

Being a Presbyterian in Canada Today

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In the year 1978 Dr. Stephen Hayes wrote this booklet which went on to sell thousands of copies. We are here reproducing it in a slightly updated form. We hope that you find it both of interest and of help.

Contents

WHAT IS THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH?	2
1. We are Evangelical	
2. We are Catholic	
3. We are Reformed	
THE CENTRE OF OUR FAITH: THE LIVING GOD	3
1. God is Lord	
2. God is Triune	
3. God is Saviour	
THE CHURCH	7
1. The church is the body of Christ	
2. The worshipping church reaches out	
3. The church is under the authority of Christ: Presbyterian Church government	
THE BIBLE	11
THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH	13
THE SACRAMENTS	15
1. Baptism	
2. Holy Communion	
THE CHRISTIAN LIFE	18
LIFE AFTER DEATH	19

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AND THE UNITED CHURCH	21
INTO THE FUTURE	22

What is the Presbyterian Church?

Presbyterian Churches are those which have certain beliefs in common and a Presbyterian form of church government. This booklet presents an outline of those beliefs and government.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada shares those beliefs. We are a branch of the Christian church. As such, we are Evangelical, Catholic, and Reformed.

1. WE ARE EVANGELICAL

In the New Testament the word "evangel" means good news. It is exactly the same word as "gospel". The good news, of course, is about Jesus Christ: his life, teachings, death, and resurrection. Basing our understanding of the word on the Bible, evangelicals, then, are those who believe the good news and want to share it with others.

Being evangelical also implies personal religion. The emphasis has not just been on accepting certain statements as true, but rather committing oneself to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. One way of putting this is to say that we believe not with our heads alone but with our hearts also. Indeed, when the New Testament uses the word "faith" it usually means personal trust. Faith does not mean believing about Jesus. It means believing in Jesus. Faith means saying "yes" to God who comes to us in Christ. Only when faith is of this lively personal kind is the church alive. Such faith cannot be handed on like a package of goods: each person must believe for himself or herself.

When seen in this way the word "evangelical" is little more than a description of Christianity. Where else should we start than by asserting that Presbyterians are Christians? Sometimes the word "evangelical" is equated in the public mind with emotional religion, mass rallies with people often being manipulated, and narrow theology. We are not using the word here in that way. Rather we are saying that the word "evangel" is a solid New Testament word, and that all who believe the good news of Jesus and are trying to follow in his way are entitled to be called evangelical.

2. WE ARE CATHOLIC

"Catholic" does not mean "Roman Catholic". The word catholic means universal, or world-wide. To belong to the catholic church is to say that we belong to the church as it is found around the world, and throughout the ages. All of church history is ours. The Christian Faith did not spring into being at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century. It started in the first century with Christ. All that has happened since then is to some extent a description of us. The church with all of its ups and downs, its times of glory and its hours of sad despair: these speak to us of ourselves. When one is baptized in the Presbyterian Church one is first and foremost baptized into the church catholic. When one is confirmed, one is first and foremost confirmed in the Christian church, and only secondarily the Presbyterian Church. When our ministers are ordained they enter the ministry of the church catholic. By the way, we might note in passing that one truly enters the church at Baptism; later vows are confirmation of those our parents took on our behalf. If we are catholic in this sense, then our outlook should be one of love and generosity of spirit to all Christians of whatever denomination. Wherever Jesus Christ is honoured as Lord, there we rejoice. The earliest definition of the word catholic was given by a church father named Ignatius some 1900 years ago. Ignatius wrote: "Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church". That is still the best definition we have of the word.

3. WE ARE REFORMED

The words Reformed and Presbyterian mean the same thing. The former word is more common on the continent of Europe, and the latter more common in Britain and North America. Both words refer to our denomination which came out of the Protestant Reformation, a major religious movement that occurred in the early and middle years of the 16th century. A very simplified view of church history might go like this. Roughly speaking (for there are exceptions) there was but one church until the year 1054 when the Eastern Church (Greek and Russian Orthodox) and the Western Church (Roman Catholic) separated. The next major upheaval was the Reformation. The chief leaders in that movement were Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli, and Cranmer. They were Protestants not so much because they were protesting something (though they were intensely objecting to corruption in the Roman Catholic Church), but rather because they were bearing witness (Latin *pro plus testare*: to bear witness) to what they regarded as New Testament Christianity.

They believed that people were justified in the sight of God by grace alone, received through faith. They believed that all had access to God through prayer and that forgiveness could be received directly. They taught the indwelling of Christ in the believer and passionately fought for the glory of God. Most of their reform they based on a study of the Bible and it, not church councils, came to be the norm by which truth about God and persons was judged.

From the Reformation sprang four main denominations: Lutheran, Reformed (Presbyterian), Anglican, and Anabaptist. Our roots go back to the 16th century in the sense that Presbyterians became a separate branch of the Christian church at that time. Our leaders in the Reformation were John Calvin (a Frenchman) and John Knox (a Scot). The Reformed Church spread to France, Switzerland, Germany, Holland, Scotland, Hungary, and to a lesser extent to other European countries. It is wrong to regard Presbyterians as being only Scottish in origin, though it is true that the roots of The Presbyterian Church in Canada are Scottish and that our mother church is the Church of Scotland (which is Presbyterian). Our Reformed family, however, is now worldwide,

thanks to the enduring work of many dedicated missionaries. We also belong to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, an international body of Presbyterian Churches. In addition to relief work, consultation among member Churches, joint activities such as editing Calvin's writings, the Alliance has played a significant role in conversations with Rome since Vatican II. Churches in the Alliance represent some 70,000,000 members and adherents around the world. To be a Presbyterian is to belong to a large family!

The Centre of Our Faith: The Living God

The glory of God has been central to our faith. When this perception that God is all-in-all, the one in whom "we live and move and have our being" diminishes, then to that extent we lose continuity with our history. John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with these magnificent words: "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves... our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone." As in the previous section, there are three chief declarations we might make about God: God is Lord, God is Triune, God is Saviour.

