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"The Birth and Growth of the Presbyterian Church in America"

First, of all the money that comes into the denomination headquarters in Atlanta, over sixty percent goes to world missions. Over sixty percent of every bit of money that goes into Atlanta by the churches goes for one thing -- world missions. So, this is a crucial kind of a service for world missions.

Secondly, I am not the founding father of this church. I am one of many who have helped found this church. I grew up in Chicago, Illinois. My wife is from Atlanta. I am still on probation as far as her family is concerned, despite the fact that I came to the south when I was seventeen years old to go to school. I've been in the south ever since, but I am a little bit still on probation.

Let's begin with the Civil War. That's exactly where you have to begin if you are really going to understand. In 1861, when the Presbyterian General Assembly met in Ohio, some men went through the lines. The war had already begun. The only denomination that had not already split into southern and northern churches was the Presbyterian Church. We had commissioners that made their way into Ohio. A resolution was made in that general assembly by a man named Gardner Spring. He was a good guy, but he made the resolution that in the conflict, the Presbyterian Church would support the Union, which was the North. There were many who spoke against it, including men from Princeton Seminary. But, the resolution passed and the men came back home and started a new denomination in the south. The first church was in Augusta, Georgia. It was the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, Georgia in 1861.

The second general assembly came about and it was a church in Macon, Georgia. It was a church that much later, where I would become pastor. The sanctuary was constructed in 1857 and remains basically untouched until this day. There were two denominations from that point. There was the Northern Presbyterian Church and it was three times larger for the next seventy years. Then, there was the Southern Presbyterian Church. The Southern Presbyterian Church was a regional church. It started during the war. It was only located from Texas to Virginia. The Northern Presbyterian Church grew in the south after the war. My mother, father and sister were born in Scotland, so I'm not really a Yankee as such. These people were called carpetbaggers. The carpetbaggers came down here and claimed land that southerners didn't have the money to pay for due to the taxes. Many of the carpetbaggers wound up in Alabama. They would not join Southern Presbyterian churches. They formed Northern

Presbyterian churches right here in the south, particularly in Alabama. Most of them were in Birmingham, Alabama, because of industry.

For the next seventy years, these two denominations worked side by side. The Northern Presbyterian Church was three times as large and much more liberal. The Southern Presbyterian Church was more conservative and very economically sound. In the 1930's, the Northern Presbyterian Church, which was the last bastion of real conservative theology, falls. It is called Princeton Seminary in New Jersey. It falls into the hands of the liberals. There was one man who stands against it and his name was James Gresham Machen. By the way, Machen's mother was born in Macon, Georgia. His mother married a man from Baltimore. Machen was deeply affected by his mother. Machen became a professor and was supposedly the best New Testament scholar in the United States. He was a very conservative professor at Princeton University. He formed a new World Mission board called the Presbyterian World Missions. He was called up on charges, because he formed that independent board of World Missions. He eventually was defrocked. In 1936, he was defrocked and a new denomination started, which was the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In December of that year, Machen went to Bismarck, North Dakota and got pneumonia and died. It was started by Machen and it immediately split into three different denominations.

Now, the Southern Presbyterian Church comes along. In the 1930's there was a man who was on the faculty at Richmond Seminary. Richmond Seminary was the largest of the four Presbyterian seminaries in the Southern Presbyterian Church. It was located in Richmond, Virginia. His name was Ernest Trice Thompson. He had a nice little white moustache and was a lovely southern gentleman, but however, he was a real liberal. He formed a secret society out of his students. That secret society was known as the St. James Society. He figured out a way to get the moderatorship of the Southern Presbyterian Church. He also had an outward group called the Fellowship of the Concerned. This inner group was the Secret Society and by 1933, they gained the moderatorship for the history of the Southern Presbyterian Church. The moderator had to be a liberal going forward. Ernest Trice Thompson was the man.

