

The Next Frontier

Michael Jinkins

Sermon preached for the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky Stated Meeting
November 14, 2011
Frank H. and Fannie W. Caldwell Chapel
Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Texts: Luke 4:14-20; 10:1-2 and I Corinthians 1:18-31

I want to tell you a story this morning about where we came from and where we may be going.

The western territories of the United States spread out before our ancestors just like all the songs say, prairies that terrified us with their vastness, mountains that defied us with their craggy heights, and forests that whispered in the haunting wind and beckoned us to enter. To many of our ancestors, the west summoned us to take a chance, to move into the unknown. This was the case even before our War for Independence, but especially so after it. The richness of the resources of the American west laid virtually untapped, at least in the eyes of our ancestors, those adventurers, pioneers, and first settlers. The land was a vast promise just itching to be kept. And the people flooded in.

They came here to what would become Kentucky first, pouring through the Cumberland Gap and spilling out onto the rolling hills of bluegrass. Others came right over the mountains from Alexandria, Virginia. But they were coming here, too. While still others made their way down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh. The fourth great track westward, of course, was from Albany, New York, to Buffalo, out along the shores of the Great Lakes. But three of the four most important routes westward came right past our front doors.¹

The west was the frontier. And the people flooded in. By 1790 there were about 100,000 people settled in the Mississippi River Valley. Just ten years later, that number had nearly quadrupled. The challenges of the west must have seemed even more numerous and more daunting than the strength of the first settlers.

Hostilities were not uncommon, both between these settlers and the original peoples of the land, and with people from other European nations who laid claim to the region. The land itself resisted the efforts of the settlers as much as it invited them. And there were other challenges, especially for those who hoped that civilization and godliness might flourish together on the new frontier.

There is an old saying that saloons and brothels were the first institutions of the west, and there's some truth in that. So there were clearly some moral challenges facing the church. But it is also true that the intellectual challenges to the truth of the Christian faith were, if anything, greater in the late eighteenth century even than today.

If you think that modern atheists, like Christopher Hitchens, have the ear of the public, it's nothing compared with the influence of Thomas Paine, a man who was read not only by eminent leaders like Thomas Jefferson but also by stable boys in Louisville and Lexington. Paine, of course, is often remembered today as the author of *Common Sense*, the tract that more than any other single piece of literature fanned the flames of colonial revolt. But Thomas Paine was also a virulent enemy of Christian faith.

"My own mind is my own church!" Paine wrote. His anti-Christian message was perceived as such a threat that the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church issued a warning in 1798 that "unless America turned from deistic infidelity, God would assuredly visit his wrath upon it."ⁱⁱ Paine's aggressively anti-Christian message, scoffing at the Bible and the Sacraments and contemptuous of Christian ministry, swept across the western frontier; as one historian notes: "Subscriptions to the deist papers were gathered from Kentucky. Deism had spread out over the mountains into the Ohio Valley.... Presbyterians feared that most of the people in the state [of Kentucky] were infidels."ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, I think this is where the story gets *really* interesting: Far from feeling overwhelmed and dispirited at the enormous scale of the challenges facing it, the church was filled with confidence. If there is a single biblical text that might be considered the text for that whole era, it would be this: "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.*"

We began to build seminaries across the country to provide ministers of churches that did not yet exist in communities that were then only barely forming. We built seminaries to educate pastors and teachers for the frontier: Pittsburgh Seminary (1794); Princeton Seminary *and* Union Seminary in Virginia (1812); Auburn Seminary (1818); Columbia Seminary (1828); McCormick Seminary (1829); University of Dubuque Seminary (1852); Louisville Seminary (1853); Johnson C. Smith Seminary (1867); San Francisco Seminary (1871); and Austin Seminary (1902).

Now, here's what I want us to notice. The year that Pittsburgh Seminary was founded (1794) the population of the United States was just under four million persons. The year Austin Seminary was founded (1902) the population of our country was just under eighty million. Those dates and those population figures span the history of the founding of all ten of our Presbyterian seminaries. During that time, our nation grew from four million to about eighty million souls. We were utterly convinced that we needed ten seminaries across this country to supply ministers to preach the gospel in a period that culminated in a population of eighty million.

The current population of the United States, according to the population clock on August 23, 2011, was over 312 million. The population of the country is four times greater today than when we established our tenth seminary.

In the 1790s, despite the claims of the nostalgic, the romantic, and the politically-motivated who will tell us that the founders of this country were more Christian than we are, some historians estimate that less than 10% of the total population of this country actually belonged to churches.^{iv} Even the most generous studies estimate that the proportion was less than 20%.^v That percentage had risen to about 50% by the time that we stopped building seminaries.^{vi} Today, according to Gallup, 43.1% of the American public claim to attend some church, though, that figure is often disputed. Apparently, people like to give the impressive even to anonymous pollsters that they are more faithful than they really are.^{vii} But all of this means (and this is the point we shouldn't lose no matter how we cut the statistical pie) that today, by any count, there are more (far, far more!) potential hearers of the gospel than at any other time in the history of this country.

I'm sure that about now some of you are wondering if there's a sermon in here somewhere. And I'm just coming to that.

I want us today to reflect on the loss of confidence in our church regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want us today to identify the loss of confidence in our church for what it is.

This loss of confidence is not the consequence of a realistic assessment of unfavorable demographic trends. It is the consequence of an unrealistic theological assessment of the love and power of the God we serve. What we have here is not (*vis a vis* "Cool Hand Luke") a failure to communicate or organize or ride the crest of the demographic tidal wave, but a failure of trust.

I would be willing to be discouraged today if two things were true: (1) If the gospel of Jesus Christ has lost its power; and (2) if there were fewer people to hear Christ's message of liberation. But there are millions more people today than when we first built our seminaries to provide ministers for churches that did not yet exist in communities that were only beginning to be formed on the frontiers of this country. And the gospel of Jesus Christ still liberates persons today around this globe.

The only thing that has changed is the location of the frontier. The frontier is not somewhere "out west." The frontier is "among us." And so is the reign of God – "among us." Yes, we need to identify this frontier. And, yes, we need to articulate the gospel through media that will be heard on this frontier. But, mostly, we need to believe again, because really the only thing that has changed is the location of the frontier.

Oh, and one other thing has changed. We no longer have confidence in the power of God to seek and to save, to liberate and to raise from death to new life.

We have, instead, taken on the false teachings of that ancient lie told by Pelagius – that heresy that St. Augustine and other saints of our church long ago raged against, that heresy that fuels American

utilitarianism and the myths of the “self-made man,” that heresy that teaches us that we can save ourselves, that all we need is self-improvement, that techniques will make us whole, that what afflicts us can be corrected with a little more effort and a little good advice, that we can do it all. We have nurtured this myth. We have told ourselves this lie. And today when confronted by the challenges before us, we throw up our hands and we despair, and yet we are unwilling to face the facts that we continue to place our faith in ourselves. The Pelagianism, the heretical belief that we can save ourselves, has let us down, and yet we cling to our false ideology even though it is not a theologically-approved floatation device, but an anvil round our necks that will drag us straight to the bottom.

There is good news for us today, but it is not news I find on the virtual pages of *The New York Times* I read each morning on my trusty iPad!

There is good news for us today, but it will not satisfy those who demand signs and the kind of wisdom that impresses the worldly Pelagian.

There is good news today from folks like St. Luke and St. Paul.

Now, Luke, according to ancient Christian traditions, was a physician. He probably knew his way around a CAT scan and an MRI. And Paul was a smart guy. He could do longitudinal studies and long-table analyses with the best of them. But when Luke chose to tell us the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he took us to a tiny synagogue in Nazareth, that dusty backwater village where Jesus grew up, and he placed Jesus at a table with an ancient scroll, and he reminded us, that redemption comes from God alone and that our job is to preach it. And when Paul laid out the vision for the missionary church, that church which in a startlingly short period of time moved from oppressed-outsider-status under the boot of a seemingly all-powerful pagan Empire to the position of dominant faith, he told us that he had consciously chosen to forget everything else he ever knew, except the message of Christ, and Christ crucified, “foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved ... the power of God.”

“Where is the one who is wise?” Paul asked. “Where is the celebrity consultant who has the answers to how we save ourselves from statistical irrelevance?” “Where is the sacred snake oil salesman who will heal our diseases and restore us to a vigorous life of fame, fortune, and influence?” “When does their plane land so we can greet them and shower them with tears of gratitude, and provide an appropriate venue in which to sign their newest books?”

If our goal is the institutional survival of the Presbyterian Church (USA), we will not succeed. But, I’ll tell you a little secret, if that is our goal we do not deserve to succeed. Our goal must be to proclaim the message of Christ and Christ crucified that still has the power to save, to liberate, and to raise humanity to life abundant, a message that will remain foolishness to all the Greeks.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sitting in a Nazi prison, toward the end of his life, imagined the future of the church. Bonhoeffer intended the words he was writing to serve as the climax of a book he hoped to live to write. The words survived, though the Nazis hanged Bonhoeffer. He wrote: “*The church is the church only when it exists for others.*” The church, he continued, must tell people of every calling “*what it*

means to live in Christ, to exist for others. In particular, our own church will have to take the field against the vices of hubris, power-worship, envy, and humbug, as the roots of all evil.”

Never have these words been more true than today! Never have the vices of *hubris, power-worship, envy* and (maybe especially!) *humbug* had a more sure grip on our church!

Generations ago, those who brought Christian faith to the frontier, those who founded our seminaries and churches, took up the challenges of the frontier to build new churches in communities that did not yet even exist. They did this because they had confidence in God and in the gospel of Jesus Christ. So they went forth to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberation for the oppressed. They proclaimed the year of the Lord’s favor.

Today, right now, the only thing that has changed is the location of the frontier. Our challenges are great. But it is time for us to stop focusing on the challenges and to remember the God who is more than a match for any challenge, in whom alone we can entrust the future.

Today, right now, the only thing that has changed is the location of the frontier. The people on today’s frontiers need the good news of Christ crucified to raise them to life abundant. They want to hear this good news of liberation, even if they have no inkling of what it is or what it means.

We stand today with a cloud of witnesses to remember that the church is only the church when it exists for others. And evangelism must be for the sake of the other, or it is not God’s good news that we are announcing.

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.”

You know what the verse is that follows that one, don’t you? Jesus says, *“Go!”*

Amen.

I want to thank Angela Morris, Head of Public Services and Reference Librarian, for the Ernest Miller White Library, for her assistance in assembling many of the statistical facts used in this sermon. I am also grateful for Rick Nutt, *Many Lamps, One Light: Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, A 150th Anniversary History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), James Arthur Walther (editor), *Ever A Frontier: The Bicentennial History of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), especially Dwight R. Guthrie’s chapter, “Presbyterian Beginnings in the West,” 33-68; and Thomas White Currie, Jr., *Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary: A Seventy-fifth Anniversary History* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1978).

ⁱ Jerald Brauer, *Protestantism in America: A Narrative History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 94.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 92.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 92.

^v Stanley I. Kuther, *Dictionary of American History*, (Thomas Gale, third edition, 2003), Volume 7, p. 83.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 83, figure 1.

^{vii} See Bob Smietana’s article, “Statistical Illusion,” in *Christianity Today*, August 24, 2011.