1. GOD IS LORD

God is the Supreme Being of the universe and rules over all. God is unique, and has primacy over all things. Yes, we have outgrown the "old man in the sky" image of God. But all too often we continue to think of God as some static sort of figure awaiting our approach, never involved in daily life. For too many, God is a distant being, one who could never possibly be interested in them.

How far is this picture from the one the Bible gives us! In the Bible, God loved the world so much that He gave his Son for the life of the world John 3:16). God is creator (Genesis 1), love (1 John 4:8), father (Matthew 6:9), saviour (1 Timothy 2:3-6)! In every way, God is Lord. For this reason the Bible does not seek to prove God's existence. Rather, it assumes that God will be revealed in history as active and powerful in the affairs of humankind. God is the living God, not just a collection of ideas in our minds.

2. GOD IS TRIUNE

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches belief in one God who exists as three "persons". This difficult doctrine, much under attack today, continues to form an essential part of our faith.

The Bible does not present us with a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity. Our position, however, is that the doctrine nonetheless arises from all that the Bible tells about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Belief in the Triune God came from the church's reflection on this question: What shall we believe about Jesus Christ? Overwhelmingly the answer came that he was and is divine.

The New Testament portrait of Jesus supports this conclusion in the most decisive fashion. Jesus forgave sin, changed the laws of Moses, performed miracles, made the most astonishing claims for himself (e.g. "I am the way, the truth, and the life") and while his own special name for himself was "Son of Man" his words and actions revealed him as Son of God.

The New Testament writers clearly came to the same conclusion. The earliest Christian confession, found so often in the New Testament, was "Jesus is Lord". Such in itself is assertion of deity. Readers may wish to consult passages such as John 1:1-3, 14; Colossians 2:9, and Hebrews 1:1-3.

As the church reflected on these passages, as well as on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, it was led to assert that God is one yet three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yet we are puzzled by this. How can this be? Some explanation seems in order.

When the early church spoke of three persons in the Trinity it meant something different from our usage of the word "person". By it we now mean an individual. But then the word person lacked such distinctiveness. Indeed the word comes from Latin *persona* meaning the mask through which actors spoke in Greek plays. The definition can even be taken one step back and be seen to derive from the Latin words *per* and *sonare*, meaning to speak or sound through. Specifically, it was not the mask as a whole, but the mouthpiece that was the persona. We see from this analysis how difficult it is now to think our way back some 1700 years to a precise understanding of what the church meant in speaking of one God in three persons.

The original meaning of the word shows, however, that we are concerned not with a mask that hides, but with a medium that reveals. The one God comes to us in the three modes of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As the doctrine of the Trinity developed, the Eastern Church (Greek and Russian Orthodox) tended to emphasize the threeness of the Trinity and the Western Church (Roman Catholic) the oneness. Yet even here there has been misunderstanding. The Eastern Church did not so much see the Father, Son, and Spirit as standing side by side as it saw them as three stars one right behind the other so the light of one was caught up and captured in the light of the other. Even in threeness there was a unity and oneness.

The Western Church tended towards emphasizing the oneness of God. Several illustrations of this come to mind. For instance, it is possible for the substance H₂O to exist in three remarkably different forms: as water, ice, or steam. Or we might mention St. Patrick plucking a three-leaf clover and saying that though the clover had three leaves, yet it was one. But after we are through with our examples and illustrations, we are wise to confess that we are in the presence of a deep mystery. Should that necessarily bother us? I think not. Indeed, why should our small minds be capable of wrapping themselves in thought around God? Would it not be the absence of mystery that should occasion surprise? It's like a flea trying to size up an elephant: the flea is too small and the elephant too big!

We should be reminded of how fundamental the doctrine of the Trinity is both to Christian worship and thought.

All churches baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Most services conclude with the benediction which is Trinitarian: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all". The great creeds of the early church came to assert belief in the Triune God and these creeds our Church accepts, as do most other churches.

Our salvation hinges upon the truth that it was really the Godhead who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. If the Father was not in the Son and the Son in the Father, we do not have God and we are not saved. And if the Holy Spirit does not indwell us, uniting us with the Father and the Son, we do not have God and we are not saved.

Belief in the Triune God is central to Christian faith.

The third "person" of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit, the presence of God with us and the power of God within us. The Spirit is in the world bringing men and women to Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the chief witness to Christ in the world, and empowers our witness. The Holy Spirit also gives gifts to people, the chief of which is love.

The modern church, hungering as it is for Christian experience, has been gripped in many places, by the charismatic movement. People involved in it have a great sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit and often speak in tongues, a phenomenon not unknown in the New Testament church.

While recognizing speaking in tongues as one mark of the presence of the Holy Spirit, we should never take this sign and exalt it into being of special importance. We cannot agree with those who believe that because they speak in tongues they are better Christians than those who do not. Nor must we allow people to claim that all Christians need some sort of second experience of the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us that "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13 NRSV). All Christians possess the Spirit. However, for our part, we must not turn against those who belong to this movement, for God may well be trying to teach us through it.

At the same time, however, it must be admitted that speaking in tongues has not been part of the tradition of the Presbyterian Church (though by no means totally unknown in the past). There are very real dangers here and it is naive to fail to recognize them. To repeat: if we truly see love as the chief gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 13) then we shall keep our approach to this and any other gift of the Spirit in perspective.

As we consider life in the Holy Spirit, we are led to a consideration also of our devotional life. We should see to it that we keep growing as Christians and that in fact we have a devotional life. It is too often the poverty of our Christian experience that renders us weak and ineffective as a Church.

3. GOD IS SAVIOUR

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible speaks of "This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself a human, who gave himself a ransom for all..." (1 Timothy 2:3-6 NRSV).

It would be incomplete, to say the least, to speak of God without joyously proclaiming the truth that God is also our Saviour and that this salvation comes to us through Christ!

The focal point of our salvation is the death and resurrection of Jesus. In a way which we cannot fathom -though many theories abound -"Christ died for our sins" (I Corinthians 15:3). Just as we cannot forgive unless we are willing to accept the injury that has been done to us, so also God cannot forgive unless God bears (accepts) our sins. On the cross the Father in the Son bears the cost of our salvation.

