

ARPTalk(171)

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One of the hallmarks of the healthy church is VIGILANCE. Without vigilance truth turns into syncretism, orthodoxy dilutes into heresy, love corrupts into license, discipline degrades into ecclesiastical anarchy, intellectual pursuit devolves into intellectual idolatry, and academic freedom transmogrifies into academic tyranny. Woe to the church that fails to be vigilant in the care of her agencies!

Second Helvetic Confession, XVII. 5

"...while the pious snore the wicked gain ground and do harm to the Church."

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The Rise of the CARPChurch

When I was a boy, I fished a lot with Daddy in the lakes of Central Florida. This wasn't sport fishing. Daddy fished for food: bass, crappie, bluegill, warmouth, sunfish, catfish, and, occasionally, he brought home a soft-shell turtle or a small gator. All these were cleaned and fried for the table — and the eating was good!

Early one Saturday morning in the spring of 1959, Daddy got up early to go fishing with Homer Brown at a lake south of Winter Haven, somewhere below Mulberry. I didn't go because 3:30 AM was too early and a 60 mile ride was too far. Daddy and Homer returned late mid-morning with a long string of fish, and with a huge carp caught by Daddy.

Now, for you who are uninitiated, carps are "mud-suckers" that are all bones, scales, and uneatable.

Daddy was undeterred when Homer warned him, saying, "Sherman, that thing is nasty and not worth keeping. It's all bones and tastes like something a buzzard wouldn't touch."

Daddy was resolute! His motto was, "If I catch it, I eat it!"

When Daddy cleaned the carp, it was all stink and bones. When he fried the crap, Mama said she was gong to leave him, warned him she would kill him if he couldn't get the stink out of her kitchen, and then she left and didn't return until long after dark. When I bit into the fried carp, it was too foul for a dog's palate!

A METAPHOR

The story above is a metaphor for what has taken place in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. Ecclesiastically (that is, governmentally), the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church has devolved into the Catawba Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (CARPChurch).

Other than the Moderator and Vice-Moderator (who are elected annually and exert little influence), the officers of General Synod are Principal Clerk (Rev. Kyle Sims, Catawba Presbytery) Reading Clerk (Rev. Mark Miller, Catawba Presbytery); Bill Clerk, (Rev. Ben Glaser (Catawba Presbytery); Parliamentarian (Rev. Patrick Malphrus, Virginia Presbytery); Treasurer (Mr. Jamey Dagenhart, Catawba Presbytery), and Rev. M. J. Denning (Archivist, First Presbytery). The ecclesiastical "movers-and-shakers" are, obviously, the "Clerks." They set the agendas. They control information and events during the year through the Executive Board. They are the bishops of the CARPChurch (and the Principal Clerk and the Parliamentarian are the Cardinals). Whatever the CARPChurch is or isn't, these humble servants of God wield the powers of direction. They view themselves politically and not pastorally — that is, they are politicians and not pastors.

Interestingly, Patrick Malphrus is not a member of Catawba Presbytery; rather, he is the pastor of a congregation in Virginia Presbytery. Notwithstanding, he is counted in the number of Catawba, for he identifies himself with "the Catawba boys" and longs to be a part of Catawba Presbytery (if only a gerrymandering of the presbyteries can be arranged which allows for the inclusion of the Old Providence congregation in Catawba Presbytery, or if he can get a call to a Catawba congregation which can afford him. He longs to return to the Carolinas).

Once upon a time, the *ARPMagazine* was the information highway of the ARPChurch. Now, in the time of the CARPChurch, the *ARPMagazine* is the Ministry of Propaganda for the CARP leaders. It is totally under the control of the Executive Board which is dominated by the "Catawba boys." The Editor is a nice lady, who is a member of the Lancaster congregation in Catawba Presbytery. This is Kyle Sims' former congregation. And, as Kyle Sims once said, "The Editor of the *ARPMagazine* will do as she is told!" Well, I suppose that is a true

statement, since the *ARPMagazine* is under the thumb of the Executive Board.

The CARP boys are delusional. They actually think the CARPChurch (aka, the ARPChurch) is influential. They look on their roles as important to the religious life of the United States. Actually, the role of the CARPChurch is not even a footnote in the religious life of the US.

There are a number of ways of looking at the influence of the CARPChurch. (1) The CARPChurch has a membership of only 26,900 congregants (and, as everyone knows, this is an inflated membership). Regardless, using the 26,900 membership, the CARPChurch is 0.00007881% of the US population. (2) There are about 120 million Protestants in the US, which means the CARPChurch is 0.0002%. (3) Of the approximately half million members in NAPARC, the CARPChurch represents 0.054% of NAPARC.

