said that we will not participate in the heartlessness, lies, and selfishness of others, we offer the example of our lives and of our Lord and say: "We are Christians. This is what we do!"

Geddes Hanson taught me that the most practical and seemingly mundane things – such as church administration – are merely the manifestation of your faith – your choices to follow the ebb and flow of popular expediency – or to follow Christ in love and service.

Now I tell you about these two people not just to brag about my great experience at Princeton – though I am very proud to be an alumnus of that fine seminary. But I wanted to tell you about them to make two points.

The first is that the body of Christ in the world – the Church – is magnificent in its diversity and in the abundance of gifts which the Holy Spirit has given to its members. But we share a common belief and common confession of Christ as our Lord and Saviour – a belief first confessed by the apostle Peter in the Gospel witness for today.

We are fortunate in our community of Churches on-the-Hill that we can see and experience this diversity of talents, mission, worship, preaching and all aspects of our life of faith. But we also affirm our common beliefs, our belonging to one Church – which we do in a visible way on this Sunday, exchanging preachers and readers within our community.

The second point is more practical and directed to you here, in Calvin Presbyterian Church. And that is this: the next time The Presbyterian Church asks for your donation to support your denominations theological seminaries – give generously. You may not realize how great and far-reaching your gift will be! I have only Princeton Seminary as an example, but it is undoubtedly true of many other seminaries, that trained pastors, who then followed the call of Christ and serve in all parts of the world, in an astounding variety of ministries, practicing and expanding upon the knowledge and insight they gained in the classroom.

This Latvian Lutheran stands before you today, proud of the education and experience made possible by the men and women of faith in the Presbyterian Church.

Amen.