Our salvation and the forgiveness of our sins are linked directly to his death on the cross and the resurrection: "O Lord, by thy cross and precious blood, save us and help us we humbly beseech thee". Such prayers have echoed down the corridors of time and echo still on the lips of those who find in Christ their salvation. God's salvation comes to us through Christ as a free gift. The channel of receiving it is faith, and in this sense we are justified by faith alone. It is then not a question of God idly waiting around for us to come. Rather God comes to us in Christ and by the Spirit. It is more true to say that God seeks us than it is to say that we seek God. Many people seem to be running in the other direction! But in the end God's will shall reign supreme.

The Church

The church is Christ together with his people who are called both to worship and to serve him. He alone is King and Head of the church, his body on earth, those called to reach out in his name and who serve under his authority.

1. THE CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST

The New Testament speaks of the church in a variety of ways, the most dramatic and far-reaching of which is to say that the church is the body of Christ.

Such a metaphor points to the fact that Christ is the head of the body and believers various parts of it (I Corinthians 12). The church, then, is an organism much more than it is an organization, for Christ has chosen to live in and through his church making all believers "in Christ". Since we are all members of the body we each have a function to fulfill.

The relationship between Christ and Christians in this respect is unique. Such a relationship can be found in no other world religion. Nowhere else can one find followers spoken of as "in" the founder and members of his body. One may well say to all of this: "Well that's pretty lofty language to describe what goes on in my congregation. We certainly don't seem to be the body of Christ on earth!" This is a natural reaction to a startling expression, but nonetheless we must insist that this truth applies to our congregation as to all other Christians. Realize that these same thoughts about the church as the body were applied to the early church in Corinth -a sinful church struggling with

problems shocking even by modern standards. Sometimes we read the New Testament through rose-tinted glasses and forget just how human and prone to error were those early believers.

The church is the body of Christ because Christ has chosen to make it so. It does not depend on our feelings. We are the hands and feet of Christ and through us the Lord has chosen to work, and to express his will.

If we are upset by the imperfections we find in our own congregations --imperfections that we are part of and share in --we should remember that our Lord has acted in this way by his own choice. As a modern Christian martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once said: the imperfections of the church as the body of Christ are simply another manifestation of the willing humiliation of Christ to become flesh and dwell in our midst.

2. THE WORSHIPPING CHURCH REACHES OUT

The church exists both to worship and to work for Christ. Yet these two, worship and work, are but aspects of the same thing. We serve his will through worship as much as by work. Indeed, it is often the case that the church does its best in serving Christ simply by relaxing and being itself: a worshipping community that enjoys the presence of the Lord in its midst as a vital reality of daily life. As we worship, we lift up Christ by exalting him. Part of what was meant when he said "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all peoples unto me" refers to exaltation in worship. Hence worship must never be divorced from evangelism. Worship is evangelism. We can't really share the good news until we experience it as good news for ourselves. Only the truly worshipping community can be evangelical.

Yet our Lord also told us to go out to all the world to preach the gospel and to make disciples of all people. That means that we must reach out in our own communities, and also that we must support the work of missions

Too many congregations have forgotten that they are to reach out; they rely for church growth merely on births within the congregation or transfers of other Presbyterians into their churches. We shall start growing again as a denomination when we discover anew that we are to reach out into our communities and bring others to Christ.

The mission of the church also includes overseas missions. The Presbyterian Church in Canada is partners in mission in the following churches or agencies: Taiwan, Nigeria, India, Japan, Malawi, Mozambique, Lesotho, Pakistan, Guyana, Kenya, Central America, Zaire, South Africa, China, Hong Kong, Central Asia, Central America, Mauritius, Nepal and the Middle East, and has personnel in most of them. It also serves the cause of Christ through home missions: inner city work, on Indian reservations, new churches in towns and suburbs, and other specialized ministries such as day-care centres.

As the world changes, missions change as well. Our Board of World Mission has responded to these changes most sensitively. Too often people have an out-moded idea of exactly what missionaries do. In fact we are fortunate in the dedicated men and women who serve as missionaries. They have worked in the most amazing variety of ways: as evangelists, ministers, teachers, nurses, agriculturists, doctors, architects, and Bible translators.

The Mission Board also considers volunteers for service for short-term appointments. Some reading these words may well ask if they could serve in this or other ways.

3. THE CHURCH IS UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST: PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Christ alone is King and Head of the church and has authority over it. But exactly how is his authority given to his people? We believe it comes through his ministers and (for us) through our system of church government.

Authority, after all, does not just mean decisions handed down by governing bodies such as Sessions and Presbyteries. It means, first and foremost, the rule of God in the life of each person. God's will is known in many ways: the Word of God addressing us in the Bible, spiritual guidance that comes through prayer and worship, But in a particular way God has given us ministers to guide and to build up the church through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments (The Westminster Confession of Faith 25:3) .

It is obvious in the life of the church that ministers have a special role to play. They alone administer the sacraments. They alone conduct ordinations. They alone serve as, moderators of Sessions. They alone, with but few exceptions, preach to us the Word of God.

Ministers, then, are set apart not simply by their special education, but also by the call of God in their lives, such call being affirmed by the church.

Ministers are members of Presbytery, not of the congregations they serve. Hence while they must act within the terms of reference of our system which gives significant power to Sessions, they are nonetheless not under the authority of the Session but of Presbytery. Sessions also have no right to tell ministers what to preach. As an old saying goes, their authority stops at the pulpit steps.

In a particular way Christ rules his people through his ministers as through Word and sacraments he seeks to govern their hearts and minds. He also rules through our system of church courts. These courts, four in number, are as follows:

Session
Presbytery
Synod
General Assembly

These courts are composed of ministers and elders. To understand how the system works we must first explain what an elder is.

