

HAVE YOU READ ANY CHURCH RECORDS LATELY?
REFLECTIONS OF AN IMPORTED YANKEE

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
BY THE LATE
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(Glenn died in an automobile
accident in June, 1986)

The expression “The grass is greener on the other side of the fence” is not true when the fence is between denominations. We are then conveniently convinced that only our side of the fence has grass. I do not remember the exact date of the episode, but it was shortly after the initial invasion of Southern Baptists into New York State. The minister from the First Baptist Church of Pen Yan was the speaker at the Pastor’s Conference. His opening was he had been repeatedly asked about his reaction to the starting of a Southern Baptist Church a few blocks from the American Baptist Church. He said that they got along beautifully. The Southern Baptists did things their way, the American Baptist Church did things God’s way.

When a Southern Baptist joined an American Baptist Church it took one week to get them out of the habit of going to Sunday evening services, and Prayer Meeting. The habit of tithing left them at the church door. Actually, any Southern Baptist I ever had in any of my churches were excellent workers and an asset to the church. I know I’m showing my prejudices, but I don’t see where the Anastasia Baptist Church or the Florida Baptist Historical Society has been permanently harmed by the importation of a Yankee.

My kid brother lives several thousand feet from the Edgewood Baptist Church which was severely damaged by a tornado that destroyed large sections of western Pennsylvania. When he drove past and saw a group of people from Florida working on the church, he stopped and got acquainted. He and his wife opened their home, trailer and especially the bathrooms to the workers, and furnished several meals. The upshot of the affair is that he and his wife joined the Edgewood Southern Baptist Church of New Brighton, Pennsylvania. My nephew and his wife are to be baptized and join the church. As the Reverend Ron Moore says, “There goes the whole family down the tube.”

I’m often asked about the differences between the denominations. I see three big differences. First of all, up north we are parsons, and live in a parsonage, rather than a parsonium. To my Yankee ears a parsonium sounds like a place a lot of pastors may end up after the election at the Convention.

Up north we say “amen” after a prayer, or sing it at the end of certain hymns. There seems to be no rhyme nor reason to the use of amen in a Southern Baptist church. I guess it is bred into you. I told my wife that if I were going to be a real Southern Baptist I was going to say amen. The choir finished their special, the minister moved to the lectern, and I took a deep breathe. He said, “I wish I could preach as well as they can sing.” I have gone back to saying amen at the end of a prayer.

Up north we bore you to tears once a year with a thing called the “Annual Meeting.” Down here you have an annual meeting once a month. Maybe you haven’t had the same opportunities that I have had, but whether it is north or south,

church or lodge, or what have you, the minutes are so similar. The meeting is opened by a moderator, someone reports on the attendance, someone else gives a financial report, old business, new business.

I would like to tell you about some very interesting church minutes that I have seen and draw some limited conclusions. My first pastorate was a two point charge in the Snow Belt outside of Buffalo, New York. The morning I moved in, it was 20 degrees below zero. We took the refrigerator in about 3 in the morning, and it was 2:30 in the afternoon before it warmed up enough to run.

The church and the parsonage were built by the men of the church in 1840. They felled the trees, squared them with adzes. You can still see the marks on the 21" by 21" sills.

It must have been the second Easter Sunday I was there, that I had finished the sermon, and we were on the second verse of the invitation hymn. The door to the church opened, a young woman with a baby in one arm and a book in the other stepped into the church. She was followed by a young man holding one child by the hand, and carrying an Easter lily in the other.

They explained that they had driven over from Rochester. Not knowing what time the services were, they had arrived too late. Her grandmother had recently died; the lily was in her memory. And, here is the Church Record Book we found in her attic. Grandma had been the church clerk about 25 years previously. When she moved she took the book with her.

As soon as I could I sat down to read the church records. They started in 1840. This was the record of the first 95 years of the church. There were the names of the elders who donated the land. There were the names of the men who worked on the church. The problem was that the church was not where the records said it was built, nor were the names on the deed, the names of the elders who gave the land. We never did figure that one out.

If the use of the word elder bothers you, remember that that section of New York State had been western Connecticut. The Congregational Church had been the State Church, and their terms were a long time dying out.

During the 1860's there was a war variously known as the Civil War, the War of the Southern Rebellion, or the War of the Northern Aggression. I read ever so closely the reports of those years. But not a word. Was no one from the church involved? Not even a request for God to intervene one way or another.

You walk from the church about 1000 feet to a cemetery. Right in front of the entrance is a bronze shaft. On the front is the name of a minister born in England, on the left side his wife, on the rear the daughter, on the right side two boys. The top boy had been 1 year old when he died, had been buried at sea on the way to this country. Wouldn't you like to know the story? The minister wasn't even mentioned in the church records.

