

Blessed Zion

Lessons From the History of FPC Jackson

By [Sean Lucas](#)

I've titled this talk, "Blessed Zion — Lessons from the History of First Pres. Jackson," and that's because the story of First Pres. Jackson is one of God's grace, preserving and growing a congregation in a small frontier town, which is what Jackson was in the 1830's, into one of the leading churches of evangelical Presbyterianism. In many ways, the church's growth mirrors the demographics of Jackson. Particularly starting in 1900, Jackson would double in population every twenty years. The church's growth mirrors the demographics and yet demographics alone cannot really explain the growth or the impact of First Pres. Jackson. After all, Central Presbyterian Church in Jackson, which at one point in 1930 actually had four times the number of members as First Presbyterian Church Jackson in the then-fashionable section of town, West Capitol Street, no longer exists. And so demographics alone can't explain how it is that First Presbyterian Church here in Jackson has continued. In fact, the fact that Central Presbyterian Church no longer exists actually serves as a sobering reminder that our congregation's futures are not guaranteed. God's covenant promises extend to the Church universal, both visible and invisible, but the conditions of the covenant are actually realized in local, congregational life. And so as First Presbyterian Church here celebrates its 175th anniversary, I thought it might be helpful to share a few lessons that I learned writing a history of the church. I'm sure there are other lessons that could have been learned. The lessons that I'm going to mention tonight are the ones that most impacted me personally, both as a historian by training but also as a pastor by calling. My eye is constantly on our people in Hattiesburg and on the life of local churches, and so these five lessons were things that particularly impacted me as I studied your story.

IT ONLY TAKES ONE GENERATION FOR A CHURCH TO DIE

And the first lesson is simply this. It takes only one generation for a church to die. As part of the research for the book, I tracked down a number of churches that were mentioned in biographic sketches or represented in various events. And one day working on the chapter on John Reed Miller, who pastored in the 50's and 60's, I tried to find information about several churches — Point Breeze Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg where Harold Ockenga and Reed Miller himself 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. What do those congregations have in common? Well, they were all large, thriving, significant congregations pastored by conservative, talented men, and they no longer exist today.

Now the reasons why these churches no longer exist are as various as the congregations themselves. Still, as late as the 1950's they were thriving congregations and if a congregational death can happen to those congregations it can happen to any congregation. God's mercy has been evident in the life of your church, First Church, a downtown church, in the fact that your congregation has continued to thrive and foster in the city of Jackson even as the city has transitioned several times through the decades. But it would only take a generation for a congregation to show signs of decay, perhaps a poor pastoral choice, perhaps a failure to preach God's Word faithfully, or a transition in the church's understanding of mission, or an inability to see and adapt to the neighborhood around it. Of course, these reasons suggest that we often think of congregations dying because of unfaithfulness, either doctrinal laxity on one side or evangelistic laziness on the other. But often the reason is not unfaithfulness but simply that the church's covenant children move away and they don't come back. Well such transitions can happen in the span of thirty or forty years. One generation may be all that's necessary for a congregation to begin the process of dying.

One of the things I know for us at First Pres. Hattiesburg we've thought a lot about over our anniversary celebration, and I would challenge you to think about it as well, our futures are not guaranteed and though God has shown great faithfulness in the past, over 175 years, we need to continue to ask Jesus to preserve His lamp stand here and not to take it away, either through our own unfaithfulness or for His own good pleasure. One of the prayers I know I pray regularly in our pastoral prayer is, "Jesus, just as You have given us generations here for 130 years, raise us generations after us that will love the name of Jesus Christ here in this church and in this place." And that is, I think, something that all of us should pray, particularly you in your anniversary time as members and leaders, to pray regularly that the Lord would not remove His lamp stand from this corner of North State and Belhaven Street, that He would remain faithful by raising up the next generation who will love Christ and His covenant. So that's one lesson.

