

The Great Piano Schism

One of the members of the first church I served was married to a man named Bill who had grown up in the Church of Christ

There are several churches that call themselves that, but

Bill grew up in the uniquely conservative Church of Christ that you find across the mid-South

The church that among other things does not believe in having any instrumental music in their church

Which by the way leads them to have some of the most awesome choirs

singing in beautiful harmony

Bill explained to me (his version) of how that particular unique belief came to be associated with that group of churches

Please, note that this is Bill's version

Having, so far as I know, very little basis in actual historical fact

And you should probably know that Bill had a wicked sense of humor

All that said, Bill's story was:

That sometime in the early 19th century, before the Churches of Christ had separated themselves from other denominations

The piano in a church was damaged and in need of replacement

And the elders of the church were not in agreement on the subject of whether they should spend money to replace the piano

Some said the music was a glory to God

Others said it was too expensive, and God didn't need it

Since this was an argument in a church, both sides sought biblical or theological support for their position

The Piano Supporters pointed to Biblical references to playing on the flute, trumpet and lyre

The "don't replace the piano" group pointed to the Protestant theological ideal of avoiding ostentation in favor of being (what we would now call) "mission oriented"

And besides, the references to singing in the churches of the New Testament never mentioned any instrumental accompaniment

(certainly not pianos which weren't invented until the 17th century)

The argument continued for some time until

The church divided in what Bill called the Great Piano Schism

The non-instrumentalists calling themselves the true and Biblical Church of Christ.

I assure you the movement that we now know as the Churches of Christ, did

not actually get started that way,

Their theology is much more complex than that

However . . . new denominations start over controversies all the time

Breakaway Presbyterian denominations have left the larger church over

The amount of formal education a person must have to preside over communion and baptism

Whether slavery could or could not be justified or reconciled with the Bible

The ordination of women

Segregation and desegregation

Whether the building in which the church worships belongs to the congregation or the Presbytery

Whether elders should serve on the Session for life, or should serve in rotating terms of a few years

And other things I can't remember or imagine

I once heard it said that all it took to start a new Baptist church was a Bible and an argument

To start a new Presbyterian church you need a Bible, an argument and an administrative commission

And when we talk about historic schism –

Let's not forget the church dividing into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox

That Great Schism was over whether the Holy Spirit

“proceeded from the Father

or from the Father and the Son”

I have no idea what difference it made or how anyone
thought they knew

But it was one of the earliest and largest recorded ruptures in
the unity of the Body of Christ

I think the bottom line is – we have a hard time getting along

We all have opinions

And we are all sure we are right

And for some reason, Human Beings have come to think that the best
way to prove that we are right is to prove that everyone else is
wrong

Which is frankly –

stubborn, short-sighted and stupid

Our denomination at least pays lip service to the idea

that Christians of good conscience may differ over any number of
non-essential things

and still be good Christians and valuable members of God’s Kingdom

But in fact, Presbyterian congregations divide (and stop speaking to
each other) over

what type of music should be played in the Sanctuary

Or whether children should be allowed or forced to stay in

church through the whole worship service

Or . . . you name it.

We are no better or worse at this than other denominations

Apparently we're not much different from the Christians of the 1st
century

Paul had to remind the church in Rome (and the church in Corinth
twice!)

that we're supposed to appreciate the differences

see our varied gifts

as part of God's design

and quit quarrelling over non-essential things

Unfortunately, he did not give us a litmus test for determining what is
essential and what is not

But Paul did suggest this as the bottom line

Those who think one way must not despise those who think the
other,

for God has welcomed them both

Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another?

It is before their own lord that they stand or fall.

But the last verses are is my favorite part:

And they will be upheld, (they will stand)

for the Lord is able to make them stand.

I think that means

That even though all of us are right about some things
and wrong about others

(None of us being perfect, you know)

By the grace of God, we will not be condemned for our
*mis*judgments

Instead, we all are loved and accepted

Because we are *saved*

And we are saved

Through Jesus Christ

Not through our wisdom, good judgments,
or right opinions

And always we have no business complaining about who God
chooses to invite to his table

In the second church I served, we had a series of 6 banners

We had made these banners with our own hands in the fellowship hall
And then hung them between the windows in an otherwise very plain
sanctuary

They represented the 6 Great Ends of the Church as they are identified
in our Book of Order

You know them

Maybe not as well as those of us who sat between those banners
every Sunday,

I can still close my eyes and see them

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;

the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;

the maintenance of divine worship;

the preservation of the truth;

the promotion of social righteousness; and

and my personal favorite: the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

There are a lot of things I don't know about the Kingdom of Heaven

Pearly gates, streets of gold

Will there literally be lots of singing and feasting...

But I know this one thing absolutely –

In the Kingdom of Heaven we will love one another

The way we are supposed to

I don't know how many of our personal opinions will survive our rising, but I know that

there will be no condemnation there

in the Kingdom of Heaven we will come from east
and west, from north and south, to sit
together at the table

and Heaven will not be divided by schism

And I think that's what the church (and particularly the

Presbyterian church) can and should show the world

That we can disagree without condemning or hating

That we can listen with open minds to those whose
opinions differ from ours

And come together at the table.

We Presbyterians believe that we make our best decisions by

sitting together to discuss issues **in the presence of God**

Listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit in and through the voices of
our brothers and sisters

That idea is what we can exhibit and offer to a broken and divided
world

We don't do it perfectly

You know;

Broken people form broken institutions

Reformed and ALWAYS reforming

But the reason I am still serving in this Presbytery after 23
years

Is because we do it pretty well

As a Presbytery, we have weathered some of the
biggest most important and divisive issues in
these years

And we've argued passionately about whether to
change a comma to a semicolon

But at the end of the day we walk out of here still loving
each other

Reminding ourselves that our colleagues are doing
the same thing we are

Striving to hear the Word of the Lord

Striving to protect and challenge and defend
and grow this corner of the Church of
Jesus Christ

That's our exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven

And that Is the hope for the future of the
church

Our hope and our gift toward the future of a
broken world.

Let us pray:

Gracious Father , may we see each other as you see us. May we love each
other as our Lord instructed. And may your Holy Spirit fill these meetings,
always.

Amen.