

PREFACE

The story of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi, is one of God's grace in preserving and growing a congregation from a small, struggling church in a frontier town into one of the leading churches of conservative Presbyterianism. While in many ways, the church's rise paralleled the growth of the city of Jackson, especially after 1900, demographics alone cannot explain the church's increase in membership or significance in the life of the city, state, or larger denominational influence. After all, Central Presbyterian Church in Jackson, which at one point had a larger numerical membership in the then-fashionable area of West Capitol Street, no longer exists. That reality serves as a sobering reminder that our congregations' futures are not guaranteed; God's covenant promises extends to his universal church, both visible and invisible, but the conditions of the covenant are realized in the context of local congregational life.

As a result, I thought it might be helpful, by way of introduction, to highlight several lessons that I learned while writing this book. To highlight them now, as a preface to the whole story, is to note especially the overarching keynote of God's grace to First Church. By God's grace and for his glory, this church stands as a testament of God's sustaining mercies. As such, she offers a number of instructive lessons for her congregants and friends in contemplating the past for the sake of the present and future.

It Only Takes One Generation

The first lesson is the one alluded to above: it only takes one generation for a church to die. As part of the research work for this book, I have tracked down various churches that were mentioned in biographical sketches or represented in various events. One day, working on the chapter on John Reed Miller, I tried to find information about Point Breeze Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh (where Harold Ockenga ministered); Central Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga (where Wilbur Cousar pastored); United Presbyterian Church in Wheeling, West Virginia (where John Reed Miller served for a time); and Central Presbyterian Church in Jackson (where R. E. Hough pastored). What do these congregations have in common? They were all thriving, large, significant churches, pastored by conservative, talented men: *and they no longer exist today.*

Now, the reasons why these churches no longer exist are as varied as the congregations themselves. Still, as late as the 1950s, they all were thriving congregations, and if congregational death can happen to these congregations, it can happen to any congregation. God's mercy has been evident in the fact that First Church, a downtown church, has continued to thrive and prosper even as the city of Jackson, Mississippi, has transitioned several times through the decades.

But it would only take a generation for a church to show signs of decay: perhaps a poor pastoral choice; a failure to continue to preach God's Word faithfully; a transition in the church's understanding of mission; an inability to see and adapt to the neighborhood around it. All of this should cause First Church members and leaders to pray regularly that the Lord not remove his lampstand from the corner of North State and Belhaven Streets, but that he remain faithful by raising up the next generation who will love Christ and his covenant.

A Few Good Men

As will be clear to everyone who reads further this book, one of the outstanding features of First Church has been the quality of men who have served as ruling elders. Even when Jackson was a small, struggling town in the mid-nineteenth century, First Church had remarkable men as elders: J. S. Copes, William Lemly, and J. L. Power, to name three. Copes was a doctor who would move to New Orleans to establish the medical college at what is now Tulane University; Lemly was a leading merchant; and Power would become the long-time owner of what is now the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* and Mississippi's Secretary of State. And from that time to this, the church's elders have included state supreme court justices, federal circuit court judges, prominent lawyers, leading merchants, hard-working doctors—who have taken their turns teaching Sunday school, caring for the sick and struggling, and visiting the lost and lonely.

Indeed, what has marked First Church's elders is not only that they were *talented*, but that they were *godly* men. And it is that combination—talented, godly men—that sustains influential congregations over the long haul. Churches that lose the faith have talented men; many small churches have godly men; but churches that have served as leading churches in the formation of institutions and in impacting their cities and towns over generations inevitably have talented *and* godly men. In God's mercy, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, has had more than a few good men serve as elders. In these pages, the reader will meet many of them; my only regret is that I could not highlight all of these men who have served Christ and his cause with honor, humility, and distinction.

Long-term Pastorates

One of the trends in missiology over the past twenty years has been the increase of “short-term missions,” where people volunteer to serve on the mission field for two weeks or two years. Undoubtedly this is valuable. But one of the lessons from First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, has been the long-term mission work of their pastors. Since 1858, the church has had only seven ministers: John Hunter (1858-94), J. B. Hutton (1896-1940), Girard Lowe (1941-51), John Reed Miller (1951-68), Don Patterson (1969-83), James Baird (1984-95), and J. Ligon Duncan (1996-present).

This longevity has shaped the congregation’s life in profound ways. First, there has been remarkable stability. Consider that from 1858 to 1939, there was *only one pastoral transition*; what stability that provided the congregation as they went through building programs, Yellow Fever, tragic deaths, church discipline, four church plants, and countless efforts to reach Jackson with the Gospel! Whole generations lived their lives with only two pastors, weekly receiving God’s Word from Hunter and Hutton, having their children baptized and married, cared for and buried by these two men. The same could be said of those who were part of First Church between 1950 and 1983 (Miller and Patterson) or between 1984 and 2012 (Baird and Duncan). Such stability gives the congregation strength in times of crisis as well as vision for the future.

