



Presbyterianism and Gospel Prosperity in Australia

By David Robertson

“We don’t do denominationalism in Australia” – was the somewhat encouraging comment I was given upon arrival in ‘the lucky country’. Having come from tribalistic Scotland – where the clan system seemed to have been spoon fed into us with our mothers’ porridge – I looked forward to a new era of evangelical co-operation, unity and joy in the service of Christ. But is it true? Maybe hanging loosely to the idea of denominationalism is a good thing – but not if it is replaced with networks, fashions and inter-denominational politics. That is to jump out of the frying pan into the fire!

Of course, someone coming from a Scottish Presbyterian background would not dare to tell his Australian brothers and sisters how to do things – but we can give you some advice about how not to do them! A Scottish Presbyterian was once shipwrecked and stranded on a desert island. Several years later when he was rescued, his rescuers marvelled at his hunting, engineering and spiritual skills. Amongst other things he had managed to build two churches. Why two? “The first is the one I go to, the second is the one I don’t go to!”. Sometimes we define ourselves by what we are not.

So, when people say that they are an Australian Presbyterian I hope it is not a way of saying that they are not Anglican, Baptist or Charismatic! Does it matter what label we have? In one sense no – there is only one Church, one Family, one Bride of Christ. She is the sum of all believers, through all ages, in all the world. We are but a tiny part of that. But the church militant (that is, the church on earth) is not yet the church triumphant (in heaven) and so on this earth we are organised into local fellowships. Yes, we are one in Christ – I have far more in common with a Christian of another denomination than I would with a non-

Christian in my own. My predecessor (by several generations) in my old church, St Peters in Dundee once stated in the local newspaper that he would rather “have pastor Martin Boos, preacher of the Church of Rome though he was, in my pulpit, than some frigid evangelical from my own denomination!”. But it is also the case the denominational distinctives do matter.

I happen to think that Presbyterianism (the form of church government by elders in local congregations, and congregations working together in presbyteries) is both biblical and suitable for today’s Australia. Presbyterianism is at one and the same time, both the best and worst form of church government. At worst it is a dream for bureaucratic formalists who love church law and politics and who manage to use the Presbyterian system to prevent change and stifle initiative. At best it is a system where diversity and unity go together; where godly tradition and contemporary biblical application unite; and where passion, purity, practicality and proclamation are combined.

Scotland is often thought to be the mother of modern Presbyterianism (although Geneva, Ephesus and Jerusalem might have a larger claim!). The Australian Presbyterian church was a daughter church of its Scottish mother. The daughter needs to realise that her mother is very sick. What’s gone wrong?

Traditionalism, liberalism, legalism, pettiness, confusion, lack of leadership and inability to cope with a changing culture, are all words that could help describe where we have gone. But it is best summed up in this – the Church of Scotland (and much of the Church in Scotland) has largely forgotten its central doctrine – that Christ is the head of the Church, and that he governs his Church through his word. When the church moves away from the word of God then it destroys itself. As Dean Inge

put it: 'he who marries the spirit of this age, will end up a widow in the next'!

I don't know the Presbyterian church in Australia well enough to make any kind of judgement. But as an outsider who is seeking to work with you – all I can do is plead that you don't follow the path of the Scottish Presbyterian church. Any Presbyterian church which makes its aim to survive and maintain what it has – will die. Any church which decides to become like the society around and go with the tide will die. Any church that seeks to circle the wagons and hold on until the Saviour returns will die. Only a church which is prepared to die to self and live for Christ, will live.

I believe that these are great days of opportunity for the church

of Christ in Australia as a whole – and the Presbyterian church in particular. We can be Christ-centred, radical, biblical, contemporary, charismatic and catholic (in the best sense of those words). If we strengthen what remains and is about to die (Revelation 3:2); If we walk through the door that Christ has opened (Revelation 3:8) and if we are earnest and repent' (Revelation 3:20); we will yet know great days of Gospel prosperity in Australia.

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