

“Our reliable compass.”

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Robert John Andrews

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“Fiction’s Truth”

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Someday I’ll retire from retirement. Given changing attitudes about ministry, churches lack professional ministers to serve. I’ve picked up another chore. Church headquarters has been busy drafting new policies for our congregations to adopt. New ones are added to an already stuffed basket. My task is to review and re-organize them, beginning by sorting between policies and procedures. Paper-cuts are the Presbyterian stigmata.

I should explain that John Calvin, Presbyterianism’s forefather, never was ordained. He studied law. Enough said. After the Bible, we hold our Book of Order (our Church Constitution) with a reverence that necessitates alterations befitting a church that values periodic reformation. We adjust, we try to progress, seeking guidance from Word and Spirit how to be reformed.

We may be a denomination born in protest, but we do acknowledge the practicality of institutional rules. Discarding a baseline of principles and procedures to which we contract ourselves, humanity tumbles into a mess. The Enlightenment advanced the illusion of self-willed human perfectibility. Given right knowledge, right opinion, right government, all will be wonderful. Really? The Enlightenment failed to take seriously something Calvin took seriously: sin. Indeed, we believe that it’s easier for us to sin in groups than as individuals. Beware when power itself becomes God. The KKK comes to mind. So too Mussolini’s fascists, Christian Nationalists, Robespierre’s unchecked mob-democracy. Guillotined heads in baskets. Hence, the authors of the US Constitution explained: “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”

Our US Constitution is a pragmatic product of Reformed Protestantism, distrusting the perfectibility of both individuals and government. We depend on our citizenry’s ongoing commitment toward virtue, education, altruism, truth. If we manifest none of these, decadency follows. Our self-interest demands we get beyond our self-interest.

September 17th celebrates Constitution Day, when we honor the day the Convention of 1787 voted to adopt this document and send it to the States for ratification. The Constitution: more lodestone than cornerstone. Our reliable compass.

Given the recklessly rude nature of our 2023 society, some of the policies my church is bidden to enact include addressing harassment (bullying and kindred abuse), racism (bigotry with power), church safety, family leave. I’m hoping we might model similar policies adopted by local school districts. It makes sense that we reinforce community efforts.

Yet, as much as we less than angelic humans benefit from a baseline of rules (picture a football game lacking umpire discipline, where players and coaches balk at playing by the rules), is Christ’s church merely some social institution? Are we not first a community of faith summoning us to go deeper than surface navigation between “Thou Shalt Not,” and “Thou Shalt?” We the church must behave by more than compliance. Are we lifted by Word and Spirit in what we foster?

When faced with racism, for instance, let's develop a two tiered approach. The foundation will be the do's and don'ts. When we act out racist sins, the code points it out and indicts. Faith, however, demands we plunge within and ask questions, pressing those of us who struggle with social sins to examine ourselves. It must be personal, situational. Interrogatives over declarations. Does your behavior glorify the grace of God? Do your jokes, your actions, your motivations, your reaction to others square with Christianity's practical central principles embodied by the Sermon on the Mount and the cross?

A church cliché teases how preaching should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. History too. Can we be honest without fear, indignation, hostility, or self-justification? Although, I'm guessing my Southern ancestors might feel relieved to hear how their plantation actually offered an apprenticeship program for foreign nationals.

After 8th grade I visited Israel's Holocaust museum. I remember piles of shoes and soap rendered from Jews. More recently, I visited the bridge outside Okemah, Oklahoma, where prominent citizens picnicked above the lynched bodies of a mother and her boy.

This partly is why I travel. I need to see through other eyes. The Christian faith requires it. It's why I read fiction like, "Cry, the Beloved Country," a story about suffering amidst apartheid: "I shall no longer ask myself if this or that is expedient, but only if it is right." Non-fiction relates information, facts. Fiction illuminates truth. We shouldn't be surprised by parallels between the policies of the Afrikaner movement and Trumpism.

No, I guess you really never can retire until the real work is done.