Here's a sobering question: if the CARPChurch (aka, ARPChurch) were to disappear this evening, would anyone know it or miss the CARPChurch at the rising of the morning sun? With the exception of the leaders of the CARPChurch, would anyone even care? Only the CARP bishops! They would be lamenting in sackcloth and ashes, saying,

"Fallen! Fallen! is our emaciated and ghastly painted church!

Woes to us! Woe to us! for she whom we led to calamity and dressed in rags and gilded with yellow paint and encrusted with zircons (purchased at the *Dollar Store* just outside of *Bonclarken*) has been brought to ruin.

What can we do? What can we do? There is no one to honor us as humble servants of the great CARP!" (2 Revelation 17.82)

The leaders of the CARPChurch obsess over little, and are only capable of less. Which of them has had notable success in pastoral leadership — that is, in church growth or church planting? Incompetent leadership leads to disaster! If the CARPChurch were a carp fish, it would drown in the turbulent waters of Lake Bonclarken for not knowing how to swim!

RAMBLIN' MATT

In 1962, the smooth sound of Nat King Cole's voice covered the air waves of America with the lyrics of "Ramblin' Rose," which go like this: "Ramblin' rose, ramblin' rose / Why you ramble, no one knows / Wild and wind-blown, that's how you've grown / Who can cling to a ramblin' rose?"

Matthew Miller is the “Ramblin’ Rose of the CARPChurch”. Over the years, he has desired a teaching position at a seminary. A position at Erskine Seminary was offered to him a couple years ago, contingent on him finishing a PhD program. Failing to complete the PhD program in the allotted time frame, he was provisionally hired last January, and, immediately, given a sabbatical to finish his PhD program by June. He was expected to be ready for full-time responsibilities by July.

On July 31, the following email was sent to the Erskine faculty, staff, and Seminary Committee of the Board of Trustees from Dean of the Seminary Seth Nelson, the subject: “Announcing Full-Time Faculty Change”:

I regret to announce that Rev. Dr. Matthew Miller has resigned as Associate Professor of Pastoral and Historical Theology and Director of the ThM Program, effective August 31, 2023. Dr. Miller has been serving both as a faculty member at Erskine Seminary and as the Director of the C. S. Lewis Institute in Greenville over the last year. During this time his responsibilities with the C. S. Lewis Institute have unexpectedly grown, bringing him to a point where he needed to decide between Erskine and the C. S. Lewis Institute. After much prayer and counsel, Dr. Miller has concluded that the Lord is calling him to deepen his commitment to the expanding ministry of the C. S. Lewis Institute for the foreseeable future, thereby necessitating his resignation from Erskine Seminary.

While a member of the Erskine Board (from 1998-2004), I learned to read Erskine gobbledegook. It’s difficult, but I will attempt the translation and meaning of Nelson’s email.

One, this may mean Miller has failed to complete his PhD dissertation; two, this may mean Miller’s dissertation was rejected; three, this may mean (that since Miller was given multiple academic responsibilities at Erskine Seminary) he has found work highly irritating to his hands and odious to his general nature. For certain, the necessity for a small paycheck from Erskine Seminary is not needed in an affluent household where he is a “trust baby” and his wife is a medical professional.

One thing is for certain, the verbiage regarding conflict between his academic responsibilities at Erskine Seminary and his responsibilities as Director of the C. S. Lewis Institute in Greenville is gobbledegook. For goodness sake, the C. S. Lewis Institute is a highfalutin book club!

Well, at the beginning of this section, I wrote Matt Miller is “the Ramblin’ Rose of the CARPChurch.” With apologies to Nat King Cole, I was wrong about the “rose” part. Matt Miller is “the Ramblin’ Flake of the CARPChurch.”

I’m told “Flakey” Matt is often seen on the sidewalks of Greenville, at the far end of the West End where the “ragged people go” and the homeless people hangout, ramblin’ around, muttering to himself, blithering, “C. S. Lewis! C. S. Lewis! Don’t you wanna join my book club on C. S. Lewis? C. S. Lewis! C. S. Lewis is what you need!”

Poor boy! He has a lot to learn, and I hope he never learns it!

By the way, have you noticed there hasn’t been a word in the *ARPMagazine* about Matt Miller’s withdrawal/removal from the faculty of Erskine Seminary? As Kyle Sims says of the editor of the *ARPMagazine*, “She will do as she is told.”

