

**PREACHING THROUGH 1, 2, AND 3 JOHN  
AND JUDE**

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## Preface

It was Hughes Oliphant Old, in his *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture*,<sup>1</sup> who first opened my eyes to the history and importance of *lectio continua* preaching, which is reading and preaching through the Bible, book by book, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse, in order, without omitting sections. He also gave me courage to pursue such preaching yet today.

Old's book has been reissued in a revised and expanded edition as *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*. Here is some of what he has written about our goodly heritage of *lectio continua* preaching:

**Origen** (ca. 185-ca. 254)...preached through the books of the Old Testament one by one. Today we have some twenty of his sermons on Genesis, about fifteen on Exodus, and a similar number on the other historical books...The ministry of Origen was to preach through the whole of the Bible, book by book, chapter by chapter.

**John Chrysostom** (ca. 347-407)...preached through most of the books of the New Testament. We have eighty-nine sermons on the Gospel of Matthew. When we look at these sermons, we discover that he proceeds through the whole of the Gospel explaining the text verse by verse.

**Ambrose of Milan** (ca. 339-97)...preached in Milan, the capital of the Western empire, at the same time John Chrysostom filled the pulpit in Antioch. Ambrose fascinated his congregation with his expositions of the Old Testament.

**Augustine of Hippo** (354-430)...preached a *lectio continua*.

**Ulrich Zwingli** (1481-1531)...started out by taking the Gospel of Matthew and preaching through it verse by verse, day after day for a whole year. To use the technical term, he preached a *lectio continua* of the Gospel of Matthew...Zwingli began his reform with a return to the classical practice of systematic expository preaching...Like a Swiss John Chrysostom he preached through the Bible, verse by verse, one book at a time.

**John Oecolampadius** (1482-1531)...became preacher at St. Mark's Church, where he set to work preaching, just as John Chrysostom had done, through one book of the Bible after another.

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture*, Guides to the Reformed Tradition, ed. John H. Leith and John W. Kuykendall (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), ch. 5, "The Ministry of the Word," 57-85. For information on revised and expanded edition, see next note.

**Matthew Zell** (1477-1548)...began his ministry by preaching through the four Gospels.

**Wolfgang Capito** (1478-1541)...preached through Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

**Martin Bucer** (1491-1551)...did a long series of sermons on the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John, the first epistle of Peter and the book of Psalms....If the Gospels were preached though in course on Sunday morning, then the New Testament Epistles were preached through either later on Sunday, at vespers perhaps, or else at the daily preaching services. It was the same with the Old Testament books.

**John Calvin** (1509-64) introduced [this approach] to Geneva and that those who were exiled during the reign of Queen Mary (1553-58) took with them when they returned to England and Scotland. *The exposition of Scripture in course became one of the biggest planks in their platform of Christian revival. To them it was an essential component of Christian worship that was according to Scripture and after the example of the early church....*Sunday morning Calvin normally preached through the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles. At Sunday vespers he would preach through the Psalms or perhaps a New Testament epistle. On weekday mornings he preached through Old Testament books....Calvin preached through most of the books of the Bible, and he preached his way slowly through each book. Normally, he took three to six verses at a time. This system produced, for example, 123 sermons on Genesis, 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, 159 sermons on Job, 176 sermons on 1 and 2 Corinthians, and 43 sermons on Galatians....His life's work was to preach through the whole Bible.

**John Knox** (1513-72)...became preacher at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. There he exercised as dramatic and powerful a preaching ministry as any preacher in the history of Christendom....He did this in the course of expository preaching, never departing from the text of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

How could I do any other? So it was that, at Gilwood Presbyterian Church, in Concord, North Carolina, I began preaching through the books of the Bible, particularly the New Testament. I spent more than five years going through Matthew (1991-1992), Mark (1992-1993), Luke (1993-1995), and John (1995-1996). I can honestly say that it

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<sup>2</sup>Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*, revised and expanded edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 63-78, emphasis added; for a fuller treatment, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, seven volumes (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998 ff.), of which volumes one through four are in print, volume five is at the printer, and volumes six and seven are forthcoming.

was the most important thing I have ever done in regard to preaching. After that, I preached through some of the shorter letters. I am very grateful to Gilwood for the opportunity and privilege of doing this.

Subsequently I was called to be the pastor of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, in Richmond, Virginia. In addition to preaching through Matthew (1999-2001), Mark (2002-2003), and Luke (2004-2006) again, as well as some of the letters, I have also preached through the Acts of the Apostles (2001-2002) and the Letter to the Romans (2003-2004). The sermons included below have come from this second series. Again, I am very grateful to Grace Covenant for the opportunity and privilege of doing this.

Through most of the years of my preaching, I have used the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. After years of anticipation, I used the New Revised Standard Version briefly. Now I have begun to use the English Standard Version, which I have found to be a most faithful and felicitous translation.

I should note that in my studies of the Bible I have learned much from the commentaries of John Calvin. I should also note that in my study of theology I have learned much from John Calvin and from John H. Leith. He has also done much to encourage my preaching.

As I have continued forward in *lectio continua* preaching, I have been much encouraged by the preaching ministries of my colleagues David Wood and Steve Bryant, who joined me along the way in this adventure. I have recently learned of others who also preach *lectio continua*: Ron Scates, Jeffrey Wilson, Louis Williams, and Bob Fuller. I am also grateful for help and encouragement not only from Hughes Oliphant Old but also from Stan Hall and Richard A. Ray. I would appreciate hearing from others who preach in this way.

My daughter, Campbell Goodloe Hackett, is a student at Princeton Theological Seminary. One of her New Testament professors, the late Dr. Donald Juel, once introduced a text from Mark to the class and suggested that almost no one had ever heard a sermon on it. My daughter put up her hand. He was dubious, but Campbell said that she had grown up in a church where the minister preached straight through the books of the Bible, including Mark. Juel was shocked that anyone did that. My question is, Why is such preaching unusual? It could and should be the norm.

I am more keenly aware of the shortcomings of the following sermons than are any who heard them or any who will read them. I offer them here less for any illusions I have about the value of their content and more for the importance of the substantive and historic pattern of preaching the Bible *lectio continua*, submitting ourselves to the authority of the Word. That can still be done today! Here is the proof. It is my prayer that others will be made bold to follow in this way and to do better than I have done.

# The Word of Life!

Psalm 19:1-14, 1 John 1:1-2:6

April 18, 1999

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands...we proclaim also to you.” What we have here today, in our hands, in our hearing, is an eyewitness account to the life, ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. John is not telling us about someone of whom he knows nothing. John is not telling us about someone of whom he has only second-hand knowledge. John is telling us about Jesus Christ, whom he had known in the flesh, whom he had heard, whom he had seen, whom he had touched with his hands. This is a for real, first generation, eyewitness account of Jesus Christ.

This testimony does two things for us. First of all, it places us just as close to Jesus Christ as John’s congregation was. They got to receive a first hand report, and so do we. We are, of course, grateful for the unbroken chain of witnesses which goes back from this congregation across all the centuries to the very first disciples and to Jesus Christ himself. Without that chain of witnesses, it is unlikely, from a human perspective, that we would be here today, that we would know of Jesus Christ, or that we would be Christian. Nevertheless, it is vitally important that we have this access to the first witnesses in the chain, the first disciples who followed Jesus literally and geographically as well as in their hearts and lives. They saw him, they heard him, and they knew him, so what they say is authentic and authoritative. And we have as much access to their witness and testimony as every other generation of Christians has.

Second, this testimony emphasizes and establishes the reality of the humanity of Jesus Christ. John heard him, saw him, and touched him. At the time he wrote this, it may have stood against the erroneous faith of those who accepted the reality of the divinity of Christ but who held that the humanity of Christ was only apparent, a facade, an illusion. They might have thought that it was inappropriate or inconceivable that God would take on human form, that the word would become flesh and dwell among us, full of grace and truth. But John understood that the reality of the gospel, which is for us, depends upon the reality of the humanity of Jesus Christ. He heard him, he saw him, he touched him. He knows that Jesus is truly human.

Today, John’s teaching might stand against other misunderstandings or opponents to the gospel. I do not know of anyone today who would accept the divinity but not the humanity of Jesus Christ. There are many who make a mistake the other way around, accepting the humanity of Jesus Christ but not the divinity, and we shall get to that in a moment. But there may also be those today who attempt to deny the humanity of Christ by saying that he is a legend, a literary production, or a figment of the imagination. Against these, too, John argues for the reality of Christ’s humanity and thus the reality of the gospel.

