

For the November 19, 2017, Worship Service Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the Founding of First Presbyterian Church-Bryan, TX Acts 9:31; 10:17-22,24-36; 11:1-3,17-18
“An Interview with John Russell Hutchinson (Now of the Invisible Kingdom)”

#1 – In more than one Sunday School Class and even some other gatherings, First Presbyterian’s 150th anniversary has been discussed. Sometimes the discussion goes back to what it was like in 1867 for the church at its beginnings.

#2 – Yeah, sometimes people say, “How great it is that it happened back then that Reverend John Hutchinson down in Houston had a vision of a church beginning 80 miles up the railway which was being extended northwest of Houston into Brazos County and even into Bryan City.” Some of the discussions have added a question to their observation: “Well, it might be great that Reverend Hutchinson had such a vision and acted upon it, but how was it to start a church in a southeast Texas county just two years after General Lee surrendered the Army of the Southern Confederacy to the United States from which the Confederacy had seceded?”

#1 – I’ve noticed that too. It’s almost like part of us says: “How great, even awesome that the chartering of the church happened.” Another part of us thinks, “Whoa, though! How tough the times were with everyone scrambling to figure out how life could work, and how they could make something – or hold onto something – amid so many losses and changes.”

#2 – You mean due to the war’s outcome and the end of slavery?

#1 – Exactly. Times had to be extremely tough in all of that.

#2 – That’s what I’m thinking. (Pause) How do you think it would be to interview Reverend Hutchinson today?

#1 – Role play! You be Reverend Hutchinson in heaven, and I’ll be a reporter from 2017 interviewing him.

#2 – Are you saying that we pretend this is a séance or something?

#1 – Oh, you can think of it that way, I guess, but let’s pretend I can interview him without conjuring up a spirit, or whatever it is séance-people say they do. Just imagine that you are he – knowing some things he would have known, and knowing some things you know. Ready?

#2 – Ok. Let’s do it.

#1 – (Pause for focus, then raising a hand respectfully and saying ...) Reverend Hutchinson, I’m from 2017, a hundred and fifty years after you helped Presbyterians in Bryan City, Texas, start a church. Can I ask you three questions?

#2 – I guess so. But I don’t have all of eternity.

#1 – I beg your pardon? Don't you really have all of eternity?

#2 – No, I don't have eternity! God has eternity! Don't you know I'm a dedicated Calvinist? That's one question. What's your second one?

#1 – Well, I didn't intend for that to be my first question.

#2 – People don't intend a lot of things, but a lot happens in life people don't intend to happen. That sounds like something a Calvinist would say, doesn't it? (Laughs at his own humor.)

#1 – Well, if I only have two questions remaining, what might you tell the people of 2017 how it was to start the church back in 1867?

#2 – It was not easy. It was an up-hill challenge every day. Not only to round up those 24 charter members and the ones who month by month joined over time, but life in general was an up-hill challenge for everyone. First, the over-all population was decreased because many soldiers went off to war and never returned. The economy was destabilized because of the war. The social structure of the society was in confusion due to slavery having come to an end. Personally, it was not easy for me because, as you may know, I was not a Southerner. I was born and raised in Pennsylvania, having studied and graduated from Princeton Seminary. You may know that Princeton Seminary was the place where many Old School Presbyterians were trained for the church's ministry, north and south. After Princeton, I went to the southern states and eventually arrived in Houston, worked there in ministry for a few years, but felt that people out beyond Houston needed a faith community like the Presbyterian Church could offer. So the Reverend James Wilson and I journeyed to Bryan City and constituted a faith community of Presbyterians there. Don't you see? Following Jesus Christ is more than where we're from; it's more than what we think about a theological doctrine or philosophy or ideology, or political or cultural issues; it's more than the color of anyone's skin or the region or nation where anyone lives. But you know all of that still does figure into our habits and prejudices and the ways we relate. I was convinced then, and am convinced today in eternity that following Jesus Christ and growing in faith is more important than anything else. Than anything else! So, how was it to start the church in 1867? It was a hard time, but the Spirit of Jesus Christ was leading us: former Northerners like myself, former Secessionists, former slaves. We all had rebuilding to do if there was going to be a community in the next month and year and decade. It was never easy, I think, because life is most often not easy. Did you say the church has lasted 150 years?

#1 – Yes, I did. But I thought I was supposed to be asking the questions.

#2 – (Stunned, double-taking, then laughing) Oh. Well, yes, you are! Ha, ha, ha, ha. You got me on that. I believe you have one more question to make your three. Remember, I don't have all of eternity to give you. Ha, ha, ha, ha!

#1 – I remember. Would it surprise you, Reverend Hutchinson, to learn that the church has changed over 150 years?

#2 – Are you kidding me? Oooops. I'm not supposed to be asking the questions. Ummm, well, I'd say it would surprise me if you said that the church had not changed. Remember how, in Acts, chapter 9, verse 31, the Scripture says, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied"? That verse follows what earlier is described about the church in Palestine in consternation and trying to figure out how to accept Paul after his conversion to follow Christ – when Paul earlier had been opposed to Christians and had been an advocate for violence against Christians, if violence is what it took to get rid of them. And following this, in Acts, chapters 10 and 11, Peter, of all people, is convinced that the message of Jesus should be carried to Gentiles, who have not ever been Jews before, who do not share the faith-tradition and faith-genealogy of most of the early followers of Jesus, who were Jews of Israel. So, hard thinking, and debating, and praying were going on. Change was in the wind. I think the Scripture is saying to us that God can be in the midst of change. I lived in a time when slavery was ruled illegal. For all I know – and I'll take your word for it that – other changes have happened in the church since I worked for Jesus Christ in Bryan City. I would assume that God continued working with disciples of Jesus Christ in ways that led to changes maybe as momentous as slavery becoming illegal. But you know, what becomes momentous is at the same time both ordinary and hard. Momentous change happens in the ordinary day to day lives we are given. And grace from Almighty God is always life-changing, not only from drunkenness to sobriety, but from people saying "nothing can change" to the realization that in God's grace everything can be made new, in one person's life, in a town and region, and throughout the world. We don't ever want to underestimate God's potential changes through the grace of Jesus Christ and God's continuing faithfulness through the leading of the Holy Spirit, do we? (Pause) Ooops! There I go again, asking the questions.

#1 – It's alright. I'm willing to answer that one for you: I agree with you. You make a positive argument that we make a big mistake if we ever underestimate God's potential changes through grace and God's continuing faithfulness by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Reverend Hutchinson, as we say in the 21st century, "Thank you for your service."

#2 – And as we Calvinists and others say: Sola Gloria Dei.

#1 – That means what in translation?

#2 – Oh, my apology. It's Latin for, "The only glory is to God."

#1 – Absolutely. Thank you, Sir.

#2 – Thanks be to God! (Both) Amen.