MORE NEWS FROM ERSKINE

(1)

I don’t think they meant to do it, but in the Erskine board’s report to General Synod, the level of the endowment was accidentally revealed. One has to do a little math, but it’s easy. The relevant paragraph reads:

A portion of Erskine’s 2022-23 revenue comes from contributions raised through the Advancement Office and investment resources from the Endowment. As of February 2023, the funds for the fiscal year 2022-23 that have come through the Advancement Office (\$1.4 million) and from the Endowment (\$1.1 million, a 6% endowment draw) reflect diligent fundraising and the exercise of care in financial stewardship. As part of the stewardship pillar of the plan, the Institution is returning to its internal stewardship policy of a 5% Endowment draw for the fiscal year 2023-24, with the goal of reducing the draw even further in the future.

So, a \$1.1 million draw was taken from the endowment for operational expenses, and that represents a 6% draw on the endowment, then the endowment was about \$18.4 million. Now, reduce the \$18.4 million by the \$1.1 million draw, and the present endowment is about \$17.3 million.

Wow! It wasn’t long ago the Erskine endowment was over \$40 million. No wonder Erskine is once again sanctioned by SACS. The last

time around, the SACS auditors warned Erskine not to draw more than 5% on the endowment. That warning was ignored.

When Erskine board leaders talk about “diligence,” it’s a smokescreen meaning nothing. All the gobbledegook about Erskine complying with SACS’s directive for a 5% draw on the endowment is political misspeak and misdirection to keep math-challenged ministers pacified in their stupor.

(2)

As most readers of *ARPTalk* know, Rev. Kyle Sims is now the Director of Seminary Admissions and Church Relations. His role is finding and attracting students to attend Erskine Seminary.

This past June in Memphis, he set up a booth at the meeting of the General Assembly of the PCA. As the photograph to the right reveals, the crowd of students inquiring about Erskine Seminary at Memphis was a bit less than overwhelming. It is reported Sims could be heard saying, “Don’t you want to attend Erskine Seminary and be a minister like me?” I don’t think many wanted to be a minster like him. I don’t think extra help had to be secured in Due West to process the applications which poured in from Memphis! I don’t know why Sims didn’t order the posting of this photograph in the *ARPMagazine*!?



Unfortunately, Sims is beating a dead horse. The seminary of the CARPChurch (aka, ARPChurch) is the seminary from which he graduated. Yes, RTS-Charlotte is the seminary of the CARPChurch. At the meeting of the RTS-C alums at Synod, the speaker announced that RTS-C is “the seminary of the ARPChurch,” and his announcement was welcomed with an applause of agreement. I wonder if Sims was present?!

I don’t know why Sims took the Erskine job. In the past, he said Erskine Seminary is a lost cause and should be closed in order for the college to survive. Well, I suppose he needs something to do in order to occupy his time. I understand he has inherited some money and doesn’t need a job.

(3)

There has been no announcement in the *ARPMagazine* regarding the closing of RUF-Erskine. Sadly, with the resignation of Jonathan Cook to take the call to Young Memorial Church in Anderson as Senior Pastor, the ministry has come to an end. There may be an effort to find a replacement for Cook, but, with all the toxic challenges at Erskine College and the Due West community, no one in his right mind would seek or attempt the role. The role of RUF would have to be revamped from nurture of Christian students to hard evangelism, and RUF is not structured in that manner. Besides, RUF has larger fish to fry than little Erskine College.

The ministry of RUF-Erskine has always been tenuous, and the ministry survived only because of the tenacious efforts of Paul Patrick and then Jonathan Cook.

The opposition of the administration and the Erskine community were poisonous to the ministry. In a small college community where about 95% of the students are athletes and 90% of the student body is non-Christian, a ministry like RUF (which attempts to minister to Christian students) is untenable.

As far as *ARPTalk* is concerned, Paul Patrick and Jonathan Cook are worthy of a big THANK YOU and a tip of the hat.

WHAT'S WRONG?

A cataloguing of what's wrong with the CARPChurch is long and exhausting. Let it suffice for me to share two items I have recently seen and one from not so long ago.

FIRST. What's wrong? I recently read a conversation between two senior ministers bemoaning the decline of Sunday evening services as a reason for the decline in evangelical churches today. Well, if a minister can't fill a Sunday morning worship service, why does he think he can persuade congregants and others to attend an evening service?

TWO. What's wrong? According to one minister, the problem is that babies and toddlers are excluded from the worship service. I suppose a large sign needs to be erected in front of the church building, reading, "Babies and Toddlers Welcome in Worship."

By the way, this isn't a novel idea. There is a large community church of over 3,000 within two miles of where I live, and babies and toddlers are present at all three of the Sunday morning services. Perhaps the absence of babies and toddlers (crying or not crying) is not the problem for falling attendance. The pastor who was advocating for

babies and toddlers should have been advocating for people. His sanctuary on Sunday morning is nearly empty.