Not only this, the commitment to long-term mission has provided for sustained impact for the pulpit ministry. A long stay in the same place allowed these men to shape the theological and experiential perspective of the congregation in favor of the grand, winsome, evangelical truths of Reformed Christianity. Though each minister had his own unique way of and plans for preaching, there was a common thread of Gospel-centeredness and evangelical commitment that has made First Church a powerful advocate for evangelism, missions, discipleship, and theological education.

Her ministers have been at the front and center of many of the key institutions that have furthered this work, but the groundwork was laid through the regular, sustained, long-term pulpit ministry of each man.

Finally, the pastors' long-term stays have enabled them to develop great trust. Though each of these men had other opportunities—both when coming to FPC Jackson and while there—they remained at their post, earning the long-term trust of the church. And so, this lesson: when difficult times come, it is not the wonder or power of one's preaching that holds the congregation, but the trust built up over a long-term mission with God's people.

The Road Not Taken

Along this same line, there is another lesson when it comes to ministers: the lesson of the road not taken. At each point along the way, the church's pulpit committees could have made different choices, and the future of First Church would have been dramatically different. For example, before the church called J. B. Hutton in 1896—a little-known, young pastor of a yoked parish in Central Mississippi—they had tried to call A. J. McKelway, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina. McKelway had visited and preached, investigated the call, but in the end decided not to come. That was a blessing for the church: McKelway would become one of the early proponents of the Social Gospel in the southern Presbyterian church, while Hutton became known as one of the staunch defenders of evangelical doctrine in the southern Presbyterian church. Imagine how different the history of First Church would have been if McKelway had accepted the proffered call!

At several key points in the church's history, similar "roads not taken" occurred. And while such situations raise the question of how churches do pastoral searches and calls, one thing seems clear: churches that stand faithful through the generations are those that

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seek men who are faithful to the Scripture, true to the Reformed faith, and obedient to the Great Commission, men who are winsome pastors and faithful leaders, and men who stay in a place for a little while at least. But to find men like this to serve as pastors, we have to confess that they are grace-gifts of Christ to his church (Eph. 4:7-12). In God's mercy, First Church was blessed in the men they have called through the years—and protected from the roads not taken.

The Blessings of Evangelical Presbyterianism

One final lesson to mention: First Church has known the great blessing of being a congregation committed to evangelical Presbyterianism. From her earliest days, the congregation has sought to preach the Gospel, win lost men and women to Jesus, and present the Reformed faith in a winsome and winning manner. And the value of this is two-fold. On the one hand, such evangelical Presbyterianism has prevented the church and its leaders from “majoring on the minors.” There is little doubt that as one reads through our doctrinal standards—the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms—there are some things that are essential to the system of doctrine and other things that we confess but also recognize are not essential to that doctrinal system. While some in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition have sought to require full-throated adherence and passionate commitment to every single jot and tittle, such has not been First Church's history. Rather, First Church's ministers and elders have led with the Gospel and the fixed points of the Presbyterian doctrinal system: the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture; God's sovereignty; his covenants of work and grace; the Redeemer's person and work; the means of grace; and the reality of Jesus' soon return and final judgment, all being chief among them.

But, on the other hand, because the church was committed to evangelical Presbyterianism, First Church was willing to commit everything in preserving a congregation and denomination that stood for the great fundamentals of our system of doctrine. The Gospel would be best served not simply by being an independent congregation holding these evangelical truths. Rather, it would be best served through a connectional denomination of churches that held and proclaimed these truths together. And so, in an era when denominations have been viewed as dying dinosaurs of a previous era, First Church took the lead in forming and in sustaining the Presbyterian Church in America, a denomination committed to the Scriptures, the Reformed faith, and the Great Commission. All of this to say, First Church has gloried in being evangelical *first* and Presbyterian second, but in being evangelical *and* Presbyterian together. And this has been and will continue to be what shapes this and all leading Presbyterian churches.

These are some of the lessons that I have learned in writing this anniversary history. But there is one more thing to mention. In thinking about First Church over 175 years, my mind has been taken back repeatedly to the image of Zion—an image of God’s collective people, his Promised Land, his cherished prize, his protected possession. Over and over, I have come back to this title of “Blessed Zion” to describe this book and the people for whom God has cared as First Presbyterian Church, Jackson. In 1806, Thomas Kelly paraphrased Psalm 125 for a hymn collection that he published. In reflecting on the words, “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore,” Kelly wrote:

*Zion stands by hills surrounded, Zion, kept by power divine;
All her foes shall be confounded, Though the world in arms
combine;*

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Happy Zion, what a favored lot is thine!

*Every human tie may perish; Friend to friend unfaithful
prove;*

*Mothers cease their own to cherish; Heav'n and earth at last
remove;*

But no changes can attend Jehovah's love.

*In the furnace God may prove thee, Thence to bring thee forth
more bright,*

*But can never cease to love thee; Thou art precious in His
sight;*

God is with thee—God, thine everlasting Light.

My prayer is that First Church will see herself as God sees her: blessed and happy in his love, precious in his sight, attended by the light of God, protected by his grace to the end of the age.