Now, while the literal, physical reality of the humanity of Jesus Christ provides John the occasion for making this witness, and forms an important part of the content of that testimony, it does not, of course, make up everything that he has to say about Jesus Christ. His humanity is necessary but not sufficient for the gospel. And the other side of

his testimony is that Jesus Christ is divine. John expresses this by saying, “concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we...proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.” That is to say, Jesus Christ is also the word of life, or the word of God, and very the Son of God, having lived eternally with God before becoming human and then being made visible, audible, and tangible to John. This divine reality to which John makes witness is just as important as the human reality. In fact, without it, Jesus would be merely human, just like us, not only subject to all the vicissitudes of life to which we are subject, but also incapable of doing anymore than we are to save ourselves. So, the basis for John’s witness to Jesus Christ is the reality of both his humanity and his divinity.

Now, while this forms the basis and foundation of John’s witness, and while it is the first point he makes, this is not the content of the gospel, as such. The content of the gospel has to do with the good news and the benefits which Jesus Christ can and does bring to us because he is both human and divine. And this good news and these benefits consist of several interrelated components.

First, John says, “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.” “In him there is no darkness at all.” Can you realize how wonderful that is? Our lives are too full of darkness: the darkness of the night, the darkness of fear, the darkness sin, the darkness of death, the darkness of evil, the darkness of suffering, the darkness of hunger, the darkness of poverty, the darkness of so-called ethnic cleansing, the darkness of torture and murder, the darkness of forced marches and homelessness and on and on. Our lives are so full of overlapping and interconnected darknesses that light is a rarity, a novelty. We desire it and yet we are afraid of it, for it both heals and exposes. It warms us, and yet it may be a fire that will consume us. But deep in the darkness of our hearts, despite all that denies and obscures it, we know that we are children of light and we need the light. No matter how much the darkness entices us, no matter how much it draws the life out of us, we know that only in the light do we find home. So it is good news that John learned from Jesus Christ and passes on to us, “that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.”

The second part of the good news has to do with the significance of this light. If the darkness has to do with lies and sins, then the light has to do with truth, forgiveness, and fellowship with God and with each other. “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” Again, look at the alternatives: walking in darkness has to do with all the gone-wrongness in our hearts, in our lives, in our relationships, and in our world; walking in the light has to do with everything that is good, right, true, and beautiful, all of which come from God. God is calling us to leave the old world behind and to enter the new world. Jesus is inviting us to abandon all that is evil, deceitful, hurtful, wrong, and harmful, and to embrace all that is good, true, and right.

The third part of the good news is that God in Christ not only calls and invites us into newness of life, but also makes provision for that to happen: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The human predicament is such that we need to be forgiven. This is our biggest problem.

Sometimes we are hungry, and that is terrible, but it is not the worst thing facing us. Sometimes we are sick, even unto death, but sickness is not the deepest trouble that we have. Sometimes we are poor, but we suffer from a malady that no amount of money can help. Sometimes we are at our wits end, and our resources fail us, and our hearts are broken, and our relationships are destroyed, but these do not define the most intractable dimensions of the human predicament.

Our real problem, finally, is that we have sinned against God. We have broken God's commandments, we have denied God's glory, we have placed ourselves at the center of life, meaning, importance, and even the universe. Having done this, we cannot undo it. The self-centered human cannot become God-centered by any efforts of the self, for even the self's desire to be God-centered is self-interested and therefore, by definition, doomed to failure.

Thanks be to God that God, in Jesus Christ, has an answer for all of this! Thanks be to God that God, in Jesus Christ, has a cure for the human predicament, a provision for our ultimate destiny, a balm for the sin sick soul, good hope in the midst of our hopelessness. And this answer is that God will forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. That which we cannot do for ourselves, God can and will do for us.

This is not easy. Neither is it cheap. Forgiveness cost Jesus his life on the cross. That is what it means when John says that Jesus is "the expiation for our sins." He paid the price. There is always a price to pay for evil. The price we owe is more than we can pay. But thanks be to God that Jesus Christ has already paid it for us.

It is interesting to think about this in terms of a court case. We are familiar, perhaps, with thinking of Jesus as a judge, and so he will be at the end of time. To understand that Jesus is "the expiation for our sins" means also that he has served our sentence for us, an odd role for a judge. And now John adds another image to the mix: "[I]f any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." An advocate is a lawyer, a defense attorney. Jesus Christ the righteous is in heaven, right now, pleading our case for us, not because we deserve it, but for his sake and for the sake of his sacrifice, the price he has already paid for us.

A fourth part of the good news is that this forgiveness and cleansing leads us into fellowship with God and with his Christ, and therefore with each other. Or maybe it is the other way around. John says that he is proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ to us so that we may be in fellowship with him, John, and that he is in fellowship "with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ." Through his first hand testimony we get to know John, through his eyewitness account of Christ we get to know Christ, through his proclamation of the gospel we get to know God. And as each of us is brought into, and restored to, this proper relationship with God, then we can be and are brought into the wonder and the miracle of Christian fellowship with each other.

This points toward a fifth component of the good news, when John says, "[W]e are writing this that our joy may be complete." The gospel stands over and against the loneliness that eats away at our lives, over against the despair that corrodes our spirits, over against the sense of forsakenness that pervades our society, and over against death and the fear of death which stalk us so relentlessly. The purpose of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the aim of forgiveness and cleansing, and the fulfillment of Christian fellowship is the completeness of joy. Complete joy! That is why John is writing

us. That is why Christ came to us. That is why God is calling us together in this time and this place today. Could you appreciate some more joy in your life? Is this of any interest to you? Could the people you know and love benefit from the completeness of joy? Would you like to be lifted out of your heartache? John says we receive this joy through the gospel, forgiveness, cleansing, and fellowship.

Even though I have tried to say that today's reading applies to us at each step along the way, it is always legitimate to ask what any reading, and what the gospel, has to do with us today. John says, "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; ... And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says 'I know him' but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked."

Part of what it means for Jesus to be the word of life is that he gives us life, which is to say that he gives us life both abundant and eternal, life in all its fullness as God intends it to be and life everlasting in the knowledge of God and of God's son. This is part of what it means.

Another part of what it means for Jesus to be the word of life is that Jesus gives us life together, life in fellowship with God and therefore with each other. You and I are not here simply because we chose to be here. Yes, at some level we chose to be here, and we are glad that we did. But at some other level, we are here because God in Jesus Christ has called us together to be his disciples in this time and place and has given us to each other, in his providence, wisdom, and grace. It is in and through each other that our joy in God is to be completed. The relationships we are forming here are a part of eternity. One day this building will no longer be here. One day the United States of America will no longer be a country. One day the world will cease to exist. But you and I will continue in eternal life, in the presence of God, in fellowship with one another. This adds some perspective to what we are about.

And yet another part of what it means for Jesus to be the word of life when we say that Jesus gives life to us in the community of faith is that Jesus also sets the standard for that life, sets the pattern for that life, and determines how it is that we should live together as Christians. It is a consequence, indeed a purpose, of the gospel that we are called together here in Christian community. It is incumbent upon us who bear his name that we also bear his character. "By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." That is to say, we ought to live in the same way in which Jesus lived: worshiping God, loving one another, caring for one another, healing the sick, and feeding the hungry. Here we are to share love instead of hatred. Here we are to know reconciliation instead of alienation. Here we are to know joy instead of despair. The standards are set high. May God grant us grace so to live!

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

# Love One Another!

Leviticus 19:17-18; 1 John 2:7-17

May 2, 1999

Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34). So this is the word of the living God to us today: "Love one another." This is the word spoken to us by God's Son, Jesus Christ: "Love one another." And this is the word communicated to us by his disciple, John the Evangelist: "Love one another."

This sounds so simple, but it proves to be so difficult! We are accustomed to hearing the gospel proclaimed, the forgiveness of our sin and the salvation of our souls, and that word of God calls for our faith, belief, and trust. We may be accustomed to hearing the glory of God proclaimed, the wonder and majesty of creation, providence, and redemption, and that word of God calls for our joy, awe, and praise. But we may not be so accustomed to hearing the commandments of God proclaimed, particularly this new commandment of mutual Christian love, and this word of God calls for our obedience, love, and action. What does God ask of us here, and how shall we respond?

