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Giving Thanks for Harry Reeder (1948-2023)

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

In many ways, Harry was a man's man: strong, athletic, and confident. But he was also a family man. We should pray for his wife, Cindy, along with their three children—Jennifer, Ike, and Abby—and their many grandchildren. Harry will be greatly missed by thousands, but especially by his family. I'll miss him as a Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) founding father, as a ministerial example, and as a friend.

Transcript

[music] Welcome back to Life and Books and Everything. Today I want to read a special tribute that I wrote for Harry Reeder. Gospel Coalition asked me if I would write a reflection on my friend Harry, who sadly passed away just yesterday, as I'm required.

I'm recording this on Friday, just yesterday, Thursday morning, tragically in a car accident. I'm happy to do that. Even as I finished this late last night, and now recording this, just within the past couple of hours, I've also received the sad news that Tim Keller has passed away.

These are hard days in the PCA and for the broader church. Both Harry and Tim were friends of mine. World has asked that I would write up something for Tim in short order, so I hope to do that.

Not that it's my full-time job to write reflections like this, or that everyone needs to hear from me every time some well-known Christian passes away. Both of these men have had an influence in my life and were friends. It's easy to say so-and-so is a friend, and it's somebody that you met once at a conference.

Harry and Tim were really genuinely friends, and I give thanks for their lives. I want to read this TGC piece that came out this morning giving thanks for Harry Reeder, 1948 to 20 years. I have some sad news to share, a subdued voice told me over the phone.

Harry Reeder died in a car accident this morning. That was a call I got from my friend yesterday afternoon. I couldn't believe it.

I had just seen Harry two weeks ago at the Gospel Reformation Network Conference here in Charlotte, North Carolina. I was going to see Harry again in a few weeks if I didn't talk to him before then at the PCA General Assembly. How could this be true? Did this really happen? Is Harry really gone? That was my response, and it was the same response I got from members of my congregation.

I shared with him the tragic news that their beloved former pastor had passed on to glory. I sent an email out to our congregation yesterday afternoon, and to a few folks I called personally, and it was always the same response. Are you serious? Did this really happen? One of the things I'm adding a parenthesis here that I didn't include in the TGC piece, which I'll come back to in a moment, is that Harry's sister, Vicki, passed away a number of years ago.

I remember getting that phone call. She was a member here at Christ Covenant just as I was making my transition here six years ago. That was hard news, devastating news for Harry, Harry, and his sister.

We're best friends. They talked on the phone every single day, and to have this. That was also a car accident.

To have this, a car accident also happened almost the exact same time six years later is a hard, providential pill to swallow. I suppose everyone is unique, but Harry truly was unlike anyone I've ever met. He was a powerful preacher, authoritative and gregarious, big in personality and passionate about the gospel funny and blood earnest all at the same time.

He wasn't just a gifted preacher and teacher, he was also an amazingly conscientious pastor, never forgetting a name, learning all that he could about his flock and constantly following up on church members. As everyone who knew Harry can attest, he seemed to possess indefatigable energy, not to mention a filing cabinet in his brain that could produce sermon outlines, the movements of civil war regiments and alliterative insights seemingly at will. In many ways, Harry was a man's man, strong, athletic and confident, but he was also a family man.

We should pray for his wife Cindy along with their children, Jennifer Ike and Abby and their many grandchildren. Harry will be greatly missed by thousands, but especially by his family. I'll miss him as a Presbyterian church in America, founding father as a ministerial example and as a friend.

Hardly a week goes by that I don't hear firsthand about Harry readers' ministry. Though Harry left Christ Covenant where I now serve as senior pastor almost 25 years ago, the church still bears his imprint. Under the Lord Jesus, it's Harry readers' church.

When Christ Covenant particularized as a congregation on December 5, 1981, the church

had fewer than 40 members and no pastor. At the time, Harry was leading a flourishing work at Pineland's Presbyterian Church in Miami, Florida. The PCA, less than a decade old, wanted to establish a flagship church in Charlotte.

The aim was to plant a church that would plant a Presbyterian. Not surprisingly, the denomination wanted Harry to return to his hometown and plant this kind of church. Harry was interested, but he soon discovered there was already a small PCA church in Charlotte, and Harry didn't want to plant a rival church to one that already existed.

This humble hesitancy was all the encouragement Christ Covenant needed to aggressively pursue Harry to become its senior pastor. In February 1983, Harry and Cindy moved to Charlotte and began their ministry at Christ Covenant. Harry left a thriving church, a 400, for a church plant, literally meeting in a trailer.

But almost immediately the church began to grow, tripling in the first three months, outgrowing their facilities the same year, adding a second service in 1987, moving into their first-owned building in 1988, doubling again three years later, starting a Christian school in 1989 and then breaking ground in 1994 on the worship center, where I now have the privilege of preaching each Sunday. By the time Christ Covenant moved into its permanent home in 1997, the church had swelled to 3,000 members, almost half of whom were children. In 1999, Harry left Christ Covenant to become the senior pastor at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

It may have been the only church that could have lured Harry away from the congregation in the city he dearly loved. Briarwood isn't only a very large and very generous church, it's also the mothership of the PCA, the place where the denomination began on December 4, 1973. Following Frank Barker at Briarwood was no small task, but Harry and Frank supported and encouraged each other admirably during the transition and over their many years together in Birmingham.

For almost a quarter century, Harry preached the Bible faithfully, fruitfully, forcefully, in what is one of our denominations most important and influential congregations. For many ministers my age and younger, Harry became an implicit and sometimes explicit mentor. Like hundreds of others over the years, I trafered across civil war battlefields with Harry as he passed along to stories and leadership lessons he loved to share.

He wasn't shy about stating his opinions, but he also was generous in passing out encouragement. Many pastors looked up to him for his theological clarity, his moral courage, and his resolute commitment to the old paths of preaching, sacraments, and prayer. The PCA will celebrate its 50th anniversary in Memphis next month as commissioners from all over the country gather for General Assembly.

I can hardly believe we won't see Harry there. As well as anyone I've known, Harry embodied the motto of the PCA, faithful to the scriptures, true to the reformed faith,

obedient to the great commission. That was Harry, all of him and all of it.

He loved to teach the faith, he loved to defend the faith, and he loved to share his faith. I'm sure I wasn't the only person to see Harry witness to the restaurant server or ask perfect strangers how he could pray for them. Above all, Harry's legacy is the gospel.

The gospel he preached so effectively and shared so frequently. For Harry, all is glory and gladness now and forever. For those he knew here on earth, he'll be grief and sadness.

But if Harry's word can be believed, no, if God's word can be believed, then we don't mourn as those who have no hope. We have heard the joyful sound. Jesus saves.

Jesus saves. Jesus saves.

(dramatic music)