

The Great Ends of the Church

A Leader Reader by J. Houston Hodges

Introduction to the Statement

The “Great Ends of the Church” statement is a hundred-year-old message written at the beginning of the twentieth century that still addresses the problems of the twenty-first. It is a gift from a stream of what is now the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that explains the mission of the church and is found in our Book of Order. It says the following:

The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. (G-1.0200)

This paragraph from the past came from the traditionally Scots and Scots-Irish United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPNA), which was centered near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. That small but powerful denomination had used the phrase “great ends of the church” in publications as early as 1878, though the first versions of the statement are predictably and Victorianly orthodox: “The great ends of the Church are the preservation of the truth and ordinances of true religion, for the glory of God and salvation of souls” (The Government and Discipline of the United Presbyterian Church of North America [Pittsburgh: United Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1880]).

The UPNA decided to update its standards to reflect the more modern times of the turn of the twentieth Century. In the age of the Wright brothers and Henry Ford’s black Model A, various committees worked

Prayer

Grant, O God,
that your holy and life-giving Spirit
may so move every human heart,
that the barriers which divide us may crumble,
suspicions disappear,
and hatreds cease,
and that, with our divisions healed,
we might live in justice and peace;
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

—*Book of Common Worship*, 818

from 1904 to 1908, and in 1910 the UPNA General Assembly adopted a statement virtually identical to that found in today’s Form of Government.

The Six Ends

These six ends show the mission of the church is not singular, but plural: not one purpose for the church, but six; not one mission, but half a dozen; not a single, uniform job description, but six different ways of doing church!

Records about the origin of the Great Ends declaration are sparse: a letter from the Presbyterian Historical Society says, “We have very little documenting this statement.” Bill Keesecker (former General Assembly Moderator and staunch spokesperson of Great Ends statement) said in a 1997 article for the Presbyterian

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Historical Society, “the statement was adopted without comment or controversy” (Presbyterian Heritage [Fall 1997]: vol. 10, no. 3). Professor John Wilson of Pittsburgh Seminary did a thorough search of old UPNA records but found little about the rationale for the paragraph and nothing about its authorship.

General Assemblies have stubbornly refused to single out any of the tasks as paramount or to suggest they’re written in ascending (or descending) order of importance. What an example of unity in diversity!

- The Christian education enthusiasts, who constantly need resources for better curriculum and paint for the Sunday school rooms? They may also be designing programs for college students or high school seniors—also part of the “children of God.”

Facts about Presbyterians

Presbyterians differ from worshipers in other congregations in four important ways:

- Presbyterians are older. Eight in 10 Presbyterians (79 percent) but only seven in 10 other worshipers (69 percent) are age 45 or older.
- More Presbyterians are retired (40 percent; 29 percent); fewer are employed (48 percent; 58 percent).
- Fewer Presbyterians have children living at home (34 percent; 43 percent); more are empty-nesters (40 percent; 31 percent).
- More Presbyterians have at least a college degree (of those 25 years of age and older 58 percent; 47 percent).

On other characteristics Presbyterians are similar to other worshipers:

- Six in 10 are female (Presbyterians, 62 percent; others, 61 percent).
- Two-thirds are married (68 percent; 66 percent).
- One-quarter have household incomes of \$100,000 or more (24 percent; 24 percent).
- Large majorities were born in the United States (96 percent; 90 percent).

—results from the 2008 U.S. Congregational Life Survey

- The social action group, with their placards and picketing songs? The people who write congress or the president and want to change the world? They’re part of the church, too: Their social action is “the promotion of social righteousness.” It claims that being a Christian by yourself isn’t enough.
- The evangelism committee who wants to support missionaries and spread the word in new ways.
- Those concerned about process and doing everything decently and in order.
- Those who put so much energy and resources into Sunday worship service.
- And, finally, what about those people who believe that “just being church” is important, making a witness to the world? That, too, is validated as one of the great ends. “The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” gives us the image of a county fair in heaven, with a tent where all the religious groups are on display, each doing its thing, whether saying Mass or collecting Christmas funds in a kettle; and each bunch, including the Presbyterians, are being judged by how well they reflect the impression and expression of the Inexpressible Lord of Heaven and Earth!

Conclusion

In the scant documentation attesting to the creation of the Great Ends statement there is a lovely little passage both promising and prophetic about “public social covenanting,” which is nineteenth-century language for “adopting a resolution.” Making such statements is a “moral duty,” says an 1881 declaration (A Manual of the United Presbyterian Church of North America, 1751–1881, [Harrisburg, PA, 1881], 85–88). Moreover, it commends public social covenanting especially “in times of great danger to the church” and “on extraordinary occasions.” Such proclamations are also called for, our UPNA ancestors opined, “in times of reformation when the church is returning to God.”

It is easy to connect this statement from the nineteenth century with this time in the twenty-first. And we can hope that this amazing sentence might have come into being for such a time as this: to offer some hope in this “time of great danger,” that we might be “returning to God.”

For More Information

Frank A. Beattie, *Companion to the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999).

Ted V. Foote Jr., and P. Alex Thornburg, *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000).

William F. Keesecker, "The Great Ends of the Church: A Historical Note," *Presbyterian Heritage*, fall 1997.

Joseph D. Small, ed., *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church: Mission and Ministry for Presbyterians*, (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press. 2010).

About the Writer

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