A FEW GOOD MEN

But a second lesson that I learned from your history was that it really is necessary to have a few good men. One of the outstanding features of First Presbyterian Church has been the quality of men who have served as its ruling elders. Even when Jackson was a small, struggling town in the mid 19th century, First Church had remarkable men as elders — Joseph Copes and William

Lemley and J.L. Power just to name three. Copes was a doctor who would later move to New Orleans and start the medical school as what is now Tulane University. Lemley was a leading merchant here in town and J.L. Power was the longtime owner of what became *The Jackson Clarion Ledger* and served for a time as Mississippi Secretary of State. And from that time to this, the church's elders have included State Supreme Court Justices and Federal Circuit Court Judges, prominent lawyers, leading merchants, hardworking doctors, who have all taken their turns working in the nursery and teaching Sunday School and caring for the sick and struggling and visiting the lost and the lonely. Indeed, what has marked First Church's elders is not only that they were talented, but that they were also godly. It's that combination, talented, godly men, that sustains influential congregations over the long haul. Churches that lose the faith have talented men, lots of small churches have godly men, but churches that have served as leading churches in the formation of institutions and impacting cities and towns over generations, inevitably have talented and godly men. By God's mercy, First Presbyterian Church Jackson has had more than a few good men to serve this church as elder. Indeed, heaven's roll call is filled with the talented and godly men who have served this church, not just Cops and Lenley and J.L. Power, but also Thomas Helm and J.D. Power and all the Wells' from the first William Calvin Wells to the present, and Leon Hendrick and Robert Cannada and the Stokes Robertson, senior and junior, and Erskine Wells and Russ Johnson and R.G. Kennington and on and on and on to the present session. My great regret in writing "Blessed Zion" was that I could not highlight all the good men who have served as elders and deacons here at First Church.

But the reason why there have been so many good men as leaders here is that there has been an intentional focus on ministry to men. Jim Baird would periodically observe from the pulpit, "If you look around yourself today you'll see more men present than women and you could travel a thousand miles in any direction before you would see the same thing in a church this size." But from John Hunter's ministry starting in 1858 to the present day, the church has focused intentionally on ministry to men, whether the Brotherhood Sunday School class or the Men's Bible Study taught for a year by the Alexander brothers, or the Mid-South Men's Rally or many other ways beside, reaching men with the Gospel, teaching them God's Word, and involving them in ministry has been an important focus of your congregation's life.

This ministry to men has been complimented by having strong men as pastoral leaders. For example, Gerard Lowe who was the pastor here from 1941 to '51 was described this way. "He has the rare combination of broad scholarship, deep spirituality, an attractive personality, and at the same time is a hail fellow well met with a positive genius for making and holding friends and meeting and mingling with the masses." Likewise, all who knew John Reed Miller remember him as a strong, masculine presence. In particular, one man recalled, "While not seeking to be universally loved, Dr. Miller was and is respected by all and truly revered by many. In a day when the average preacher based his personality on how to win

friends and influence people, Dr. Miller concentrated on how to speak the truth in love and was not in the least taken back by the opinions of men if his own conscience was in clear alignment with the Scripture.” What was true of Lowe and Miller has been true of all the men who have served as pastor here at First Presbyterian Church. They surrounded themselves with godly men and sought to reach men because they themselves were men who loved Jesus and loved to be with men who loved Jesus. That’s an important lesson to learn, that it takes more than a few good, godly men.

LONG-TERM PASTORATES

A third lesson that I learned was a lesson on long-term pastorates. One of the trends in missiology over the last twenty years in the study of missions has been the promotion of short-term missions, whether going to the mission field for two weeks or two years. And undoubtedly this is valuable but one of the lessons of First Presbyterian Church Jackson has been the long-term mission work of its pastors. Since 1858, the church has only had seven pastors. Think of that. John Hunter, 1858 to '94, J.B. Hutton, 1896 to 1940, Gerard Lowe, 1941 to '51, John Reed Miller, 1951 to '68, Donald Patterson, 1969 to '83, James Baird, 1984 to '95, and then Dr. Duncan himself from 1996 to the present. The longevity of these pastors has shaped the congregation's life in significant ways. First, there's been profound stability. Consider this — for the eighty years between 1858 and 1939 there was only one pastoral search. There were only two pastors in eighty years. Think of the stability that provided for 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 in this congregation had lived their lives with only two pastors, not just the Hunter/Hutton generation but the Miller/Patterson generation. Two pastors in thirty-three years between 1950 and 1983, or even between Baird and Duncan, 1984 to 2012 and continuing. Such stability has children who were baptized being married and then counseled and see their own children baptized and married by the same men gives a great deal of stability and strength to a congregation. That's been your story.