What God seeks, asks, and requires of us here is that we love one another. This is a very specific, new commandment. It is built upon, but distinguished from, the old commandment which we have read from the Old Testament: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," where "neighbor" means both fellow Israelite and the stranger or sojourner. This is also a special case of, but more tightly focused than, the second half of the Great Commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," which has been forever defined by Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan as the obligation of universal love, across all national, racial, ethnic, religious, and economic lines. These old commandments have to do with justice, holiness, and evangelism, all good, right, and important. But this new commandment has to do with the will of God for the internal life of the Christian community, the inner realities and workings of the Christian church, the day to day life of a particular congregation, and the way we relate to each other, care for each other, and love each other, in the light of, and truth of, the infinite love of God for us.

Much of what we do and say at church has to do with trying to reach people who are outside the church, to proclaim the word of God to them and to try to serve their human need. Much of what we do and say has to do with reaching out to people to bring them into the church, into the Christian faith, and into the Christian life. And much of what we do and say has to do with continuing to proclaim the gospel to all of us who have already been converted and are believers, knowing that we always need to be more fully converted, that we always need to be led into deeper faith and greater belief. These are good, right, important, and essential to the Christian faith and life. But they are not what we are doing today. The new commandment of Christ for the church has to do, instead, with the very real, hard, practical, day to day, everyday matters of all of us, you and me, loving each other, here and now, within the church.

Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." There is nowhere to hide. There is no room to wiggle. There are no back doors. And there is no way out. Jesus Christ, Son of

## Love One Another!

God, our Lord and Savior, is the one who gives this to us. This is a new commandment, not a request or a suggestion. It is directed first to the disciples and then, by extension, to all Christians. And it is given in absolutes: “Love one another.” It does not say to love only on Sundays. It does not say to love only when we feel like it. It does not say to love only those whom we want to love, or those who love us. And the only modifier applied to this is that the standard for our love is none other than the total, absolute, mind-boggling, incomprehensible, self-sacrificial love of Jesus Christ on the cross for us! That is *how* we are to love each other, taking on wrongful suffering instead of dishing it out, and that is how *much* we are to love each other, suffering even to the point of death. Why? Because Jesus says so. If we would follow him, and if we would bear his name, this is what he would have us do: “Love one another.” Are we ready for this?

I once read a story about John the Evangelist, author of the gospel and of these letters. It was said that in the congregation of which he was pastor, when he had become an old man, he would say over and over, “Little children, I say to you, love one another. Little children, I say to you, love one another.” As a new generation of leaders arose, they grew tired of this and became exasperated. Finally they asked him, “Why do you keep saying this same thing to us over and over again? Tell us something else. Teach us something different.” But the old man said to them, “Little children, when you love one another, you have done everything.”

John keeps telling us this over and over again in the gospel and in these letters. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in the other gospels, emphasize the universal command to love neighbor. Paul, in his letters, emphasizes the universal command to love neighbor. But John emphasizes the priority of mutual love within the Christian congregation.

One thing this tells us is that the church where John served had a lot of problems, specifically problems with hatred, contempt, backbiting, hatred, hurtful lies, slander, falsehoods, hatred, envy, jealousy, hatred, pride, arrogance, and, most of all, hatred. So, of all the things Jesus had to say, of all the sermons he preached, of all the lessons he taught, of all the encouragement he shared, of all the inspiration he exuded, and of all the commandments he gave, this is the one which the Holy Spirit led John to remember, to proclaim, to apply to the congregation he served, to write down, and so to promulgate in and for the church forever: “Love one another.” With this we have light, life, and joy. Without it, we have darkness, death, and despair.

It is too easy for us to try to take God on our terms. We want to believe only what we want to, nothing more and nothing less; we want to do only what we want to, nothing more and nothing less; we want to obey only such commandments as we wish, ignoring or dismissing the rest; we fully expect God to do whatever we ask, whether or not we do what God says. But that will not work. God sets the terms. God sets the standards. God sets the limits. God gives the commandments. And the new commandment, never given to Israel but issued instead to the disciples of Christ for the church, is this: “Love one another.” This is who we are. This is what we are about. Apart from this we are nothing.

John gives several reasons for this emphasis on mutual love. One is that our sins have been forgiven for Christ’s sake. That is assumed here. John is not preaching forgiveness here because he has done that before. God loves us. God has forgiven each of us of more than we could possibly hold against each other. God has saved us. That has been decided. Therefore, because God has forgiven us, now let us love each other.

Another reason for mutual love is that the true light of the world is shining into the world and the darkness is passing away. Darkness has to do with sin, death, evil, hatred, falsehood, decline, decay, and demise. Those who are attracted by it are blinded by it. John knows that some who seem to be members of the church reveal their love for the darkness by their hatred of the brothers and sisters in the church. It is not possible to live in darkness and light at the same time. It is not possible to love and hate at the same time.

We are privileged to worship God in the beauty of this sanctuary. The purpose of Gothic architecture is to reduce the walls to columns as narrow as possible, to make the windows as large as possible, and to let in as much light as possible so to teach us again that God is light, that the darkness is passing away, that the true light is shining, and that the light is winning. Which side are we on? Do we show it in our love for each other?

Another reason for mutual love is eternal life. Those who do the will of God, those who obey the new commandment to love one another, abide forever. We have been promised eternal life. The relationships of mutual love that we are building here, one person at a time, are part of eternity. What is good and true and faithful in what we share now will last forever. We are not talking about putting up with each other for a day, a week, or a lifetime. We are talking about loving each other forever.

The Easter issue of *Newsweek* had a story on the influence of Jesus Christ on western culture and the world. The most striking impact to me had to do with the way sick people are treated. Citizens of the Roman Empire, fearful of becoming sick and dying themselves, would cast the sick out of their homes and into the street. But Christians took care of the sick and ministered to them, confident that even if they did die, they would receive the gift of eternal life. Maybe that kind of love started in the congregation which John served.

All three of these reasons John gives us—forgiveness, light, and eternal life—point to the importance of faith and obedience and therefore to the importance of individual human choice and responsibility. Now is not the time to drift through life. Now is not the time to be lazy or noncommittal. God has given us wonderful gifts of life, grace, forgiveness, light, and the promise of eternal life. And as a part of this, Christ has given us the new commandment: “Love one another.” We dare not neglect, belittle, or disobey it.

John also gives us a warning: “Do not love the world or the things in the world.” This does not mean not to engage in mission to the world. We shall take that up at another time. I do think that John would say that we have to be a Christian church before we can have a Christian mission. And we have to be a people of the gospel of love before we can share the gospel of love. The warning against loving the world does mean that, just as it is not possible to love the light and the darkness at the same time, it is not possible to love God and the world at the same time. We have to make a choice. For John, “the world” means everything that is opposed to God. To set our hearts and orient our lives on anyone or anything besides God leads to death. Our hearts have ached this week for all the confusion, violence, and death in Kosovo and in Littleton, Colorado. Surely we can see and know that the ways of the world lead to death and not to life. We are not to seek, follow, emulate, or lust after the ways of the world in the life of the church. Instead, we want to emphasize the integrity, unity, purity, and single-minded focus of the devotion and orientation of the human self to God, as made known to us in Jesus Christ.

**Love One Another!**

So, let us here at Grace Covenant walk in the light of this new commandment and love one another. Let us forgive each other. Let us think well of each other. Let us take care of each other. Let us be truthful to and about each other. Let us respect each other. Let us take wrongdoing but not commit it. Let us even, when need be, suffer for one another. Let us pray with and for each other, by name, every day. Let us pray for the church, for its pastor, and for its congregation. Let us love one another. Let us treat each other with kindness and gentleness. Let us guide each other in truth and wisdom. Let us bear each other's weaknesses, and share each other's strengths. Let us rejoice in young and old alike. Let us welcome each other into the full life of this congregation, and let us seek out every member who is not here, for whatever reason, and seek to restore him or her to the life of the church. So, let us love one another. This is not something soft and mushy. This is not sentimental. This love is as hard as the cross and as true as the empty tomb. This is the life-giving word of God and the joyful will of God for this church today. This is the new commandment of Jesus Christ for this congregation in this time and in this place. Little children, let us love one another.

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

# The Promise of Eternal Life!

Psalm 90:1-17; 1 John 2:18-29

May 9, 1999

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life....Jesus said, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life....For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day....And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent’” (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:40; 17:3). These are the words of Jesus Christ, from the Gospel according to John, echoing in the background of John’s first letter. And here is what John has to tell us about Jesus Christ today: “this is what he has promised us, eternal life.”