An elder is a man or woman elected by a congregation and ordained to rule in the church. In addition to ruling (through the Session) the elder is a church leader and with the minister and other ruling elders shares the pastoral care of the congregation.

Why do we have elders? In doing so we believe that we are being faithful to the pattern of authority found in the New Testament. Elders formed a basic part of the New Testament church. We read in Acts 14:23 (NRSV): "And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe."

Ministers are also elders who are ordained both to rule and to teach. Hence they are called "teaching elders" to distinguish them from other elders. These, being ordained only to rule, are called "ruling elders".

Ruling elders have little authority in themselves. Their rule is exercised corporately through our church courts, the lower always being subject to the higher.

The word "court" may bother some people. It summons up images of judges and juries rather than groups of men and women trying to do the work of the church. Yet the word is still appropriate because these groups are called upon to make decisions that are legally binding.

Moving from lower to highest, let us consider the function of our church courts.

i) SESSION

Every congregation has a Session comprised of the minister as moderator and all ruling elders. The Session, as a court of the church, is not responsible to the congregation. It is responsible to God and then to the Presbytery and other church courts. It is the Session, not the Annual Congregational Meeting, that runs Presbyterian congregations. The Session is responsible for the spiritual life and order of the congregation. It regulates the hours and forms of public worship. It controls the use of church premises. All groups and organizations in the church are under its supervision. The many responsibilities of the Session and other courts are to be spelled out in *The Book of Forms*. It would be helpful for each elder to have a copy of this book. Most congregations also have a Board of Managers. The responsibilities of the Board centre on two items: the raising and spending of money, and the care of the church property. Our system also allows for these functions to be cared for by the Session. Some churches have abolished the Board and given its authority to the Session which carries out these functions through Session committees. Under the present system authority is divided. With but one governing body authority is united and division less likely.

ii) PRESBYTERY

Above the Session is the Presbytery .It is comprised of all ministers and representative elders from each pastoral charge in a given geographical area, the congregations being under the care and jurisdiction of a Presbytery. Congregations are set up only through Presbytery and there cannot be a Presbyterian congregation not under the care and authority of a Presbytery .The well-being and vitality of congregations in its bounds is the main concern of this court.

iii) SYNOD

The Synod is the court responsible for the good order and effectiveness of Presbyteries in a given geographical area. The number of Presbyteries in a Synod varies but is usually around four or five. There are eight Synods and forty-four Presbyteries in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The minister and one elder from each pastoral charge within Synod's bounds are members of Synod and expected to attend yearly meetings.

iv) GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The General Assembly is our highest court. Each year one-sixth of the ministers on Presbytery rolls and a matching number of elders are expected to attend the meeting of this court.

As with other courts, a person chosen by election, presides as moderator. While we rightly give honour to the moderator and consider this person to occupy the highest office in our Church, strictly speaking he or she is only moderator of the General Assembly when it meets and not head of the Church. Serving as a focus for the unity of the denomination, this office is one of special influence as the moderator represents the Church on many religious and state occasions.

The General Assembly meets once a year .It decides on matter of polity, doctrine, and discipline and serves as the final point in matters of appeal from lower church courts. While the basic commitment of our elders and courts is to represent Christ and his will in the decision-making process, it is nonetheless the genius of our system that so many people are given a say. Yes, it is the case that truth can never be decided by vote. Something may be true even though everyone votes against it. Yet it is also true that the whole church is the people of God and it is good to involve many voices in this process. It is correct to regard this system as an attempt to make the voice of the Church heard from the local congregation right up to the highest court.

THE BIBLE

Our church has always given the Bible a special place in its life and worship. The Bible is the norm by which we test theology.

We continue today in this strong biblical tradition. Under Christ, the Bible is our chief doctrinal standard and by it we judge our subordinate standards such as *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

Yet it is common knowledge that in the past one hundred and fifty years a new world of biblical scholarship has opened up and the Bible has been examined as never before. With a new urgency people are asking what they can believe about the Bible today.

First of all we re-affirm that we are a church of the Bible. Such is central to our heritage and part of the meaning of Presbyterianism. This in no way means that we turn our backs on biblical scholarship. We must never fear truth and must always follow the evidence of careful scholarship wherever it leads. All truth is God's truth and God's will is that we worship with our minds as well as with our hearts. (Matthew 22:37)

At this point it is well to remind ourselves that equally part of our heritage has been respect for scholarship and a desire for an educated ministry. The foundation of such education will always have to be biblical. Thus, far from discouraging a careful study of the Bible, we encourage it. In a world that is becoming increasingly educated it would be folly to lower our educational standards for ministers. But still, what can we believe about the Bible today?

In the past it might fairly be said that people were asked to believe too much. They were taught that every word in the Bible was the one God wanted, at least in the original documents. Some still hold this view. However, most who have studied the Scriptures with some care can no longer accept that position. For them there are too many problems in the Bible for this interpretation to stand up.

On the other hand some would have us accept the Bible only as a human word, as though God had nothing to do with this book. We cannot accept that position. We cannot believe that the inspiration of the Bible is simply like the inspiration of Shakespeare when he wrote his marvellous plays. One might say that this is asking us to believe too little.

Let us neither believe too much: that every word in the Bible is dictated by God. Nor let us believe too little: that humans alone and not God had anything to do with the Bible. For us the Bible is both word of God and human word. God has used people, quite capable of error, to transmit the truth to us. The personality, the outlook, the temperament of each writer is only too evident in every book of the Bible. The miracle is precisely this: that the truth of God comes to us through human beings.

The Bible is a unique collection of writings. It records in the Old Testament God's dealings with Israel. In the New it tells us of Jesus and the early church. Virtually all that we know of the life of Christ we know through the New Testament. The apostles had a unique authority in the early church. The only sound record we have of apostolic witness is the New Testament. Indeed, the basis by which the church allowed books into the New Testament was their relationship to an apostle and his teachings. Such became the norm, the

standard, by which Christian teaching came to be judged. We believe that it remains our norm to this day.

