

“It’s Not About Us”
Genesis 12:1-3
Matthew 28:16-20

For many years William Willimon was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. During that time he became nationally known as a preacher and teacher. Now he is the Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church and he is still very much a guru on the speaking circuit. This past month I heard him speak two different times in two different venues. Each time he quipped, “I don’t know why Presbyterians have a *Book of Order*. What they need is a stick of dynamite!” With all due respect to the Bishop, Methodists have their *Book of Discipline*. They could use some dynamite, too.

Last Sunday was Pentecost. The gift of God’s Spirit is the only dynamite the church needs. Sometimes the Spirit explodes like dynamite. Leonard Sweet has prepared *A Magna Charta of Trust by an Out-of-Control Disciple*.¹ It reads in part:

I am part of the Church of the Out-of-Control. I once was a control junkie, but now am an Out-of-Control Disciple. I've given up my control to God. I trust and obey the Spirit. I've jumped off the fence, I've stepped over the line, I've pulled out all the stops, I'm holding nothing back. There's no turning back, looking around, slowing down, backing away, letting up, or shutting up. It's life Against the Odds, Outside the Box, Over the Wall, the game of life played Without Goal Lines other than "Thy Will Be Done..."

I'm done lapdogging for the topdogs, the wonderdogs, the overdogs, or even the underdogs. I'm done playing According to the Rules, whether it's Robert's Rules of Order or Miss Manner's Rules of Etiquette or Martha Stewart's Rules of Living or Louis Farrakhan's Rules of America's Least Wanted or Merrill Lynch's Money-minding/Bottom-lining/Ladder-climbing Rules of America's Most Wanted.

²I am not here to please the dominant culture or to serve any all-show/no-go bureaucracies. I live to please my Lord and Savior...

Today, however, is about order and discipline – words that are associated with the ordination of elders and deacons. You see, the Spirit also works by bringing together believers and organizing them for ministry and mission. The familiar Presbyterian mantra is that we like to do things decently and in order. But that’s not just a Presbyterian phrase, it’s a Biblical phrase³ and it is a Biblical phrase that is set in the context of a discussion about the explosive power of the Holy Spirit. Among the gifts of the Spirit to the church are organizers, managers, administrators, or helpers as the Greek is variously translated. The church is called to live within the tension of order and discipline on the one hand, and on the other, unharnessed energy that always moves outside the box.

We need both hands. One without the other is apt to suffer from delusion. Those caught up in *order* and *discipline* begin to serve the organization more than the mission for which the organization was called into being. Those who are caught up in their own experiences of faith and are always going off on tangents often think that their opinions are infallible and that their experiences should be normative for everyone else. In short, one hand without the other begins to believe that our corporate

life as a church is about us or that individual Christian life is about me. It isn't.

Another Bishop, N. T. Wright of the Church of England, writes that the Biblical story "Isn't just about our own private pilgrimage. It's about becoming agents of God's new world – workers for justice, explorers of spirituality, makers and menders of relationships, creators of beauty. If God does indeed speak through scripture, he speaks in order to commission us for tasks like these."⁴

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that keeps saying, "it's all about me." No wonder we're not happy. We haven't yet discovered that it's not about us. Listen to Mother Theresa: "Being happy with [God] means: Loving as he loves, Helping as he helps, Giving as he gives, Serving as he serves, Rescuing as he rescues, Being with him 24 hours, Touching him in his distressing disguise."⁵

Still yet another Bishop from England, the late Leslie Newbigin, who became a well-known missionary in South India, said that the greatest heresy of monotheism was to cherish Clause A of the Abrahamic call while conveniently suppressing, forgetting, or ignoring Clause B.

In Clause A, God promised Abraham - "**I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great.**" In Clause B, God declares the purpose of Clause A - "**...so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**" That's what Psalm 67 sings: "**May God be gracious to us and bless us ... that [God's] way may be known upon earth, [God's] saving power among all nations.**" Jesus sounded the same refrain when he told his disciples to "**God ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.**"

In the generation that I have served the church we have focused on Clause A. We want to be a great church, to have greater influence in the life of the society, the nation and the world. But that influence has waned. We have lamented and whined about the former "glory days" of the church following World War II when attendance at worship and Sunday School was exploding and when the denominational agencies had the resources needed for mission and outreach. We've tried every trick of the trade to fix the church. It's as if we never heard Jesus say, "**...those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.**"⁶

I picked up the newsletter of another Presbyterian church in my recent travels. Since it's so easy to point fingers at others (and may God forgive me), let me share the goals established by that Session for that congregation:

- < Fully fund the 2008 Operating Budget through the Stewardship Campaign
- < Ensure that 75% of new members joining during 2007 are actively participating in some program of the church
- < Increase average adult education attendance by 25%
- < Study ways to increase the effectiveness of church communications channels
- < Establish the church as a community shelter in cooperation with the Red Cross
- < Prepare a design and cost estimate for installing showers in the gym

Because of the intention to become a community shelter, you can't say that the Session believes "it's all about us," but it surely is "mostly about us!" I shudder to think how God might judge First Presbyterian Church of Ambler, PA. No wonder the church often feels more like a club than a missionary society. Brian McLaren directs some pointed words to the church: "It has been said that

the greatest obstacle to the coming of the kingdom of God is the church, preoccupied with her own existence. Could our preoccupation with making better churches rather than better blessing the world be the heart disease that plagues us? And could our Clause-A theological systems be the high-fat cause of that heart disease?"⁷

Ordaining those whom God has called to lead the church as elders and deacons is an important activity for this congregation, but it is an intramural activity and becomes important to God only when it impacts our extramural activity – our life beyond these walls: the corporate mission in which we are involved (whether it be a work group traveling to the Gulf Coast for hurricane relief; or work groups with Habitat for Humanity or helping a new church in the Kensington section of Philadelphia, our youth going to North Carolina in a few weeks or the dollars to send through our denominational mission agencies) as well as the individual witness we make in our daily Christian walk.

Having a Book of Order isn't all that bad, Bishop Willimon! It identifies six great ends or purposes of the church, purposes that maintain a good balance between Clause A and Clause B. It says that the Great Ends of the Church are:⁸

- < 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
- < The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Think about that. Our life together as a church, all our Clause A concerns, is for the purpose of Clause B. God has indeed blessed us in so many ways. May we never forget that God expects us to be a blessing to the world.

1. *Soul Café*, March 1996, Vol. 2, No. 1 (See www.leonardsweet.com)
2. 1 Corinthians 12:29
3. 1 Corinthians 14:40
4. *Simply Christian*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 189
5. Teachings of the Christian Mystics, cited in Christianity Today, February 8, 1999, 72.
6. Luke 9:24
7. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2004/cln40629.html>
8. Book of Order, G-1.0200