Here is the promise of the gospel, summarized in a sentence, captured in a phrase, offered in a word. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, crucified, dead, buried, and now resurrected, has promised us eternal life. Jesus Christ, the light of the world, the one in whom all life is, has promised us eternal life. Jesus Christ, the word of God, the one who has and who speaks the words of eternal life, has promised us eternal life. Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life, who is the way, the truth, and the life, has promised us eternal life. This is news good beyond all our imagining, beyond all our hope, beyond all our dreams.

Contrast this with the brutally realistic view of the shortness of this life found in Psalm 90:

Lord,...[y]ou turn man back to the dust,  
and say, “Turn back, O children of men!”...  
You do sweep men away; they are like a dream...  
For we are consumed by your anger...  
For all our days pass away under your wrath,  
our years come to an end like a sigh.

This is not to say that the Psalmist is wrong. And it is certainly not to say that John is wrong. But they are talking about two different things, related and yet distinct. The Psalmist is talking about this life, and this life only, as if it were all there is. John, on the other hand, is talking about something new and different, something starting in this life and yet transcending it, something based in this life and yet going beyond it, something not visible and yet available to faith, something beginning now and yet also being imperishable.

If you are satisfied with this life, and there is certainly much here for which to be grateful, maybe eternal life will not be of much interest to you. If you are satisfied with what you have done and accomplished here, and you do not seek any greater sense of completion, clarification, or correction, maybe eternal life will not be of much interest to you. If the horizons you can see here reach far enough, if the justice you have given and received here is sufficient, if the love you have shared is quite enough, if the human fellowship and community you have achieved and received is satisfactory, maybe eternal life will not be of much interest to you.

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But if your heart is yearning for something more, if you are more than painfully aware of the brevity of life, and not only of the brevity but also of the incompleteness and even fragmentary character of life, if you are burdened by the intractable injustices of the world and the violence and the suffering, if you are convinced that sin, death, and evil cannot be allowed to have the last word about our lives and who we are, if your soul is aching, then maybe eternal life will be of interest to you, of great and abiding interest, of overwhelming and all-consuming interest. And if that is the case, you are in the right place.

John says, "This is what [Jesus Christ] has promised us, eternal life." What does he possibly mean by that? First of all, in John 3:16, John contrasts eternal life with perishing, with passing away, with nothingness and oblivion. Whatever else eternal life means, it means an extension and continuation of life beyond the brevity of life of this world. It means life beyond death, a life without end, a life of permanence instead of perishing, a life not measured and poured out by days and years.

Second, quoting the teachings of Jesus Christ on his relation to God, John contrasts eternal life with judgment, which is to say that he contrasts it with condemnation. Judgment and condemnation lead to punishment and death. Eternal life, then, whatever else it means, has to do with forgiveness, salvation, and redemption.

Third, in the setting of Jesus feeding the five-thousand, John links eternal life with the direct action of Jesus Christ in the final resurrection. That is, eternal life is not only the will and gift of God the Father, but it is also the fulfillment of the work of Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus came. This is what he does. This is a big part of what he is all about. We certainly do not want to miss that.

Fourth, in quoting Christ's high priestly prayer, John tells of Jesus defining eternal life as knowing God and Jesus Christ. Eternal life is not something which exists apart from the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. It is not a substance or a power that can be gotten wrongly, held ignorantly, or in any way manipulated to one's own ends or purposes. It is a gift. It depends upon the giver. Eternal life not only includes, but actually consists of, at its most basic levels, knowing God and Jesus Christ. To know them is to be alive, truly alive, and so to be eternally alive. And this knowledge and living, of course, can and do begin now, here, today, in the midst of this present life. For that life which is beyond death, we have to wait. For life instead of punishment at the final judgment, we have to wait. For the final resurrection at the last day, we will have to wait. But for knowing God and Jesus Christ, we do not have to wait, and we should not wait, because all of the other meanings and realities of eternal life flow out of and depend upon this one.

How is it that we receive and appropriate the promised gift of eternal life? There is one way named, taught, and given in scripture. And that one way is to believe. We are not to believe in the power of belief. That is nothing. We are not even to believe simply in eternal life, as such. Instead we are to believe in God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are also to believe in God's Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Finally, because Jesus has the words of eternal life, we are also to believe the word of God and the teachings of Christ. Eternal life is a gift. We cannot manufacture it, we cannot produce it, we cannot make it up, and we cannot earn it. It is a gift. There is only one way that we receive and appropriate the gift, and that is by believing in God the Father and in his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We do this through the grace of God and the

anointing of the Holy Spirit, working through the reading, preaching, and hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the word of God. This is one reason it is important for us all to come to church each week, to preach and hear the gospel. Some will hear for the first time. The rest of us can hear again, learn, grow, and encourage others by our presence. There is more to worship than what we get out of it.

Now why, in the middle of this letter about loving one another, does John emphasize this promised gift of eternal life? First of all, he does this because it is part and parcel of the proclamation of the gospel. John first mentions eternal life in chapter 1, verse 2, as a part of his initial summary of the gospel and his opening statement of what we have seen in, and received from, Jesus Christ. And he will return to it four more times before the letter is over. It is an integral part of the gospel. The gospel cannot be proclaimed without reference to eternal life.

Second, John emphasizes eternal life at this point precisely because of his underlying interest in the Christian fellowship, love, and communion of the saints at the congregation which he served as pastor and for which we were writing this document. We have already seen that his goal is that they love one another. The emphasis on eternal life reiterates what we have already heard before, that the relationships we build and share and enjoy here are not temporary but are a part of eternity. Earth will pass away, but you and I will continue to know and love each other, because we know and love God and his Christ. Since knowing them is eternal life, it is this promised gift of life which forms the necessary basis for the ongoing community and fellowship of the saints.

Third, John emphasizes eternal life at this point in this communication with the church he served because of particular difficulties in the life of the church that were undermining the faith and spirit of the congregation. Some had been denying that Jesus was the Christ. They apparently believed that he was a great man but not the Son of God. They had tried to deceive the members of the church into their non-Christian faith. And finally they had left the church, so that those left behind were wounded, worrying, and wondering about the validity of their own faith. So John needed to remind the remaining faithful in the church of the basics of the faith, to reassure them of the promises of the gospel, to encourage them in their faith and faithfulness, to strengthen them in their struggle against evil, and to help make them bold to stay the course. He did all this, in part, by reaffirming the promise of eternal life.

How does all of this about eternal life apply to us today, near the end of the twentieth century of the Christian faith? First of all, the promise of the gift of eternal life is still a central part of the gospel itself. We dare not neglect or ignore it. Though some would deny the resurrection and eternal life, we shall not. Though some would contend or pretend that it is of no interest or import, I think most of us realize and appreciate its significance.

Second, the promise of the gift of eternal life calms our fears in the face of great evils, whether these be in our individual lives, our local community, or even the whole world. Realizing that this life is not the whole of life puts this life in its proper perspective. It is important, but not all important. It is the good gift of God, but it is not the whole of the gift. Many of the aggravations we face are a part of this world that is passing away.

Third, and at the same time, the promise of the gift of eternal life does not merely focus our attention away from this life and onto some other life yet to come but instead,

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precisely by its being understood as the current knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ, has to do with the quality of life now, gives depth and meaning to life here and now, and shows us what the reality of this life is.

What do I mean by all of this? Knowing God and Jesus Christ, believing in God and Jesus Christ, and knowing the word of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ, all of which are ways of abiding in Christ, constitute eternal life that is not merely life beyond death but is also, and especially, a quality of life available to begin right now. It is not a life dominated by the present moment, whether good or bad. It is not a life dominated by politics, economics, society, or sexuality. It is not a life marked by ignorance or ideology. It is, instead, a life of faith, hope, love, worship, Bible reading and study, mission, evangelism, and genuine piety.

This kind of life, this kind of Christianity, this kind of faith, does not flit about across the surface of life, noting only the ephemeral appearances of the world. This life is lived at the depths of the interactions of good and evil, truth and falsehood, life and death. This kind of life grasps hold of what is real in the world. This kind of life loves even the unlovable. This kind of life serves human need not out of prudence or enlightened self-interest but out of compassion, realizing that our brothers and sisters here are brothers and sisters for eternity. The reality of eternal life does not at all mean that this life is not real or not important. Quite the opposite, the reality of eternal life teaches us what is truly real and important in this life, here and now. It is only by knowing God and Christ that we are made able truly to know and love neighbor and fellow Christian.