How is the Bible to be understood? The first step in understanding Scripture is to try to see what it meant in the context of its own time. We cannot open the Bible at just any place and then apply those words to our present situation. To understand what those words meant for the group to whom they were originally written involves study and the use of Bible commentaries. Many difficulties disappear if we first establish the context and only then seek to apply what we read to our present situation.

Study of the Bible soon reveals that it cannot be taken literally in all of its parts. It is helpful, for instance, to understand that the author of Genesis 1-3 was not writing a scientific but rather a theological account of creation. It is true as theology, not as science.

The Bible must also be understood in a developmental way. The Bible reveals to us more and more about God until this self-revelation culminates in the coming of Christ. For this reason the New Testament must always be the interpreter of the Old Testament. This procedure (it looks simple, but is not) will save a person from many errors in biblical interpretation. Yet for many this discussion of the Bible as the word of God is close to a waste of time, for the truth is that thousands in our Church have stopped reading the Bible. Quite simply they are bored and confused by this book. What, if anything, can we do about this so that once more we can be a people who read and study and love the Bible?

Perhaps the following suggestions on Bible reading may be of some help:

1. Get a modern translation with a type size you are comfortable with.
2. Get a good Bible commentary. Many Bible passages remain a mystery without the aid of scholarly comment.
3. As an incentive, join a study group. Commitment to Bible reading comes first; interest follows. It's like anything else, you have to get into it before you start to enjoy it.
4. Read the Bible in faith, looking and seeking God's word for you. Too many read the Bible without expectation or hope. Faith is the key to Bible reading.
5. To take the Bible seriously is not to take it literally. Many have stopped reading the Bible because they were raised to believe that every word in it is exactly the one that God intended. Now as adults they can no longer bring themselves to believe that. Such people have suffered a crisis of disappointed expectations. For them the humanity of the Bible has to be faced and explained. We in no way ask people to suspend their sense of judgment when they read the Bible.

Let us continue to be a biblical church. Most of our sermons should arise directly from the Bible passage chosen for the day. The minister is not present to give his or her own opinions, but to preach the word of God. And that word is alive, and as relevant today as ever. To be a Presbyterian means to let the word of God resound into the life of our congregations and communities!

The Westminster Confession of Faith

The pattern of authority in the Presbyterian Church is as follows:

Christ
Bible
Subordinate Standards

As already stated, Christ is the King and Head of the Church and all authority proceeds from him.

Under Christ, our chief standard is the Bible. In a particular way Christ has chosen to guide his church through the Scriptures.

Beneath Christ and the Bible, The Presbyterian Church in Canada also has subordinate standards the chief of which is *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. This document was composed between the years 1643 and 1646, and since it was written in England, in one of the rooms of Westminster Abbey, it has been called the *Westminster Confession*.

The Confession is a brilliant exposition of many of the central truths of the Christian Faith. However, since it was written in an era that was pre-scientific, that pre-dated the critical study of the Bible, and that saw a world in which Protestant and Roman Catholic were violently polarized, we should not be surprised to find much in it that is no longer acceptable. However, the basis of non-acceptance resides not in one's private opinion, but rather in relation to our chief standard, the Bible. As we receive new insights from our study of the Scriptures we are led to new assessments of the *Confession*.

The Presbyterian Church has recognized this need in one of the questions put to ministers at ordination. They are asked the following:

Do you accept the subordinate standards of this Church, promising to uphold its doctrine under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures?

Such a question would not dismay the authors of the Confession for they believed strongly in the liberty of the individual conscience (20:2) and accepted the fact that they were fallible. In Chapter 31:4 they inform us that "All synods or councils... may err... therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both". But of course the Westminster Assembly was itself a council and therefore liable to error. Moreover the Assembly clearly places itself under the authority of the Bible (Chapter I) and hence invites correction by it. Therefore, by its own standards we are obliged to correct the Westminster Confession at those points where it does not accord with the teachings of Scripture.

As we noted already our Church also accepts the early creeds. Indeed, before ministers are ordained these words are spoken:

We acknowledge our historic continuity with the Holy Catholic Church and her doctrinal heritage in the ecumenical creeds and the confessions of the Reformation. Our subordinate standards are the Westminster Confession of Faith as adopted in 1875 and 1889, the Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation of 1954, and such doctrine as the church, in obedience to Scripture, and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, may yet confess in its continuing function of reformulating the faith.

Clearly, doctrine was not fixed for all time in the Confession. A Reformed Church is a reforming church and this means a continued examination of what we believe and why we believe it.

The Presbyterian Church also has a modern statement of faith called *Living Faith*. In 1984 the General Assembly agreed that it was "an acceptable statement of faith useful in worship and in study." In 1998 it was also made part of our subordinate standards. Many Presbyterians feel that it speaks for them. Well Over 100,000 copies have been sold. Some congregations have it in their pews and use it regularly as part of worship. Still other churches use it for confirmation classes and study material. As a church we have taken seriously the task of speaking the faith into the modern era.

The Sacraments

1 . BAPTISM

We enter the church at Baptism. It is the sacrament of initiation and is commanded by our Lord himself. The Presbyterian tradition is that one parent should be a member of a church before a child is baptized (The Shorter Catechism, question 95). Moreover, one of the questions put to parents at Baptism is the following:

Do you promise in dependence on divine grace to teach this child the truths and duties of the Christian Faith and by prayer, precept, and example, to bring your child up in the knowledge and love of Christ and of his church?

"Prayer, precept, and example". What sort of example would we be setting if we had our children baptized and then failed to attend church ourselves? It is impossible to see how we could fulfill this vow without both church membership and attendance. However, there is one exception to this tradition. In the Maritimes and in Scotland there are still some who do not consider themselves worthy to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion and for that reason never become communicant members (have their names placed on the communion roll of the congregation). Yet they are baptized into the church, come with regularity to services, and in every other way are faithful supporters of it. Certainly Baptism should not be withheld from their children. Such people may be considered baptized members of the church. There is a vast difference between them and those others who have virtually nothing to do with the church and yet want their children to receive Baptism.