But not only this, the commitment to long-term pastoral care and missions in long-term pastorates has allowed for the sustained impact of pulpit ministry. A long stay in the same place allows these men to shape the theological but also the piety perspective of the congregation in favor of the grand, winsome, evangelical truths of reformed Christianity. So each minister has had his own unique ways and plans for preaching, there was a common thread in all of them of Gospel-centeredness, and evangelical commitment that made First Church a powerful advocate for evangelism and missions, for discipleship and theological education. For ministers that have been in 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 these men.

And finally, the pastors' long-term stays allowed them to gain great trust. Though each of the men had other opportunities both coming to First Pres. Jackson and then even while here, they remained at their post, earning the long-term trust of the church. A great example of this was J.B. Hutton. As the Jackson Kiwanis Club recognized on his fortieth anniversary here at First Church, over the years Hutton had transitioned from Mr. Hutton to Dr. Hutton to Brother Hutton. They said, "People in recent years had called him Brother Hutton because they had found that not only was there strength in his body and brains in his head, but despite a seeming reserve, there was a warm and loving and tender heart for his people and for the people of his adopted state and city." There's the trust. And so then this lesson - when difficult times come, it's not only the power or the wonder of one's preaching that holds a congregation, but it's the trust built up over long-term pastorates. And you've been blessed with that.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

A fourth lesson that I've learned that kind of goes with the previous one is the lesson of the road not taken, and it's a lesson that comes again to ministers. In each point along the way in the church's history, 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 when he was a little-known twenty-nine year old pastor of a parish in the town of Durant, they had tried to call A.J. Mckelway who was the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Mckelway actually came and preached, investigated the call, but in the end decided not to come. And that was a huge blessing for the church because Mckelway would become one of the early proponents of the social gospel in the southern Presbyterian Church, while Hutton would become known as one of the staunch defenders of evangelical and Presbyterian faith. Imagine how different your history would have been if you had the proponent of the social gospel preaching from your pulpit at the turn of the last century. Indeed, several points in the churches history, many of them are in the book — similar roads not taken occurred. And while it raises questions about how churches do pastoral searches and calls, one thing seems clear — churches that stand faithful to the generations are those that seek men who are faithful to the Scriptures, true to the reformed faith, obedient to the Great Commission, men who are winsome pastors and faithful leaders, and men who stay in a little while at least. But to find men like this as pastors they must be given to the church by Christ as grace gifts. In God's mercy, Jesus gave you great gifts in pastors through your 175 years. You should rejoice in the men that God has given you as well as in the roads not taken.

But the fifth lesson I learned, and to me the most important, has been the blessing of evangelical Presbyterianism because to me, what has marked out First Presbyterian Church throughout its history, is that you have been a

congregation that's been committed to evangelical Presbyterianism. From the earliest days the congregation has sought to preach the Gospel, to win men and women to Jesus, to present the reformed faith in a warm and winsome fashion, and the value of this is two-fold. On the one hand, such evangelical Presbyterianism prevented the church and its leaders from majoring on minors. Rather, your pastors and elders have led with the Gospel and have led with the fixed points of our doctrinal system — the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures, the reality of God's sovereignty, the covenants of work and grace, the Redeemer's person and work, justification by faith alone, the means of grace, and the reality of Jesus' soon return and judgments. And because they majored on the majors as it were, they were evangelical protestants first and then Presbyterians. That was true from John Hunter's day all the way down to Ligon Duncan's day.