There is another man that came out of the Southern Presbyterian Church at about the same time. He was a medical missionary to China. His name was Dr. Nelson Bell. Word War II came along and Bell was kicked out of China and comes back home. He discovered the liberalism in his denomination and was shocked, but he was a leader. As Ernest Tice Thompson was a leader, so was Dr. Nelson Bell. Bell had a daughter who eventually married Billy Graham. In the 1950's, he had a son who was in Columbia Seminary with me. His name was

Clayton Bell and he was a leader. He started a magazine called the Southern Presbyterian Journal. He started another national magazine called Christianity Today that is still the largest religious publication in the United States. 1952 was to be the union of the Northern and the Southern Presbyterian Church in which the Southern church would have been swallowed up by the Northern Presbyterian Church. Nelson Bell led a group of about ten men and they defeated that vote for union. Also In 1952, the more liberal group was surprised and realized they had to have their own denomination. They needed the old guys to die and when they died, they would make a new denomination. They were coming back in twenty years and have that vote for union in 1972. These ten men led the conservative group. I go to seminary and I don't know about any of these things. These two denominations were divisive as far as the Southern Presbyterian Church is concerned.

In 1971, at a meeting in North Carolina of the Southern Presbyterian Church, twelve men were chosen to form a new denomination. I was one of those twelve men. There were many good folks like Grady Simpson and Jimmy Lyons from this church. There were twelve of us. Six were laymen and six were ministers. In 1973, it all came to a head and we had a new denomination. I was pastor at the First Presbyterian Church of Macon, Georgia. The previous pastor had been a director behind the scenes trying to help put the new denomination together. Paul Settle was out on the road. Morton Smith was a theologian. He and Bob Canada from the First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi wrote the book of church order. It is a denomination that believes in basically six things. I put these six things together in my mind and nobody ever voted. These twelve men met together for a year and a half, at least once a month in Atlanta. Anyone could come and speak to us .We put the whole thing together. We had public meetings. There was something like two hundred churches that would come out and vote in 1973 to form the PCA.

What were the reasons why we were formed? We were accused of being nothing but a group of racists. We were in the southeast and that was the cause. In 1973, I was on the first committee of World Missions. Six months after our denomination started, I was sent out on a trip to the Far East. I started in Japan and went to Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, India and Pakistan. I presented to Missions groups of this part of the world, why we had a new denomination. Racism was not one of the reasons. I will give you this one illustration. When we were meeting together in our monthly meetings, anybody could come in and speak to the twelve of us. They could say anything they wanted to say and give us any kind of help that we might need. A man came in that I had never seen before. He was not from any of the deep southern states. He was from a border state. He was a Presbyterian elder. When he came in, he

asked the twelve of us," How much money do you have for this new denomination?" We had never been asked that question before. Finally, Don Patterson, who was the President of our group of twelve said, "We have nothing. We don't have a dime." The man asked, "Are you going to start a new denomination with no money?" Don said, "Yes." The man said, "I will give you one hundred thousand dollars." We all were very surprised. That was back in 1972 and one hundred thousand dollars was a whole lot of money. He asked, "This is going to be a white man's church isn't it?" The twelve of us all looked at each other. One of the twelve said, "If it is to be a white man's church, count me out." All twelve of us immediately said, "Count me out." Then, this man stood up and said, "Well, count me out." He then walked out. That issue was solved, as far as we were concerned, right there. Racism wasn't the reason at all.

I'm going to give you the six reasons why we started the PCA. The first reason we started and always is the issue is this Book, the Holy Bible. The first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith does not deal with God. It doesn't deal with God the Father. It doesn't deal with Christ. It doesn't deal with the Holy Spirit. Do you know what it deals with? It deals with authority. What is the authority to do anything? The whole chapter is about the Bible. The first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith, written in the 1600's, dealt with authority. This is the Bible. It is and will always be the issue. It has to do with what you think of this book. The PCA has one great difference from the denomination that we were withdrawing from. First of all, we withdrew on the basis of this Bible. The old Southern Presbyterian Church members called me James Jones. They thought I was leading my wife into a crazy cult. Her brother thought I would go into the poor house and drag the family down with him. I used to ride around and say, "Hi, I'm James Jones and I have some Kool-Aid in the trunk of the car. If you would like to have a sip, I would be glad to share it with you." That was the attitude. It was not because of anything else. It had to do with this Word.