Ministers baptize with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Not only do we enter the church through this rite, but water is a sign of God's forgiveness. It is also a sign of dying and rising with Christ. In Romans 6:3-11, Baptism is

regarded as an identification with the death and resurrection of Christ. It signifies union with Christ and the gift of his Spirit to the individual. The word "Baptism" conveys the drama it symbolizes: it literally means "to dip" or "to plunge" (Greek: *bapto*). For this reason Luther refers to Baptism as "God's Word in water" and Karl Barth, the great modern Reformed theologian, calls it "...the acted parable of Christ's death".

Some churches believe that it is wrong to baptize children. They believe that Baptism should come only after a personal confession of faith and this is clearly not possible for infants who cannot even speak. Why does our Church teach that it is right to baptize infants?

Here are four answers to that question:

i) CHILDREN ARE PART OF THE COVENANT

In the Old Testament children were part of the covenant, the agreement that God had between himself and the Jewish people. Yet the New Testament is considered better than the Old. How strange it would be if children were left out of it when they were part of the Old!

Those who refuse Baptism to children need to grapple with this question: What status then is given to children of believing parents? Few are prepared to exclude them from the family of God. But to say that they are part of the family is also to say that they belong. But if in fact they belong, how can we fail to symbolize their inclusion through Baptism?

ii) THE PRINCIPLE OF VICARIOUS FAITH IS PRESENT IN THE BIBLE

The word "vicarious" means doing something for someone else. Our point here is that to some extent it is possible to believe for another person.

In Mark 2 Jesus healed a sick man not on the basis of that man's faith, but on the faith of his friends. Others believed for him. They exercised vicarious faith.

Parents also exercise such faith for their children. They feed, clothe, and protect their children. For a while it is even true to say that they believe for them. A neutral religious upbringing is impossible. In infant Baptism a child is baptized on the basis of the sure promise of God and the faith of the parents.

iii) INFANT BAPTISM WAS NOT AN ISSUE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Yes it is true that there is no clearly undisputed case of infant Baptism in the New Testament. But this does not mean that it was not practiced. If the early church was opposed to Baptism it is reasonable to assert that there would have been some record of an intense controversy over this matter. But evidence for such controversy is completely lacking, and this suggests the acceptance of infant Baptism by the early church.

iv) THE NEW TESTAMENT SPEAKS OF HOUSEHOLD BAPTISM

Household Baptism may well have included children (Acts 16:15,33; 18:8, 1 Corinthians 1:16). When Gentiles were converted to Judaism they had to receive a type of Baptism as they were immersed in a pool of water to symbolize their new life in the Jewish community. It would have been unthinkable for them to have left out their children. This practice suggests strongly that household Baptism did in fact include children.

2. HOLY COMMUNION

The word "sacrament" originally meant the oath of allegiance a Roman soldier gave to his emperor. The word "sacrament" is not found in the New Testament and was only later adopted by the church. People were marked as Christians by their participation in the sacraments much as a Roman soldier was known as one who was loyal to Caesar by his oath of allegiance.

Presbyterians believe that there are two sacraments. The first, Baptism, we have already discussed. The second is Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, as it is often called.

As with Baptism, we celebrate Holy Communion in direct obedience to the command of our Lord who said "This do in remembrance of me". Thus Holy Communion is a churchly rite by which we take bread and wine and make a memorial of our Lord's death and resurrection. In a sense we re-enact Calvary much as the Jews at Passover re-enacted the Exodus.

The word "remembrance" really means "memorial". It does not mean simply jogging one's memory. Too many believe that all we do as we take the bread and the wine is remind ourselves that Christ died for us: like going down to the war memorial in the town square and thinking quietly for a few minutes about the men and women who died for us in the two world wars.

But "memorial" means more than that. It means making the past alive in the present. In a dramatic way we make real the Lord's death and resurrection. All of our senses are brought into play. We taste the bread and the wine. We hear the Word of God. We see the bread broken, the cup passed. We even smell the bread and the wine. We are not observers; we are participants. After all, Jesus said this do in remembrance of me. Yet the essence of the sacrament is not what we do but what God does.

The heart of Presbyterian belief about Holy Communion is summed up in the phrase "the real presence". After consecration the bread and wine are not changed chemically into something else. But in another sense they are changed, for they are sacramentally united with Christ and he is present to us by the Spirit in the sacrament.

St. Paul put it this way: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because

there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (1 Corinthians 10:16,17 NRSV)

One of the oldest names for the Lord's Supper is Eucharist, a Greek word that means thanksgiving. That is a good description of the sacrament. After all, it is a thanksgiving feast. We are present not just to remember, not just to re-live, but also to celebrate and rejoice in the presence of the risen Christ in our midst.

Holy Communion is also a covenant, for Jesus said "This cup is the new testament in my blood". The words "testament" and "covenant" both mean a solemn pledge or agreement. Jesus was saying that the bread and the wine are signs of God's new way of dealing with people. The old way was by law and temple sacrifice. The new way was by faith and sacrament. Holy Communion is God's pledge to us and our pledge to God. Each time we eat the bread and drink the wine that covenant is renewed. Christ through the sacrament feeds us spiritually. We pledge our oath of allegiance anew. The prayer before Communion includes these words: "And here we offer and present unto Thee ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice..." And so offering ourselves, we rise from the holy table, and go into the world to serve the living Christ.

The Christian life

What does it mean to live as a Christian in Canada today?

The answer to that question will have to be lived out in the complexity of each person's life. Certain characteristics, of course, will be common to all believers: personal faith, worship of God, love and kindness.

In concrete detail, however, we can rarely tell others how to live and we should strive to maintain all that the New Testament tells us about Christian freedom and life in the Spirit.

We are so adept at creating stereotypes! We so often assume that others should be exactly like us! Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together* reminds us that we can never tell in advance how the image of God will appear in other people. After all, that image appeared most fully in Jesus Christ and what a surprise he was! We should hold on to Christian freedom for ourselves and we should covet it for others.

