



May 1, 2023

The Making of a Presbyterian Minister or Three

I am in deep grief over the loss of my brothers in ministry, Bob and Russ, whose friendship and devotion to the church and its future will live with us forever. Bob McQuilkin, Russ Brandt and I are all 88 years old, born within the same year. We shared a unique bond. We remembered World War II, when we were children and had nightmares about children our age being sent into the gas chambers in Germany. It was scary and hard to understand. Twenty years later we were sitting in classes in theological seminaries, learning about neo-orthodox theology, which came about in response to World War II and the Nazi atrocities. Why was Germany, the home of the greatest Christian theologians in history, from Martin Luther to Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, able to perpetrate such heinous crimes against humanity with no protest from its churches? When I sat in Richard Niebuhr's class on Christianity and Social Justice at Yale Divinity School, we learned the answer. We read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer was one of a few Christian ministers who protested the Nazi genocide of Jews, and was executed for his cry for social justice. Others were not willing to pay the cost of standing for what is good and right, hiding behind their claim of being good Christians because they believed in the fundamentals of Christian doctrine.

Early in our ministries, Bob, Russ and I experienced the theological revolution in the Presbyterian Church when the *Confession of 1967* was adopted as a part of our Presbyterian Book of Confessions and Constitution. It brought neo-orthodox theology to the forefront of our theology and ministry, turning faith into action, declaring that the ministry of reconciliation of divisions in human society is the primary work of the Church. In short, it said clearly that no one can love Jesus

and also love white supremacy, male supremacy, supremacy of the rich over the poor and the powerful over the weak. It also called on Christians to respect other world religions and share common values with them in bringing peace and justice to all humanity. It also put an end to literal interpretation of Scripture, stating “The scriptures are... the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. The church, therefore, has the obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding.” This enabled the church to challenge fundamentalism and embraced scientific discovery.

Bob, Russ and I often talked about what an impact this had on our ministry. Russ, as you may recall, implored us to think historically, put aside the Greek dualism of win/lose, Heaven/Hell, Christian/heathen way of thinking, and embrace the Hebrew mind-set of God’s love for the whole world, a win/win for everyone. Bob focused on his literary and poetic skills, bringing the ministry of the arts to St. Andrews, while devoting himself in service to the community as Chair of the Office on Aging, the ministry of the Presbytery, the Benzie Ministerial Society, and the Congregational Summer Assembly. I was blessed to have a Session and congregation in Cleveland Heights who were willing to study the Confession of 1967 and as a result, join with Jewish, Catholic, Civic and Black leadership to put an end to racial housing segregation in our city, forcing out realtors who were steering Blacks into black neighborhoods and whites into white neighborhoods. I was proud to be invited to Fourth Church, Chicago, in 1987 for a celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Confession of 1967, to tell this story of racial reconciliation.

I find it not a coincidence that the same year the Confession of 1967 was presented to the church, a hymn was written and became popular throughout the church, expressing the theme on which Bob, Russ and I based our ministries: “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, and we pray that all unity may one day be restored; and they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, Yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” May God bless the eternal love of Bob and Russ for Christ and His Church, and may the history and theology that bound us together never be forgotten. Yes, they will know we are Christians by our love.

~Written by Rev. Ned Edwards



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