The first general assembly was held at Briarwood Church. In my first fifteen years in the old denomination that we withdrew from, I was given the possibility of going into a certain town and starting a new church, but the presbytery shut it off every time. We couldn't start one. The only one that started was Frank Barker's Briarwood Church. It was because of his dad who was a ruling elder in the old South Highland Presbyterian Church. He was a major man in that church. That was the only church that was started in a major city in our whole PCA. All the rest of them had been older churches. The only church plant was right here, because of Frank Barker. The interesting thing is the number of northern Presbyterian churches, because of the carpetbaggers, are right here in Birmingham. A number of those churches eventually started as northern Presbyterian churches and came into the PCA when the PCA was started. One of them being Bill Hay's

church called Covenant Presbyterian. Bill Hay came from Duluth, Minnesota. When you go to an old denomination from the south, they begin the worship service by saying, "Here is the Scripture. We believe that in this Book, you can find the Word of God." How does that sound? Does it sound pretty good? It's awful. That means you can find the Word of God and find other words that are not the Word of God. Who decides? They can't even agree among themselves. What is the Word of God on this page and what is not on that page? When you go to a PCA church, we begin the service by saying, "This is the Word of God and it is the inerrant and infallible Word of God." I don't understand everything in this Book. My wife and I are going through the Book of the Revelation. I want to tell you that it's tough. There are a lot of things I don't fully understand in this Book, but I know it's true. One day, when I get to heaven, it's going to be interesting. There is also so much that is so obvious. I'll be preaching this morning on a miracle. Do you believe in miracles? The Lord Jesus did.

We started this denomination, because of this Book. Is it the Word of God? Is it infallible without error? Does it have the authority over everything else? That is the issue. It always has been and always will be. That was the position of Machen in 1937 and it was the position of the PCA. There is a big difference between the Northern Presbyterian Church when they withdrew in 1937 and us in 1972. They helped us. They told us not to make the mistakes that they had. When they started out, they did not have one significant congregation or local church. They were all educators. They had very few ruling elders. They had very few common people like you and me. We were just the opposite. We had very few educators. We had great numbers. Our first moderator was not a preacher. Our first moderator came from Alabama. His name was Jack Williamson. He was a lawyer of all things from Greenville, Alabama. That's how our denomination started. It was by the people. It was a grass root denomination. It was not from the top down, but from the bottom up. That was a big difference. We started with laymen, money and people. They started with educators and Westminster Seminary. That's the first issue. The Bible is the first issue.

I call the second issue the purity of Scripture. It was the proclamation of the Gospel. It meant as far as the world was concerned that we would be interested in evangelism of the world through world missions. We did not want to be a provisional church or a church united only by the southeast. We were a national Presbyterian Church immediately. We were not just a group in the south. We were committed to evangelism to the nations of the world. As far as world missions is concerned, there is not a Presbyterian denomination in the entire world that is committed to world missions like the PCA. There are none in Scotland, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Great Britain. It is the PCA that is committed to missions and no Presbyterian denomination in the United States

has the nations of the world like this except the PCA. It has always been that way, because it was one of the founding positions that we would have.

The second reason we started the denomination was not only world missions, it was evangelism. There are men who are lost. You don't have to be ashamed to get up there and preach and say, "Some of you folk are going to hell." I say that because I sat in the church until I was twenty seven and I was going to hell. I was as faithful as I could be, but master of my own ship. I had no idea what it meant to be saved. I was asking my wife, "Why didn't someone tell me about these things?" She told me after I was saved that everybody was trying to tell me how to be saved. I believe her now. My eyes were blind and my mind was dead to the things of God. I don't mean to offend anybody here. In a crowd this big, there is somebody I'm talking to that knows exactly what I'm talking about. You are the master of your own life and nobody and no god tells you what to do. You decide by your own wisdom. May God help you. I understand perfectly. By the way, I was a good guy. My problem was not that I was drinking and using drugs, it was just the opposite. I was better than anybody. There were guys going into the seminary and I told them, "You hypocrite. I am a better man than you." You can always find somebody that you can look down on. Evangelism of the world, locally and out of the truth of the Scripture is the second issue.