THREE. What's wrong? This story comes from the recent past. I attended the installation service for a prominent minister, and the preacher that evening chose a Psalm as his text. In his talk, he said nothing that would have offended an Orthodox Rabbi. He quoted Calvin and other Christian theologians. However, except for the beginning and ending prayers, the name of Jesus wasn't mentioned. There was nothing about Jesus. And a no Jesus sermon is no sermon. It is just a motivational talk. Zig Ziglar would have done better. You see, Calvin isn't the Savior of sinners; rather, Jesus is the only name whereby sinners must be saved. You see, a no Jesus sermon is a no Gospel sermon. And no Gospel sermons empty congregations.

A WARNING FROM 1986: KADESH-BARNEA

Monte Campbell, an attorney from Bartow, Florida, was a "blue-blood" Associate Reformed Presbyterian. No one would have dared to challenge his credentials as an ARP.

As the retiring Moderator of General Synod in 1986, he said the following in the Moderator's Keynote address.

It has been a real excitement to me to read the minutes of the Presbyteries as they have come across my desk and see the activity in regard to new church growth that has captured the attention of every Presbytery. And well that it has, for Dr. Charles Chaney points out in his book, *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century*, that the answer to evangelizing and discipling some eighty million people in the United States who claim no church affiliating is not to be primarily through existing churches. New churches are needed. Nowhere is that more evident than the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

No longer can we afford to sit back, like the "wallflower" at a "prom," and wait on those who would come to us. In the early church, it was only until the Apostles were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit did Christ tell them to wait in Jerusalem. Once they had received that power, he told them to go. Do we truly believe that the ARP Church is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit? Then the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church must seek out those souls He has dedicated to our care. **Right now, if we were the only church in the world directed by the Holy Spirit and having exclusive access to God's blessing, the world of evangelism would be in pretty dire straights**[emphasis added], Sometimes we even act like we are ashamed or embarrassed about what we

stand for. It's time for the ARP Church to be at the front of the battle to save souls with our identifying colors flying high for all to see and to know who we are and what we are.

I am convinced that God has prepared this Church for that task. While the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church has in the past had to circle its wagons to protect its heritage, in doing so, it has kept the faith. It is now time to move on with that faith secure, bright and alive. Let us not be guilty of blocking the advance of Christ by the failure of our expectations.

I couldn't help but think back to another time in the history of God's people, when He had prepared them and their mission and told them to go. In thinking of that time, I was tempted to select, as the title for this talk, the name of that place [Kadesh-Barnea] where God told the children of Israel that the promised land was theirs and to take it — where they failed simply because they didn't trust Him. . . . (*Minutes of General Synod, 1986, pages 4-5*).

What Monte Campbell warned of and feared has come to pass!! The ARPChurch sitting at Kadesh Barnea, unwilling to go and waiting to die.

Few there are in the ARPChurch today who have a vision for church planting. Few there are in the ARPChurch today who have successfully planted a new congregation. Few there are in the ARPChurch today who have successfully revitalized an existing congregation. Unfortunately, none of the bishops of the CARPChurch have experience in planting a congregation. They don't do it; they don't know how to do it; and they don't like those who can do it. And, you know, one can't lead to where one hasn't been!

A CONCLUDING WORD

Some of you who read *ARPTalk* think I am mean, evil, and divisive. Some of you even doubt I'm a Christian. Notwithstanding, I was able to plant and grow congregations in five states. How did I do that? Did I do it in the name of Beelzebub? Did I accomplish church planting, growth, and renewal on the basis of my mean, evil, and divisive spirit? No, I did not! Not knowing much about Calvin or the theological nuances and niceties of the Westminster Larger Catechism, I preached Jesus Christ the Savior of sinners and asked people to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and, believing in Jesus, they found life through His name. And, to my amazement, God, in spite of my many sins and weaknesses, used what I preached. (2 Corinthians 4.5-7).

For 50 years, I served the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church faithfully. I planted congregations and grew them. I sought to be a change agent.

I hate watching the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church devolving into the Catawba Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. The CARPChurch is a cadre of ambitious church politicians who are more interested in their political aspirations and comfort than filling the pews of congregations or seeing new congregations planted, or longing to see men and women and boys and girls come to a saving knowledge of Jesus.

Do you remember the beginning story of the carp fish? Well, a carp is an uneatable fish. The corollary follows: the CARPChurch is an unsavory church!! It's a church sitting at Kadesh Barnea waiting to die.

With a few remaining thoughts, I am

Charles W. Wilson

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