There was a boy who had grown up in that parsonage. As a teenage boy he had made a pinhole camera and had taken pictures through the parsonage window. When he was grown, he went to Ithaca and had discovered more comets than any one before or since. Quite often I would receive a letter, did the records say anything about the boy? No! But at least his father got mentioned. He was hired for \$200 a year, a sack of potatoes, a load of firewood, and the privilege of going into any member's woodlot and cutting his own firewood.

The records were rather short, but written in a beautiful hand. As I said before, this part of New York had been Congregational Territory. Consequently, according to the law at that time, you had two types of membership. Anyone who attended one worship service a year was a society member, eligible to participate in all meetings, to vote on anything except Baptist Policy, and the minister. The church member was the person who had been baptized and voted into the membership by those who were members. The reading of the old records got confusing at times. You couldn't always distinguish between a society and a church member.

The church had a nice custom in the early days. On the Saturday evening before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, they met for an examination meeting. Each person examined himself to make sure that he would be worthy of taking the elements. There was an interesting report, when instead of examining one's self, they examined one another. A family had absented themselves from the preparation meeting two times. Two deacons were elected to call upon the family to see why they had not been attending. At the next service, the deacons gave their report. The family said they were quite upset at several families in the church. They were so pious at the meeting, but didn't live up to it during the week. The members voted to expel that family for not coming to the meetings.

I would like to move rapidly to Boston where I eventually became Assistant Librarian at Andover Newton Theological School. I worked with the records of the New England Baptists and the Congregational Missionary Society. You might be interested to know that the translation of the Bible that Adoniram Judson kept in his pillow in jail was still as good as new when I wrapped it up in acid free paper.

However, the records of the First Baptist Church in Boston are of interest to me at the moment. I received a call from the minister one day that they were going to celebrate one of their anniversaries. They would send a messenger out to get the books. But since no one knew much about them, would I come and stand with the records and answer questions.

On the Sunday in question, my wife and I attended the worship service. After the service we went into the Sunday School auditorium where the books were set up. On the opposite side of the table from me was one of Boston's finest, with his pistol fitted loosely into its holster. Of course, my wife thinks that the

officer was there because on the next table they had their communion set. It had been brought over from the bank in an armored car. The set had been made by a young silversmith by the name of Paul Revere.

Remember that this was Congregational Territory through the early 1800's. It was illegal to have a Baptist Church in Boston in the 1600's, therefore the church started as a Singing Society. Sympathetic Congregational Churches allowed the use of their church for singing. But when the authorities got suspicious the services were cancelled, or moved to another church. The story is there in great detail. It is written in a beautiful hand with a goose quill pen sharpened with a pen knife. It was fascinating to read that the song service was cancelled because the minister was either in hiding, or in jail.

We brag about the religious freedom we have in this country, so let me turn from the First Baptist Church in Boston, to the First Baptist Church of Dedham, Massachusetts in the early 1800's. Massachusetts law provided that every town laid out must have a plot for the Congregational Church. The upkeep, the minister's salary came from a tax on each landowner.

Two of the deacons from the Baptist Church in Dedham dropped their tax for the Congregational minister's salary into the offering plate in the Baptist Church. When the Tax Collector was told where the tax money was, he called the High Sheriff from Boston, who took the two deacons to Boston and put them in a cell.

Quite naturally the newspapers picked up the story of two Baptist deacons who were in jail for non-payment of the Congregational tax. However, the sympathies of the readership must have been with the deacons. The climax came when one dark night the High Sheriff pushed the deacons out the back door of the jail. Remember that Dedham was a two days stagecoach journey from Boston through virgin woods. This spelled the end of the taxing of towns to pay the minister's salary. This is a freedom that we all enjoy.

From my limited experience with church records I would draw these conclusions:

1. The earlier the records of the church, the more interesting. It was harder to be a Baptist in the early days of our country. After all, if you were to read that in January three people were baptized in the church in Deland, you would think nothing of it. But what about Miss _____ was baptized Sunday afternoon, January 3 in Murder Creek. After all during the January thaw the temperature often soared to 35 degrees.
2. The harder it was to write, the longer the church records. Somehow I get the impression that the earlier records were written for the following generations. I think that present day church records are really being written

for the next business meeting. We start out to set the world on fire, and end up being respectable.

3. The church minutes are not significantly different from the minutes of faculty, a lodge, or any other organization that keeps minutes. We remark that the book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not mention God. Have you read any church records lately?

Some years ago, my brother-in-law, his wife, three-year old daughter, and one-year old son came to spend a month with us prior to being shipped overseas. In the country we burned our waste paper, buried the garbage in the garden, and took cans to the dump. One day my brother-in-law complained to me that he thought those two women were running a waste paper and garbage manufacturing plant in the kitchen. A reading of some church records gives one the impression that they are in the more members and money collection business.

In conclusion, let me leave you with a couple of exercises in imagination. Imagine the Book of Acts if Luke's only resources were minutes of the church meetings. Or, imagine the letters John might have written to the churches in the Book of Revelation if he were held to the same resources.

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