There is a third thing that we were committed to. These were the big three. The first one was the purity of the Scripture. The second one was the proclamation of the Gospel around this world, to every soul in our churches and to the ends of the world. It is still that way. The third thing was the preservation of historic Presbyterianism. Historic Presbyterianism is the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Catechism and the book of church order. We are a tiny denomination in the sight of God. In His providence, the Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals and the rest put us in shape. We are a tiny little group over here in the corner. But for some reason or another, God has given us a ministry to the church around this world. A lot of it has to do with what we call reformed theology. Out of six groups, every local denomination can be found in one of these six categories. Of these six categories only two know exactly what they believe. One is the Roman Catholic Church and the second is the Presbyterian or Reformed Church. We know exactly what we believe. We have it spelled out in the Bible and the Westminster Confession of Faith. That is worth preserving to the world. The greatest theological document that mankind has ever come up with is the Westminster Confession of Faith. I trust that it is taught in the Catechism and the Children's Catechism, so that people understand what you believe. I get up Sunday in some church and say, "We are going to have the Apostle's Creed." In the day and age in which we live there are many people who don't know what they believe. They are living in the church, but Christian what do you believe? "I

believe in these things." The preservation of historic Presbyterianism is worth preserving. There is no church around the world that is going to preserve historic Presbyterianism except the PCA. It is amazing. Who is going to do it? Is it a church in England or Scotland? We are sending missionaries to Scotland. My mother, father and sister were born in Scotland. We are sending missionaries to the home country. We better be careful in the United States for the next one hundred years. There is no denomination in the world that has a power or drive to preserve historic Presbyterianism except you. You are it. Those are the three reasons why we started a new denomination.

There are three more reasons. Peace is the fourth reason. We may have differences of opinion when we get together, but you know that the brother who disagrees believes the Scripture. He is trying to look to the Scripture and I am trying to look to the Scripture. We have a uniting, because we believe the Scripture and have a love for each other. In our second general assembly, Francis Schaeffer came. It was ten years later before they joined with us. Francis Schaeffer preached and said, "Love one another. Love those that you are withdrawn from. Love the world and the people, because they are watching you." Francis Schaeffer said, with all his intelligence, "You've got to love each other." That's what the world is looking for. The world is going to hell in a basket. As they go to hell, they are fighting everything. You can't believe how messed up this world is morally. They want to walk into a church and see people who love each other, because they find everything else is just the opposite. I don't care what it is. It may be your football team, politics or anything else. There is nobody that has an answer to what's wrong with man. But the church is supposed to have it. The first thing that they are looking for is a group of people who love each other. They are looking for a husband and a wife who love each other.

The fifth reason we started the denomination was because of property. We believe that the property belongs to the local church, not the PCA. We've only had one congregation in forty years that left the PCA and was a major church. It was the fourth largest church in the PCA. When they left, we said, "Go brothers. We think you are making a mistake." It was the Cedars Springs Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. They left with their property with no question. When we started out, we thought in the Southern Presbyterian Church that the local church owned the property. We found out it wasn't because court cases came up and the Federal Supreme Court of the United States still does not want to deal with church property. They always remand it back to the State Supreme Court. When we started out in the PCA, when they came to Mississippi, the Supreme Court said it is owned by the local church. When they came to Alabama do you know what the Supreme Court said in Alabama? They gave it to the denomination in Alabama. Briarwood had to buy part of their property back. It

was interesting who gets it. With the PCA, there is no question. It is this denomination saying that you own your property.

The sixth and final reason we started the denomination was pennies. When you give money, you have the privilege of saying where it goes. That's the PCA. As far as I am concerned, one of the greatest things I ever did was getting involved with starting a new denomination. We needed it. When we came out in 1973 in Georgia, there was only one church in a major city that withdrew. The pastor of that church was me. It was the First Presbyterian Church of Macon, Georgia. There were basically three congregations that drove the engine for the PCA. That was one of them. It was just a handful of people who believed. God used them. We just went through forty years. I think that we've leveled off. I wish that we had some fire again in evangelism and World Missions. We need to always reach out and love each other.

Let me close with a word of prayer.

Our God and Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ around this world. We know that there are people who suffer, because they will not deny Christ. Today, their lives are in danger and some will die in a worship service or by leaving it around this world. We thank You that You love us. We do ask for defense, but we do not understand. You know that we don't understand why certain things happen, but we pray for them. We pray for ourselves that we would be faithful and true. I pray this would be a congregation that would love each other in great and new ways. I thank You for today. Thank You for these flags. Most of all, I thank You that You love us and that we love each other. Although we are sinners, we are forgiven. Make us better Christians for Jesus' sake.

Amen.