For all these reasons, John assures us yet today that “this is what [Jesus Christ] has promised us, eternal life.” After all, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” And Jesus himself said, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life...For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day...And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever!*

# Children of God!

Exodus 33:12-23; 1 John 3:1-10

May 16, 1999

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” What wonderful good news this is! The God and Father of Jesus Christ loves us and has given us love in him. Because of this love, we are called children of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. And because God thus calls and names us his own children, so in fact we are made his very own children. This, indeed, is the gospel of our Lord.

First, the God and Father of Jesus Christ loves us and has given us love in him. There is a wonderful priority to the love of God for us. Before we love God, before we know God, before we know ourselves, before we were born, indeed, before the world existed, God loved us, each and every one, by name. God’s love for us is prior to our love, prior to our knowledge, prior to our lives, and prior to the existence of the world. This prior love for us on the part of God is the reason for the creation and existence of the world, the basis of the creation and reality of humanity, the foundation of our hearts and minds, and the very source of our knowing and loving God and each other. This prior love is everything, and without it there is nothing.

Now, this prior love of God for us may not always be obvious. Indeed, it may not be obvious at all. Sometimes it may appear that we are hated instead of loved, that we are ignored instead of known, or that we are neglected instead of cared for. So it is that this prior love of God is an article of the Christian faith and not one of general knowledge. It is a part of the good news of Jesus Christ which we proclaim, not something available to simple observation. All in all, despite the hardships and sufferings of life, the prior love of God makes more sense of our lives than does any other alternative, including especially the benign neglect of God, the absence of God, or the non-existence of God. Without the prior love of God for us, there would be no reason for existence. Death is certainly not a sufficient cause or reason for existence. It has only the power to destroy, not the power to build up. Evil is not a sufficient cause or reason for existence. It has only a parasitic existence itself, the shadow to the light, living only by the prior existence of the good. Meaninglessness is not a sufficient cause or reason for existence. It is known only in contrast to the priority of meaning. The list could go on. But despite the hard and obvious realities of death, evil, and meaninglessness, they are not sufficient to account for, or to constitute, ultimate reality. They are not self-explanatory, let alone explanatory of the rest of the world. Only the prior love of God is sufficient to account for life, love, and the reality of the universe.

There is a more specific application of the good news of the prior love of God for us within the Christian faith and life, particularly within our understanding of our relationship with God. To say that God’s love is prior, or that God has loved us first, is to say that God’s love precedes not only our existence and our lives but also, and specifically, our love for God. God loves us before we love God. This has a number of implications, particularly that our love is responsive to God’s and not the other way around. We love because God first loved us. We believe because God first loved us. We

are saved because God first loved us. Our love is responsive. And not only is our love to God responsive, but also God's prior love to us is based solely on the will and purpose of God and not on anything in us. What does this mean? God does not love us because we are good. God does not love us because we are loveable. God does not love us because we love God. God does not love us because we deserve it. Instead, God loves us because God loves us. God's love comes first. It has priority. It does not depend upon anything in us. It depends only upon God. And God is entirely dependable. This priority of God's love is what we mean by the grace of God. God's love and forgiveness are gifts. They do not wait for our goodness or deserving. Instead, they form the only possible foundation for our goodness, the only basis for our responsive love.

So, second, because of this always prior love of God for us, we are called children of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Each of us has been called, and continues to be called, a child of God. Each of us has this calling, this vocation, this meaning, and this purpose to life. Many of us are familiar with applying the word "calling" to the ministry. That is good and appropriate. We certainly understand that God calls men and women to the ministry, that God takes the initiative in that calling, and that we do not want uncalled volunteers in this service. At the same time, it has been a profound and important part of the faith and life of the Protestant Reformation, and of the Presbyterian Church, that each of us has a calling from God for a particular work in life. God calls men and women to each of the various good and honorable works necessary for the sustaining of human life and for the well being of human community. It is not just ministers that God calls. God calls each and every one of us to a particular life's work. God gives us good gifts, talents, skills, and abilities for the fulfilling of these callings. One of the most important things we can do with our lives as individual Christians is to seek to hear, discern, follow, obey, and fulfill God's calling for our lives. One of the most important things we can do for each other as the Christian church is to seek to help each other hear, discern, follow, obey, and fulfill God's calling for each other's lives. Sometimes others can see within us gifts of which we are not aware. Sometimes others can hear the calling to which we have shut our ears. Sometimes we can encourage others and make them brave to follow God's calling wherever it may lead. All of this is good and important. It has to do with God calling each of us to a particular life's work. And what we are dealing with in today's reading is even more basic.

Underneath God's particular call to each of us to a life's work, or before God's particular call to each of us, is God's general call to all of us. The particular call is to different works. The general call is to the Christian faith and life. All of us are called to believe. All of us are called to obey. All of us are called to be Christian. All of us are called into the Christian church. And all of us, to use the warm, wonderful, and familial language of John, are called children of God. This is the result of the prior love of God. We receive a calling, a high and wonderful and honorable and noble calling, indeed, a glorious calling. We are called children of God. This we dare not neglect. This we dare not pass by. This we dare not dishonor. This we dare not belittle. Whether we are called to something high and mighty in our life's work or to something lowly and humble, it makes no difference at this point: we are all called children of God. For this we give God thanks.

You know as well as I that in the course of a day, or of a week, or of a lifetime, there are many other things we are called besides children of God. Some of them I will not

repeat here at church or on the air. I say that not so much to be funny as to acknowledge the hard realities in life not only of stupidity, ignorance, and innocent misunderstanding, but also of hatred, evil, and malicious contempt. They are all around us in the world and sometimes even in the church. They rip and tear at our lives and hearts and souls all the time. They belittle and demean us. They seek and intend to destroy us. But I say to you, as John says to you, that we are called children of God, children of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hear this, accept it, believe it, learn it, take it to heart, and call it to mind anytime anyone calls you anything else. What God calls you carries a lot more weight than what anyone else calls you.

This leads directly to our third point, that because God thus calls and names us his own children, so in fact we are made his very own children. Because God first loved us and gave us love, in order that we should be called children of God, so in fact, truth, and reality we are now children of God. Simply because God says so, so we are. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against this word of God.

This has to do with what the church has known as the effectual calling of God. God's calling effects what it says. God's calling causes things to be. What God says, goes. We see this in creation: "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). The same holds true for redemption. If God says we are his, we are his. If God says we are his children, we are his children. If God says we are saved, we are saved. It is not the case that God's word creates mere possibilities. God's word creates realities. The word of God expresses the will of God, and the will of God prevails over all that opposes it.

Of course, all of this is worked out through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is through the love of God for us in Christ that we receive and learn of the love of God. It is through the life of Christ that we are adopted. It is through the ministry of Christ that we receive the word of God. It is through the death of Christ that our sin is forgiven. It is through the resurrection of Christ that we are made alive. I am reminded of a story I heard years ago about something that happened maybe centuries ago. Two doctors were conferring over a patient who must have been in terrible condition. One said to the other, in the presumed privacy of Latin, "What shall we do with this vile creature?" Much to their surprise, the patient responded, also in Latin, "Dare you call 'vile' one for whom Christ died?" This story has stuck with me for a long time. We may think poorly of people, but it is not for us to say. If Christ has died for them, they are children of God, and they are our brothers and sisters. God's calling and so making them "children" counts for far more than the whole world calling them "vile."

Again, this divine calling and reality might not be so obvious. There are many other different understandings of who we are and of what we are about. There are some who believe that we are nothing more than the sheer random and accidental gathering of billions of molecules, so that life has no origin in divine intentionality and no ultimate goal, direction, meaning, or purpose. There are some who believe that humanity is a late arrival on the scene and is soon to pass away. There are some who believe that we exist only to serve the economy, as producers and consumers, and that this makes up our whole value. There are some who believe that we exist only to serve the state, that the whole meaning of our lives is caught up in our being citizens. There are some who believe that life is not worth living, so that to them killing would not and does not matter. There are some who believe that humanity is evil, so that to them our eradication would be good. This could go

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on and on. To all of us, and to our young people especially, I say, “Do not believe those lies. You are children of God.” And to every one of those lies we can and must stand up, proclaiming again the gospel of Jesus Christ, that God loves us, that God calls us his own children, and that because God loves us and calls us his children, we are his children. This stands over and against every other understanding of humanity and every other idea about who we are. This counts against, works against, and ultimately will destroy every evil ideology that diminishes human life and dignity. This half of a verse tells us what we need to know: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” Hold onto that, no matter what.