The New Testament describes the Christian life as life in the Spirit. Christian belief, the act of faith, involves one in union with Christ through the Holy Spirit. The mark of the Spirit's presence is termed "the fruit of the Spirit" and the list of such fruit is most intriguing: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22 NRSV). The contrast between this list and some modern expectations of the Spirit's presence centering as they do on the uncommon and the spectacular are strongly worth noting.- life in the Spirit is for all believers (Romans 8:9,10) and is the basis of Christian freedom.

The disciples once asked Jesus how others would know that they belonged to him. His answer was love. A Christian is known not by a uniform he or she wears. We are known by love. Jesus' special word for love was the Greek word *agape*. It basically means a deep concern for the other person's well-being.

Another mark of the Christian life, recovered for the church by the Reformers, is an emphasis on vocation, a word that comes from Latin *vocare* meaning to call. The Reformers taught that everyone had a calling to serve God wherever he or she was -in home, office, school, or factory. Yes, some had a special call to serve God as minister; but everyone had a calling to serve God in daily life.

This emphasis on vocation needs to be recovered for our own age. Too many people have a worn-out, empty feeling about life. While we must be careful of over-simplifying, yet we should assert that part of the answer to making life more meaningful is to see it as a gift from God and daily living as an opportunity to serve God wherever we find ourselves.

What of religious experiences? Yes, we do need to grow in Christ, but some are troubled by the fact that though they believe, they do not have the religious experiences that others seem to have.

We by no means belittle the experiences of others. Yet it is helpful to be reminded of the fact that the New Testament gives very little evidence of concern for religious experience for its own sake or for the psychology of conversion.

Indeed, the meaning of certain New Testament words has frequently been changed to suggest that people require experiences in order to be Christians. But examine some of the key New Testament words which are often taken to describe experiences:

- "convert" simply means turn
- "repent" means to change one's mind
- "born again" refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in every person's life who turns to Christ in faith.

At no point is religious experience of an emotional kind made a test for faith.

Don't worry about experiences: be concerned about following Christ. Your emotion will vary enormously over the years. At times you will be blessed by a great sense of the presence of God. At other times you will feel that God is not near. In each case you are called upon to carry on in the life of faith. You are not a second class Christian if you have not had some sort of emotional religious experience!

God loves you as you are right now, and in Christ has accepted you. Paul Tillich once said: simply accept the fact that you are accepted. Your life, and that of those about you, has meaning. Keep growing and live out that meaning in daily life. Christian living means being open, not closed. It means love, not hatred. It means freedom, not a new form

of bondage, even to religion. And not least of all it means service to other human beings. There is no such thing as loving God and hating your brothers and sisters.

Life After Death

We have all attended funerals and viewed the earthly remains of friends who have died. Occasionally a relative of the deceased will come up to us and say, "Doesn't she look natural?" We mumble a hasty agreement, but in fact our eyes tell us a different story. The dead person looks very dead indeed. It is not easy at that moment to believe in life after death.

Yet belief in life eternal continues to be central to our faith. But how do we live after death? And in particular what does that difficult phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "the resurrection of the body", mean?

A medical doctor once said to his minister: "When I come to the phrase 'resurrection of the body' in the Creed, I omit it. As a doctor I know only too well what happens to a body after death. I cannot believe in a physical resurrection".

Is there a physical resurrection? What do we mean by "the resurrection of the body?"

One key to knowing what we mean by life after death has to do with a precise understanding of this term. It does not mean physical resurrection in the sense of decayed particles reposing in graves somehow being re-assembled at a future date. The difficulty in part resides in the fact that for St. Paul the word "body" does not mean the same thing as "flesh". Indeed when Paul discusses the resurrection in the decisive New Testament passage dealing with this matter in I Corinthians 15 he excludes the concept of a physical resurrection: "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (15:50). For Paul "body" meant the total person. He speaks of the survival of a spiritual body, one that God will provide for us: "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (2 Corinthians 5:1 NRSV). Resurrection, then, means transformation and the survival of the personality. The picture that Paul gives of the after-life is not uniform in all of his writings, but the most mature expression of his belief is the one quoted above. In other words, when we die we go to be with Christ. It happens right away and not at some future time.

In the sense that Paul interprets it, the phrase "I believe in the resurrection of the body" continues to be central to Christian belief.

The other key to the understanding of the after-life is the amazing assertion of Jesus that it begins right now: "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24 NRSV). Eternal life, then, is a present possession, and involves a relationship with God now. It has to do not just with the quantity of life, but also with the quality.

If eternal life begins now, then a new depth to this life starts to unfold for us all. Our present existence is flooded with a new meaning and becomes, in away, a training ground for the hereafter. We have eternal life: that one thought changed the outlook of tens of thousands of early converts to the Christian Faith. It gave them new hope for themselves, and for their world. It gave them power to look up and have a greater sense of worth. They would live for ever! They counted! God loved them!

The thought of life eternal is not some placid philosophy meant to comfort us in our old age. It affects us at every stage of life's journey and has within it a powerful force for good. If one can hope, then one can live as a human being. If we cannot hope and live as humans, our humanity is diminished. The hope of life eternal has a way of working backwards into this life and changing it for the better. Hope for the hereafter leads to hope for the here and now.

The Presbyterian Church and The United Church

In 1925 there occurred a major event in Canadian church history, the union of the Methodist, Congregational, and Presbyterian Churches to form The United Church of Canada. The Presbyterian Church as we now know it consists of those congregations which did not enter union, along with others formed since then. At times we have been called "the continuing Presbyterian Church".

Why did all Presbyterians not enter union? The answer lies in a mixture of reasons, some good and some not quite so good. There was fear on the part of some that the Christian Faith as expressed in the Westminster' Confession of Faith would be diluted by such a union. At the time the fundamentalist controversy was raging in the United States and this had a spill-over effect on the question. Others in our Church feared the bureaucracy of such a union. Still others cherished their Church of Scotland connection and did not wish to surrender it for any reason. Some Presbyterians disliked Methodists whom they considered at one extreme too fervent and emotional in their religion and at the other extreme too vague in their theology.