For example, J.H. Alexander, a 19th century minister in Yazoo City, remarked of Hunter that, "It is pleasant to note that while Dr. Hunter was devoted to the tenets and polity of the Presbyterian church, he had a heart and a hand for all who loved and served the Master." And the same could be said of J.B. Hutton who regularly shared in the organization and execution of evangelistic campaigns to Jackson with Baptist and Methodist ministers. When buildings were dedicated by the church, all the other congregations would shut down and worship with First Presbyterian Church because there was a heart for evangelical Christianity. John Reed Miller started the Winter Theological Institute in the late 50's and he invited the luminaries of American evangelicalism to come and speak to you. Carl F.H. Henry, Kenneth Cancer, Harold Ockenga, and of course your own Ligon Duncan has been heavily involved in The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals and Together for the Gospel and the Gospel Coalition. And all these ministers did this because the Gospel-centeredness of evangelical Christianity was at the very center of their passions and their heart and at the very center of your passions and your heart.

However, though the church was committed to a full-hearted and full-throated evangelicalism, you have been committed evangelical Presbyterians. And this was true throughout First Church's involvement with the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the old southern Presbyterian denomination. John Hunter, after all, signed the original address to "The Church of Jesus Christ throughout all the world," the manifesto of the southern church when it was formed in 1851. This church hosted the General Assembly of the PCUS in 1902. And from the 1920's on, the ministers and elders took a leading role in trying to preserve a Presbyterian denomination that would be evangelical and Presbyterian in the best senses. And when rescuing the old southern church failed, your church, First Church, was willing to commit everything in preserving a congregation and a denomination that stood for the fundamentals of our Presbyterian system of doctrine and polity. In an era when denominations have been viewed as the dying dinosaurs of a previous era, First Church took a leading role in forming and sustaining the Presbyterian Church in America, a denomination committed to the

Scriptures and the reformed faith and the Great Commission. In addition, this congregation has provided significant leadership to the PCA having three pastors, Drs. Baird, Patterson, and Duncan, as well as an elder, Leon Hendrick, serve as moderator of the PCA General Assembly. You've had countless ministers and elders serve as chairmen of committees and permanent committees and members of committees both at General Assembly and in presbytery. This has been a church of Presbyterian church men. All this to say that 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 other leading Presbyterian churches.

These are some of the lessons I've learned in writing your anniversary history but there's one more thing to mention. In thinking about First Church over 175 years, my mind has come over and over again to the image of Zion, an image of God's collective people, an image of God's Promised Land, an image of the Church as His cherished prize and peculiar possession. Over and over I came back to the title, even as I dallied with other titles, I came back to the title of "Blessed Zion" to describe this book and this people for whom God has cared for as First Presbyterian Church Jackson. In 1806 the hymn-writer Thomas Kelly paraphrased Psalm 125 for a hymn collection that he published. In reflecting on the words from the first two verses of that psalm, "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 this: "Zion stands by hills surrounded, Zion kept by power divine, all her foes shall be confounded thou the world and arms combine. Happy Zion, what a favored lies in Zion."

My prayer for you as you celebrate your 175th anniversary, is that you would see yourself as God sees you, as blessed and happy in His love, as precious in His sight, as attended by the light of God, and protected by His grace all the way to the end of the age. Surely First Church you have been blessed, a blessed Zion indeed. Would you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, we do thank You for these lessons that You teach us as congregations through the history of our churches. Lord, I particularly thank You for the history of this church, not only in getting the opportunity to study it over the last couple of years but indeed, all the way back to 2002 reading session records. Lord, I thank You for the way this church has stood for Gospel truth and has stood for Gospel passion that You would be glorified in seeing lost men and lost women come to faith in Jesus Christ. Lord, I pray as they go through the various activities of this month, I pray that You would encourage this congregation. May they know that You are with them, that they belong to You, You know them by name, and they are Yours. Grant them Your grace, we pray. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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