Because God loves us, calls us his own children, and makes us his own in Jesus Christ, the reality of our lives together as the Christian church is that we are the family of the people of God. We are related to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ far more closely than we are related to family by blood and genetic heritage. We share something more precious than life itself. There was a reason that John was going over and over this with the congregation he served. And it is time for us here at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church to receive this gift, to believe in it, to cherish it, to act on it, and to live out of it. Whatever else we do, let us respond to God’s always prior love for us not only by loving God in return but also by loving, caring for, respecting, loving, praying for, encouraging, loving, lifting up, rejoicing in, and, most of all, loving one another. This is one of the main purposes of the gospel of Jesus Christ and of the church of Jesus Christ. This is one of the main reasons we gather here. If we cannot do this, we cannot do much else. If we do this, loving one another, it will spill out into the neighborhood and the world in all sorts of ways, serving human need and bringing other people here to worship and serve God.

So, my friends, let us hear, believe, and rejoice in this wonderful good news today! The God and Father of Jesus Christ loves us and has given us love in him. Because of this love, we are called children of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. And because God thus calls and names us his own children, so in fact we are made his very own children. This, indeed, is the gospel of our Lord: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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# Love in Deed and Truth!

Genesis 4:1-16; 1 John 3:11-24

May 23, 1999

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” Here is the starting point, the foundation, the very basis for everything John has to say to us: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and that defines love for us, because it embodies love, it reveals love, it communicates love, it makes love real and effective, and it sets the standard and the model for love for all time.

We need to be clear about the centrality and importance of this event. Jesus did not show his love for us primarily in his birth at Bethlehem, in his teaching or preaching, in his feeding of the crowds, or even in his healings, as important and wonderful as all those are. Jesus loved us most of all and best of all when he loved us to the end, to the end of his life on this earth, a horrible and painful and shameful end on a cross, loving us despite betrayal and desertion, loving us despite wrongful conviction and execution, loving us despite ridicule and contempt, loving us despite hatred, loving us with a love that took on everything the world and the devil could throw at him and yet was never defeated, never corrupted, never broken, and never taken away. When Jesus laid down his very life for us on the cross, when he gave us everything he had, that was the greatest reality and expression of love we have ever known and that has ever been. We need not be deceived by any lesser expressions or pretenders.

The significance of this foundation for everything that John has to say to us, this definition of love by Christ’s self-offering of his life, begins to become clear by contrast and by implication. The contrast of love is with hatred. Christ’s love is life-giving, hatred is life-taking. Love leads to life, hatred leads to murder. Thus it has always been, from Cain and Abel, and thus it shall always be. All of this is terribly real and practical. Hatred is not a game. Hatred is not trivial. Hatred is not something to be ignored or trifled with. Hatred is not something to be dabbled in, or tolerated, or amused by. Hatred leads to murder! Christians need to stay away from it.

I love the way John thinks! Everything is so clear. There are absolute contrasts, which leave nothing in the middle. And we can claim the authority of divinely inspired scripture for thinking this way. For instance, we have already seen that John contrasts good and evil, light and dark, truth and falsehood, righteousness and sinfulness, life and death, love and hatred, permanence and transience, God and the devil, Christ and the antichrist, the Christian community and the world about us, and on and on. There is right and there is wrong, pure and simple, with no in between. There is no question about that for John. There is no wavering. There is no deliberation. There is no compromise. John stands firmly for the gospel he proclaims.

In today’s reading, he emphasizes once again the contrast and sharp division between love and hate. These are not just abstractions. These are not just words. These are not just the rhetorical devices of a preacher. Neither are they just morally neutral and equal but opposite emotions. Love and hate are hard, practical realities with very real, tangible, and long lasting consequences. Love leads to life, while hate leads to death. To

## Love in Deed and Truth!

be more specific, love leads to the giving of life, while hate leads to murder, the taking of life. That is the reality of this contrast. You cannot start on one side and end at the other conclusion. The implications do not cross over or mix and match. The right starting point leads to a good conclusion. The wrong starting point leads to a horrible conclusion. Love and hate are not just emotions. They are not just words. They are two profound, fundamental orientations of the self and of human being, leading inevitably to clear, obvious, and permanently significant conclusions. Love leads to life and the giving of life. Hate leads to murder and death.

On a very real, practical, and immediate level, this contrast can be seen in our everyday lives and in the world around us. We see, hear, or read about hatred and murder almost every day. There are acts of war. There are acts of injustice. There are acts of terrorism. There are acts of revenge. There are acts of crime. There are acts of profound and incomprehensible stupidity. And so it is that the powerful intoxicant of hate leads to murder and death. So it is that anger leads to murder and death. So it is that contempt leads to murder and death. There is too much hate and not enough love in the world. This is a simple and obvious reality in our world, the mere observation of which may be thought to be naive. But it is not naive, and neither is the encouragement to greater love naive. We shall return to that in just a moment. For now, we have only to admit the reality of war, crime, and murder in our world, growing out of hate. One people seek to eradicate another. Others try to put a stop to it. And now we learn again of young people shooting their classmates at school. Love leads to life in this world, and hate leads to murder. We, as the church, need to be willing to speak this simple truth.

And yet, this is not all there is to it. What we see here points to even greater realities in the life beyond. Love not only leads to life and the giving of life here in this world, but is also a sign now of the gift and the reality of eternal life both now and in the world to come. "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren." Then comes the contrast: "He who does not love abides in death." So, conversely to love, hate not only leads to murder and the taking of life here in this world, but is also a sign now of the absence of the gift and the reality of eternal life both now and in the world to come. "Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." Those are two mutually exclusive realities. Life and death, good and evil, love and hate do not belong together. They do not exist together in the same person. The one not only contradicts but positively excludes the other. So the one who hates has forfeited eternal life! Revenge may be sweet, and hatred may be very seductive, but surely we have to ask ourselves whether the perverse enjoyment of indulging in such worldly pleasures is worth spending all eternity in hell.

It is also the case that, given the huge and overwhelming reality of hate and murder in the world, it is understandable and legitimate for us to ask whether there is anything in the world stronger than hate, murder, and death. All life as we know it goes down to death. Everything we love and hold dear is finally taken away from us. What is there that can possibly endure, stand up to, and actually turn and defeat the massed onslaught of hate, murder, and death? This, of course, is where we come back to our initial affirmation, the truth of the gospel, that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us and thereby both gives us life and also initiates and defines the reality of love. Only the love of God in Jesus Christ is sufficient to stand up to and to defeat the ancient powers of hate, murder, and death loose

in the world today. And we who would bear the name Christian bear also the responsibility for embodying, living, announcing, sharing, and spreading the love of Christ, as simple and naive as that may seem to be.

Is it juvenile? Is it infantile? If you think so, you must not have tried the adult reality of Christian love. There is nothing easy about it. Hate is easy. It is easy to hit, to strike out, to kill. But love is hard. To stand and take the onslaughts of the world, its vicious lies, vile falsehoods, harsh blows, sharp spears, and piercing daggers, without hate, without striking back, without cursing, without returning like for like, that is hard. The fact that Jesus Christ did that on the cross gives us some of the strongest evidence we have that he is the Son of God. And it introduces into this world his love that is stronger than hate, his life that is stronger than death. He initiates in this world not merely a good example for us but also a new and powerful reality, the growing and spreading reality of the love of God, the hate-conquering and life-giving love of God, the saving love of God that has come to us, captured us, made us its own, turned us around, redirected our lives, the saving love of God that now intends to perpetuate itself in us.

So, the life-giving love of Christ on the cross, as contrasted with the life-taking, murderous hatred of Cain, illuminates for us the realities both of this world and also of the next. It also has some profound implications for us in terms of Christian faith and life in this world. First, it is God's commandment "that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another." We are to believe in Jesus Christ. We are to believe that he is the Son of God, and that he lived and died and now lives again in order that we might live. We are to trust in him and in none other. This is the undeniable starting point of the Christian faith and life. With Christ we have everything. Without him we have nothing. Believe in Jesus Christ, and so in God his Father. This faith is the work and gift of the Holy Spirit, which we celebrate especially today on Pentecost, and in which we rejoice every day of our lives. The presence of the Spirit in our lives is the evidence and the reality of the presence of Christ in our lives. And the keeping of his commandment to believe and to love is also the evidence and the reality of the presence of Christ in our lives.

Second, there is more to the Christian life than believing. As we said at the beginning, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." So, not only did Jesus Christ lay down his life for us, but also by so doing he defined the reality of love, and he set the standard for the content of the Christian life of love: "we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." By "brethren," John means our fellow Christians. Now, since all of us here in the sanctuary and all of you listening to the radio are still in the land of the living, none of us has yet laid down his or her life for our fellow Christians. Does that mean that we are not Christian? No, not by itself. It most likely means that we have not yet been called upon to lay down our lives.

Think of it this way. If someone sees a child in the street, in the path of an oncoming vehicle, and jumps into the street, throwing the child clear but taking the blow from the vehicle himself or herself, perhaps even dying, that is an act of love and heroism. But simply casting oneself in front of an oncoming vehicle with no good reason would not be an act of love and heroism, but of stupidity at best. The first situation calls for action, the second does not. If we have not yet laid down our lives for our fellow believers, it may be because we have failed to do so at some crucial point, but more likely it is because we

have not yet been called to do so. I believe that God does not test us beyond our capabilities, and most of us have not yet been called upon to shed our blood for Christ, for Christians, or for the Christian faith. This may be because our faith is not yet ready.

And yet, this in and of itself points us in the right direction. Even though we have not yet laid down our lives for each other, John, speaking for Jesus Christ, is teaching us to make ourselves ready to lay down our lives. Again, think about an example. Police officers make themselves ready every day to lay down their lives for you and me. Thank God they do not actually have to lay down their lives very often! But they have to be ready to do that every day, and every moment, in order to do their job. Our own Nancy Thomas has spent the last thirty-one years of her life helping to make all of us in Richmond aware of, and appreciative of, this amazing reality in the lives of those who serve and protect us as our police. And now think about this aspect of their work as a model for the Christian life: just as police officers must be ready every day to lay down their lives on behalf of the citizens whom they protect, so are we as Christians called not only to lay down our lives in actuality but also and especially to be ready every day and every hour to lay down our lives on behalf of our fellow Christians, so that this readiness may lead to the actuality if and when the demands of love call upon us to do so.

Let me share with you another example. It has been widely reported of the killings at the Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, that the killers were seeking out athletes and racial ethnic minorities. What has not been so widely reported in the secular press, but which I have seen just a little about on the Internet, is that at least some of the students were killed for their faith. It has been said that one young girl, a fairly new Christian, was asked by one of the killers whether she believed in God. Looking into the barrel of a gun, knowing full well the consequences of her answer, she said, "Yes, I do." It was the last thing she ever said. In the face of sure and certain death, she refused to betray Jesus Christ. She refused to reject her faith. She chose instead to make a witness, to the killer and to all about her. She laid down her life for the faith and thus for her fellow Christians.

Lest the readiness and willingness to lay down our lives sound too abstract and distant, let alone frightening, John teaches us that there are other very real, practical, day to day ways of working this out in our lives in relation to one another, ways which are directly implied by that readiness. "[I]f anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" It is a sign of, indeed it is part of the reality of, the giving of our lives to give of our goods, our money, our wealth, our possessions. To give from our livelihood is to give of and from our lives, and it is, of course, to give life to others. The offering we ask for and receive every Sunday is not simply to pay the bills, though of course that has to be done. The offering of ourselves through the regular, ongoing, substantial, and even sacrificial giving of our money is a vital and crucial part of the Christian faith and life in and of itself. This is one way, every day, every week, every Sunday morning that we lay down our lives, or at least part of our lives, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, for the love of our fellow Christians. I commend it to you. Our gifts help people here in Richmond and all around the world, in more ways than we can name or number. And the failure to give is, according to John, a sure sign of the absence of the love of God. So we see again that John is not talking about soft, mushy, sentimental love. He knows that talk

is cheap. There is a danger that the great truth and reality of the Christian faith will be reduced to empty words, but John is determined not to let that happen. John is talking about love as hard as the cross and as true as the empty tomb, life-giving love that will stand up to all the life-taking hate and murder in the world.

“For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.... We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren.... Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and truth.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

# Test the Spirits!

Psalm 1:1-6; 1 John 4:1-6

May 30, 1999

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” John here addresses the word of God to the church, both then and now, precisely as the church is situated in the midst of intense spiritual warfare between the powers of good and the powers of evil. This is not easy to understand. It is not easy to talk about. But silence aids the enemy. So it is good for us to hear this word. It is good for us to learn the truth. It is good for us to know what is going on. And it will be good for us to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God.”

Again, the premise of the testing is that there is a spiritual war raging all about us. There is a struggle going on for the heart and soul of humanity. There is a battle taking place for the human mind and strength. And the church is right in the middle of it all. Indeed, the church is the setting for the most intense struggle. The church is the very object of the battle, the prize of the war. For this is a battle between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood, love and hate, righteousness and unrighteousness, true faith and the lack of faith, the church and the world, Christ and antichrist. And the other side wants to do everything it can, including trickery and deceit, lies and falsehood, even false piety and seeming genuineness, to win, take over, discredit, disrupt, tear down, and destroy the church of Jesus Christ. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit.”

Now, before we go too far down this road, it is important to hear the words of victory and reassurance which John shares with us regarding the evil spirits. “Little children, you are of God, and have overcome them; for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” Do you see the larger context within which this places everything? This is not the ultimate battle between the equal but opposite powers of good and evil. There never has been and never will be such an ultimate battle, for the powers of good and evil are opposite but are not equal. The power of good, which is the power of light, life, and truth, resides in God the Creator, Sustainer, Judge, and Redeemer of the universe, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God does not need anything or anyone else besides himself. But the power of evil, which is also the power of darkness, death, and falsehood, is a shadow power, a parasite. It has no positive existence of its own, but can exist only as that which draws its existence from disturbing, disrupting and trying to destroy the good. Without the good, evil is nothing. So, the power of evil is greater than we are, and it is terrifying, but it cannot be compared to God, and evil continues to exist only by the permissive will of God.

While there never has been and never will be an ultimate battle between equal but opposite powers of good and evil, there has been already an ultimate battle between the opposite but finally unequal powers of good and evil. That battle was fought and won on the cross. The massed powers of sin, death, and evil did all they could to defeat Jesus Christ. The only one who had never sinned bore all the sin of the world. The only one who knew no evil became, under the law, a curse, hanging on a tree. The one in whom all life is and from whom all life comes was made to taste death and so died. But despite the weight of the sin of the world, the one who had not yet sinned did not sin then, either. His love

was not broken. He did not hate those who hurt and killed him. Despite becoming a curse for our sake, he did not become evil or resort to evil. He did not curse those about him. Despite succumbing to the power of death, he did not betray the author of life. He did not quit believing in God, and he did not quit obeying God. So while the powers of sin, death, and evil at least initially appeared to win, in reality they won nothing. In fact, they were undone, their powers were broken, and so they were ultimately defeated.

Now, given that the ultimate battle between the opposite but unequal powers of good and evil has been fought and won, what is the nature of the less than ultimate spiritual conflict within which the church finds itself? Given that John reassures us of the greatness of God and the victory of Christ, what is the status and the significance of the struggle about which he warns us? The struggle for the heart, soul, mind, and strength of the church is being waged by the failing and defeated powers of evil, whose desire it is to spoil the victory of the cross, to steal away the faithful, the believing, and the elect, and so to tear down the chosen instrument of the proclamation, the embodiment, the propagation, and the service of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The forces of evil cannot win this final battle in the war they have already lost, but they can cause a lot of pain and damage on their way down. Evil is stubborn and tenacious, and even in defeat it viciously attacks the church, the ministers of the gospel, and the faithful members of the church.

It is the purpose and intent of these evil spirits, these forces of evil, to deny the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sometimes they do this by direct attack, denying the reality of God. Sometimes they do this by subtle insinuation, denying the truth of various parts of the story of Jesus Christ, always saying that they know better than others what such things really mean, despite what they clearly say. Sometimes the attacks come from outside the church and are easily identifiable. But at other times the attacks come from inside the church, which exacerbates the pain and confusion. It is for this reason that John writes, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." And note that John, the minister, writes this to the congregation he serves: "[You] test the spirits to see whether they are of God." This is too important to trust to pastoral expertise. This is a responsibility of the whole church. But how are we the church to do this? How are we to test and discern the spirits?

"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already." Here is the test: those who affirm that Jesus is the Christ and has come in the flesh are of God. Those who believe in the reality and the content of the gospel are of God. Those who believe that God is God, that Jesus is his Christ, sent by and from God to us to save us, and that Christ came to us to be with us as one of us, in the flesh, truly human while simultaneously truly divine, those are of God. These affirmations are not human inventions. The Christian faith is not a human achievement. It is a gift from God, by the Spirit of God, so those who confess the true Christian faith are inspired by the Spirit of God and thus are of God.

Conversely, those who deny that Jesus is God's Christ are not of God. Those who deny that Jesus came to be with us as one of us are not of God. By extension of this principle, those who deny that Jesus is Lord are not of God. Those who deny that Jesus

Christ has been raised from the dead are not of God. Those who deny that the scriptures are the word of God, authoritative for our faith and life, are not of God. Though they speak with great power and persuasion, though they are very spiritual, though they hold many degrees and have great followings, if they do not confess Jesus Christ, they are not of God. And if they are not of God, they are necessarily of some other spirit or spirits, spirits of evil, spirits opposed to God and to his Christ and to his church, indeed the very spirit of antichrist. And of course, such persons can cause great pain, confusion, division, dissension, disruption, and destruction in the church. This can and should always disappoint us, but it should never surprise us. We have been duly warned from the very beginning. This is why John wants us to test the spirits. And having tested the spirits, we are to shun the evil spirits. The purpose of the testing is not to be inclusive of all spirits and representative of all diverse points of view! The purpose of the testing is to be discerning, faithful, and obedient, which means making some hard choices. The Psalmist already knew centuries before Jesus and John about the importance of the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. We are to choose the one and to avoid the other.

Now, given the reality and the danger of false prophets, inspired by evil spirits, what are some of the implications and ramifications of what they do? “They are of the world, therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them. We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” In the several writings we have from John, the word “world” does not so much mean the planet earth as it means the great sinful mass of humanity precisely in its opposition to, and rebellion against, God Almighty. So the world is in opposition to God and in contrast with the church. The false prophets who receive a good hearing in the world are not to be heeded in the church. The true ministers of the gospel within the church should not expect to receive a large hearing in the world. The two are different and distinct, pursuing different goals, inspired by different spirits, serving different purposes.

This has been hard for the church to appreciate or comprehend. For centuries the church patterned itself after the life and government of the Roman Empire. Since the Reformation, there have been striking similarities between Protestant churches and western democracies. And in the twentieth century, American churches have done their very best to pattern their structures and decision making processes after large and successful corporations, and to pattern their ideologies after the politically correct mind set of the society. But it is not at all clear that any of these efforts have helped the church to be the church. It is not at all clear that any of these efforts have helped the church to be more faithful to the gospel, or to proclaim the gospel. They have helped the church become enmeshed in the world, entangled in the world, and almost indistinguishable from the world. And when that happens, we cannot minister to the world.

About sixteen centuries ago, a pastor in North Africa, named Augustine, wrote a book titled *Confessions*, in which he both confessed his sin and confessed his faith. On the very first page he wrote a beautiful, piercing, biblical insight: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” Here is a diagnosis and analysis of the human predicament, as well as a prescription for the cure to our dis-ease and restlessness. God has made us for himself, so nothing else satisfies us. God has made us for himself, and in him alone do our restless hearts find their rest. Until

we learn that, our hearts seek comfort and rest in anything and everything the world has to offer: work, play, friendship, philosophy, power, position, prominence, security, thrills, or whatever. Some of these may even be good, in and of themselves, but they are not God. Finally we learn the hard way that all of the attractions of the world leave us empty, all of the delights of the world betray us, all of the pressures of the world distort us, and all of the horrors of the world overcome us. We were not made by the world. We were not made for the world. But here in the church, instead, here and here alone, in the preaching and hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ, do we find that rest and nourishment for our hearts and souls which God intends us to have. Do not settle for anything less! Do not stop short with the pleasures of the world. Do not be content with the false and worldly prophets. Reach instead for the word of God, the Spirit of truth, and the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you are here today with a restless heart, a hungry soul, an eager mind, and a willing strength, you are in the right place.

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God....Little children, you are of God.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

# God First Loved Us!

Deuteronomy 6:1-9; 1 John 4:7-21

June 6, 1999

“Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God.... We love, because he first loved us.” John’s first words are an earnest plea for our mutual Christian love, but the always prior reason for his plea is God’s first love for us. Love is not automatic, or John would not have to urge us toward it. Neither is love a simple human act or accomplishment, or we could do it on our own. Instead, the love of which John speaks is a wonderful, inviting, engaging gift from God, a power which envelops us and gives us life, new life, shared life, and even eternal life. And all of this life and love is inextricably intertwined, so that without this love we would have nothing, but with this love—God’s prior love for us, and our consequent love for God and for each other—with this love we have everything.

We should start with the always prior reason: “ We love, because he first loved us.” Here is the foundation of the whole gospel. Here is the basis of the entire Christian faith. Indeed, here is the very reason for our existence. God first loved us. Apart from this love we would be nothing, not even space dust lost in the vast emptiness between the galaxies. But with this love, God’s prior love, we have everything. The long silence of the universe has been broken in God’s love for us. The deep though sometimes inchoate yearnings of the human heart have been met in God’s love for us. The dark mysteries of time have been unfolded in God’s love for us. “We love, because he first loved us.” This is good news beyond our calculating or even imagining. Maybe we think it is a commonplace. Maybe we have heard it so often that we do not realize its impact. But why did John say it? Why did John say that God first loved us? He did so partly to teach and reassure the Christian community of what it has always known, and yet, he did so partly because at least some people still do not know God’s love, at least some people still do not believe God’s love, and at least some people still have not been made brave to love God and to love each other. For these reasons, and many more, it continue to be important to affirm again and again that God first loved us.

“We love, because he first loved us.” Here we have a summary of God’s divine initiative in moving toward us. Before God redeemed us, before God called us by name, before God created the world and the universe within which for us to live, before time, first of all, first of all that is or was or ever shall be, God first loved us. You see, God’s love does not depend upon our initiative, or our response, or our love, or our deservingness, or our behavior, or our creation, or even our existence. In fact, God’s love does not even depend upon Jesus Christ, which is to say that God does not love us because of Jesus Christ. Instead, it is the other way around: Jesus Christ depends upon the love of God, which is to say that God sent Jesus into the world because of God’s always prior love for us. Jesus Christ comes to us as the expression, the action, the outflowing of God’s love. So God’s love is first of all, has priority over all, and is the source of all. This is good news to which we can cling, despite all the bad news that the world throws at us. This is good news in which we can believe, despite any evidence to the contrary. This is good news we can live by, even in our own partial and broken ways.

It is on the basis, then, of this always prior love of God for us that God sent Jesus Christ into the world for us. As John writes, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." The point is, it was not the work of Jesus Christ that somehow made God love us, but it was instead the always prior love of God that made possible the work of Jesus Christ. Even Christ's death on the cross did not persuade God to love us; instead, it made visible the extent of God's always prior love for us. That is to say, the atonement was not for God's benefit, but for ours. The crucifixion was not to convince God, but to convince us.

So it is still the case today that we do not have to earn God's love or persuade God to love us. We do not have to win God over to us. Quite the opposite, Christ is trying to win us over to God! God already loves us. Of course we want to respond to God's love in good and gracious and generous and eager and appropriate ways, but that is a different question. We will get to that in just a moment. It is important first of all to hear and to realize this good news, that God first loved us. God takes the initiative. God not only created us as an expression of love, but also continues to reach out to redeem us as an expression of love.

So now, how does this good news affect our faith and lives today? What implications does it have for us? What impact does it have on our lives individually and together? John writes, "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God." Here is the first of those encouragements and exhortations which I mentioned earlier. The first and most direct implication and application of the good news of God's love is that we in the church are to love one another. We who have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, we who have received the good news of forgiveness, we who have been told of, and have come to know, the love of God for us, we who consider ourselves Christians, are now to love each other. There we have it.

It would seem far safer to try to love God, whom we might imagine to be far away in heaven, and who is invisible. Our Old Testament reading included a commandment to love God. It is based on the first of the Ten Commandments. The Great Commandment in the New Testament includes both love of God and love of neighbor. But now we are being called upon to love each other, our fellow Christians, right here in church! Now we are being called upon to love each other.

This mutual love is not something out on the fringes of the Christian faith. This is not an option. This is not something which we are free to take or to leave. John writes, "He who does not love does not know God; for God is love." Note that he does not say that love is God! That would be backwards. It is a source of great confusion. But love is not God. