

THE PRESENT STATE OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

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The successes of the preceding three hundred years of Presbyterianism in America notwithstanding, the outlook for conservative, Bible-believing Presbyterianism today is quite bleak. In the following, we shall attempt to substantiate three fundamental claims. First, the growth of conservative, American, Presbyterian denominations in recent decades has failed to keep pace with the United States' population growth. Second, such denominations, whether considered individually or as a whole, are mere pygmies when compared to the U.S. population or even the liberal-controlled Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA). Third, and perhaps most tragically, conservative Presbyterian churches are deeply divided by the so-called Auburn Avenue theology. This new theology must, on the one hand, be squelched if these churches are to maintain their historic witness; and, on the other hand, it threatens, along with other intra-Presbyterian disputes, to engulf the churches in preoccupation with internal conflicts, thus stifling renewal in the areas of evangelism and mission.

I. Numerical Decline Relative to Population Growth

The membership statistics for American denominations maintained by the Association of Religious Data Archives¹ indicate that the United States' population growth has vastly outstripped the growth of the most conservative American Presbyterian denominations. The Reformed Church in the United States, for example, between 1971 and 1998 added only 219 members to its rolls. During the same period of time, the United States added 80 million persons to its population. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the largest and fastest growing relatively conservative Presbyterian denomination, added 82,221 persons to its rolls between 1990 and 2000; the population of the United States during the same period increased by approximately 40 million persons. One may protest that such absolute comparisons unduly exaggerate the extent of evangelistic failure on the part of conservative Presbyterian churches. They are intended, however, only to highlight the datum that conservative Presbyterian churches are failing to grow at sufficient rates even to sustain the comparatively miniscule influence for good they presently exert.

II. Numerical Insignificance Relative to Overall Population

Again, the PCA, by far the largest and most thriving somewhat conservative Presbyterian church in the United States possesses, according to its denominational website,² approximately 306,000 "communicant and non-communicant members." The current U.S. population is between 299 and 300 million persons. If one pooled all of the conservative Presbyterian

¹ See website thearda.com.

² See website pcanet.org.

churches, such as the members of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council, those denominations to the right of it such as the Bible Presbyterian Church and the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Churches, and evangelical congregations that remain within the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the PCUSA, it seems one could hardly form a group of more than 600,000 or 700,000 persons, approximately one fifth of the size of the 3.5 million member PCUSA. At the most, therefore, Reformed believers and their children constitute 0.23% of the United States' population.

Many of the most doctrinally sound Reformed congregations, moreover, are composed mainly of persons fifty years of age or older and are, therefore, barring some radical rejuvenation, slated to close in two or at most three decades. Something of a crisis mentality is, therefore, quite appropriate for Reformed believers in the present. If the Reformed faith is to play any appreciable role in America's future religious history, the Presbyterian clergy and laity must be awakened from their complacency and emboldened to adopt a much more aggressive posture in the areas of evangelism, church-planting, and missions.

III. Internal Conflicts: the Auburn Avenue Theology

In the process of renovating themselves, however, the Reformed churches must also adhere to biblical standards of doctrine and life. When forced to choose between numerical growth and faithfulness to God, the church must, of course, opt for faithfulness to God; it would be perverse to sacrifice God's honor in order to aggrandize a human institution. In order to be faithful to God, moreover, the Reformed churches must firmly repudiate all teachings that detract from the purity of the gospel.

What is commonly known as the Federal Vision, or Auburn Avenue theology, it seems, constitutes just such a teaching and has wended its way into influential circles within the Reformed churches. Its adherents advocate at least three tenets that place them squarely at odds with the Reformed faith as delineated in Scripture and the Reformed confessions. Specifically, proponents of the Auburn Avenue theology, first, deny the existence of a covenant of works distinct from the covenant of grace.³ Scripture clearly states, however, that even after the fall, God offers salvation to human beings on the condition of perfect obedience to the moral law (Lev 18:5; Ezek 20:11b; Matt 19:17b; Gal 3:12): a condition no one descended from Adam by way of ordinary generation can fulfill.

Scripture states as well that God, in view of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, offers human beings salvation on the sole condition of justifying faith. If one distinguishes between two covenants, a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, one can just as easily distinguish two radically contrasting conditions of salvation: perfect obedience to the moral law and mere justifying faith, which is incompatible with reliance upon one's own works for salvation. If God offers only one covenant with salvation as its reward, however, then both

³ Cf. e.g. Rich Lusk's essay, "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (ed. E. Calvin Beisner; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 118-48, which is a polemic against the notion of a covenant of works distinct from the covenant of grace.

obedience and faith must constitute conditions of that covenant. By forsaking the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, therefore, advocates of the Auburn Avenue theology seem at least implicitly to abandon the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Proponents of the Auburn Avenue theology, second, deny the legitimacy of a distinction between the visible and the invisible church.⁴ Traditional Reformed theologians distinguish between the regenerate, who compose the invisible church, the mystical body of Christ, whom God unconditionally elects to salvation; and the merely visible church, which includes the tares who possess no genuine faith and no share in the covenant of grace. Auburn Avenue enthusiasts, by contrast, maintain that regenerate and unregenerate baptized persons alike are members of Christ's body.⁵ They distinguish only between the historic (= "militant" in traditional terminology) church and the eschatological (= "triumphant" in traditional terminology) church: between, that is to say, those who keep their baptismal covenant and those who do not.⁶

To replace the former distinction with the latter, however, is to imply: (1) that members of Christ's mystical body can revoke their membership in that body;⁷ (2) that elect and reprobate members of the visible church are partakers of the same covenant with God; (3) that those who persevere in faith possess no covenant privileges that those who apostatize do not;⁸ and (4) that persons are saved, therefore, not because God enters into some special covenant with them, but because of their obedience to the conditions of a covenant made with elect and reprobate members of the visible church. The first implication is manifestly inconsistent with a traditional Reformed understanding of the perseverance of the saints. The second, third, and fourth implications, moreover, amount to a statement that human beings, as opposed to God's covenant of grace *per se*, determine who is and who is not saved. This statement, it seems, comes perilously close to a denial of two critically important Reformed doctrines that advocates of the Auburn Avenue theology themselves endorse: namely, that God predestines human beings to salvation or damnation and that sinners are saved by God's grace alone.

Proponents of the Auburn Avenue theology, third, implicitly deny the possibility of an infallible assurance of salvation.⁹ Scripture and the Reformed confessions direct Christians to

⁴ "A problem is created," writes Doug Wilson, "when we affirm a belief in two Churches at the same moment in time, one visible and the other invisible. . . . This leads to a disparagement of the visible Church, and eventually necessitates, I believe, a baptistic understanding of the Church," *Reformed is not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2002), 74.

⁵ In the words of Steve Wilkins, "The Bible teaches us that baptism unites us to Christ and His body by the power of the Holy Spirit. . . . At baptism, we are clothed with Christ, united to Him and to His Church, which is His body," *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, La.: Athanasius Press, 2004), 55.

⁶ Cf. Wilson, *Reformed is Not Enough*, 74.

⁷ "Men fall away," writes Wilson, "because their salvation was contingent upon continued faithfulness in the gospel" (ibid. 138).

⁸ "All in covenant," writes Wilkins, "are given all that is true of Christ" ("Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 254-69 at 263. Every person in covenant, affirms Wilkins, possesses "all things that pertain to life and godliness" (ibid. 267).

⁹ John Barach explain the Auburn Avenue theorists' conception of assurance thus:

If one can belong to God for a time...and yet later fall away and perish, then how can one know that he will belong to God, not just temporarily but forever? To answer that question, it may be helpful to think about a family which has just adopted . . . a child. How can that child be sure that he will always be a member of the family? How does he know he will not one day be disinherited? He can have that assurance because he is a member of the family now,

gain assurance partially by examining their lives and determining thereby that the Holy Spirit has actually transformed them in accordance with God's promises to genuine believers. Advocates of the Auburn Avenue system, however, direct Christians to seek assurance in their baptism. That is to say, supporters of the new teaching direct persons to assure themselves of their membership in the visible church by reference to an external token of this membership: baptism.¹⁰ As the Auburn Avenue theorists themselves would grant, however, membership in the visible church is no infallible guarantee of salvation. Although this teaching's proponents speak much of assurance, therefore, their theology allows for no infallible assurance of salvation at all.

The three tenets that we have discussed (a. the denial of the existence of a covenant of works as distinct from the covenant of grace; b. the denial of the existence of a real distinction between the visible and invisible church; c. the denial of the possibility of genuine assurance of salvation) by no means exhaust the range of errors spawned by the Auburn Avenue theology. Discussion of these three suffices, however, to uncover this teaching's thoroughgoing incompatibility with what has traditionally been regarded as the Reformed faith. The Auburn Avenue theology constitutes a sacramentalistic legalism that is in important respects inconsistent with the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Extirpating the Auburn Avenue theology, naturally, will neither preserve nor expand foundering Reformed churches; if these churches come to advocate the Auburn Avenue theology, however, they will be worth neither preserving nor expanding.

IV. Conclusion

The conservative Presbyterian churches in America, accordingly, face an extraordinary challenge. They must eradicate the Auburn Avenue theology simply in order to remain evangelical Christian churches; and yet they must not allow themselves to become so engrossed in this and other intra-Presbyterian controversies that they fail to communicate the Reformed faith to the 99.77 % of Americans who are not conservative Reformed Christians. All Reformed denominations must become aggressive, enterprising, and enthusiastic in their evangelism and outreach if they are to gain an appreciable number of adherents. Countless congregations, in fact, need radically to reform themselves simply in order to survive.

Reformed churches need desperately, for example, to relieve pastors of administrative duties in order to free them for sermon preparation and personal evangelism. Programs of proven effectiveness such as Evangelism Explosion clinics and Rutherford House's Reformed alternative to the Alpha Course ought to be exploited more than they are at present. Aggressive programs of visitation ought to be implemented. Expedients as simple as encouraging

because his parents feed him and hug him and tell him they love him, because he trusts his parents not to disinherit him without cause, and because he responds to them as a faithful child, making his adoption sure. And so it is with us. Covenant-breakers will be cut off and they ought to tremble. But no one who trusts in God will be put to shame ("Covenant and Election," *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 149-56 at 156).

We leave it to the reader to determine whether the assurance spoken of by Barach corresponds to the "infallible assurance of faith" spoken of by the Westminster divines.

¹⁰ "A faithful Christian," writes Wilson, "looks to his baptism for assurance" (*Reformed is Not Enough*, 130).

individuals to target selected friends, relatives, and neighbors to evangelize need to be used on a much wider scale than they are at present. The present state of American Presbyterianism is, after all, abysmal. Without in any way altering or diluting the Reformed faith, the Reformed churches must radically increase their evangelistic efforts if they are to emerge from their present, bleak situation.