Why then did so many want church union? There are two, main reasons: they believed such to be the will of Christ, and they saw many practical advantages offered by union for home mission work. This was especially the case in western Canada where so many denominations were competing for the loyalty of the same group of people. It is not surprising therefore that the movement towards union started there.

In 1925, of a membership of 380,000, some 154,000 Presbyterians stayed out of union. By 1927 this number had grown to 163,000, with 1,100 congregations and 600 ministers. Whatever reasons one may give for or against union, it is a fact that three denominations went into union and two came out. In 1925 the Methodist Church had 418,000 members and was slightly larger than the Presbyterian Church. The Congregational

Church, however, numbered only about 10,000 members. From this we can see that the chief participants in union were the Presbyterians and the Methodists.

The United Church of Canada is a member of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. It has every right to regard itself as a Presbyterian Church because it can truthfully say that most Presbyterians entered union. Moreover, the Presbyterian system of church government has become the basic model for government in that denomination.

A common question asked of Presbyterian ministers is: "What is the difference between our Church and the United Church?" As they attend worship in United Churches the only difference from us many of our members can see has to do with the personality of the minister. Also, it is common for United and Presbyterian Churches to receive members from one another.

Well, is there a difference? If there is, it resides in the fact that the United Church has a liberal wing to it and we do not. Our Church stands in a theological tradition which has its own distinctive character much of which arises from our relationship to the Westminster Confession of Faith and other writings that have come out of the Reformed faith. The United Church is very preoccupied with social issues, more so than we. Its views on social matters tend toward the middle or left-of-centre, while ours tend towards the middle or right-of-centre. However, many in our church would argue that we should be more involved than we are.

There also tends to be more diversity of style in the United Church than in our Church.

But these are generalizations and many exceptions in both Churches can be found to the above statements. And of course pointing to differences is not at all the same thing as suggesting that one is better than the other. We should be ready and willing to learn from the United Church. For instance, it was the first Canadian Church --indeed, one of the first in the world, years ahead of its time --to ordain women to the ministry. However, our church has not followed the decision of the General Council of the United Church in 1988 to ordain practising homosexuals.

Of course the similarities outweigh the differences. We have already referred to the essential similarity of church government. Our style of worship is comparable; we both emphasize the sermon and a teaching ministry. We share theological education to an extent not commonly realized. Knox College is part of the Toronto School of Theology and our students for the ministry now study under Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, as well as Presbyterian scholars. In Presbyterian College, Montreal, there is also a significant sharing of resources with the Anglican and United Churches as well as a remarkable relationship with the Faculty of Religious Studies of McGill University.

What of church union with the United Church? That will not occur in the immediate future and the reason is that there is no grass roots movement in our Church for such action. Some day it may well come. But not right now.

One of our leading theologians claims that we used to spend too much time licking our wounds from 1925. That certainly was true at one time. It is probably no longer true.

We don't need to spend useless energy reliving 1925. There is no reason whatever why we cannot act in an adult and loving way towards one another. It's time to look to the future and not to the past. Happily, to some extent, we are doing that already. With the United Church and other denominations our Church has co-operated in sharing many church buildings, setting up chaplaincies in universities and other places, and entered into co-operative arrangements in mission appointments.

Into The Future

There is a lot of satisfaction in belonging to The Presbyterian Church in Canada. As one views the extremes found in today's church, one is happy to belong to a Church that is conscious of its past and yet is part of today's world. We rejoice in an educated ministry, a tradition of scholarship, an openness to new ideas. Yet these are balanced by a sense of the past, strong traditions, and a typically Presbyterian desire to do things decently and in good order. This means that we don't change every time a new idea comes along; but we do remain open to new ideas. Surely that's good! We can't be at the mercy of every kind of change.

The Presbyterian Church also deserves a lot of credit for achieving a degree of consolidation after a long struggle following church union. Those were trying days for hundreds of congregations. Many of our older members deserve our thanks and we owe a great deal to them. Yet it is a fact that our membership is actually declining though the population of our country is rising. Membership now is about 130,000 and according to the census there are about 600,000 Canadians who call themselves Presbyterians. Of these, less than one quarter are on our communion rolls, and of those only about one-half can be counted on to do anything. We can see then that in actuality only about 60,000 or one-in-ten are supporting our Church.

We need to ask the question: how can we get our Church going again? That is another way of saying let's look to the future.

But what is the answer?

It may well lie in a variety of things. Probably we need more church discipline. Too many of our Churches baptize without asking for commitment. Certainly we need a deeper devotional life. We need better preaching. We need ministers and elders who are more willing to face issues in their congregations. In far too many churches situations are allowed to carry on because elders and ministers are not willing to confront problems. Here we come to a question of personal courage: are we willing to pay the emotional price of dealing with problems in our congregations?

Some of our elders need to be more positive and venturesome. They have to be reminded that they have been ordained to lead, and that they should encourage constructive new ideas as they come along. We need a new sense of vision. And yes, we most definitely need a hefty dose of the power of positive thinking! We need to stop saying "It can't be

done" and start doing things. This means renewed faith in ourselves, our congregations, and in God.

Realize that the depth of faith of our people and of Christians in general in Canada has been greatly under-estimated. A few years ago, many people thought that rapid inflation would wipe out church after church. This has not happened. People care. People want their churches. And they are willing to get behind great ideas if we will only let them and not allow the negative thinkers in our midst to get a stranglehold on our congregations.

However, perhaps the best answer is found in Revelation chapter 3. There we encounter an almost vitriolic attack on the church at Laodicea. Yet in the midst of this attack on a faithless church there occurs one of the most tender verses in the Bible, a verse addressed to a church and to Christian people. There we read in verse 20:

Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you and you with me. (N.R.S.V.)

Here even a defeated church is given the bright promise of renewal through the presence of Christ. Somehow, in the strange economy of religion it is possible to be a Christian and yet keep Christ out of the centre of one's life.

What is our greatest need? It is a renewed sense of the presence of Christ in our midst. The only future we have is the one he cares to give us: but if we are willing, that will be more than enough!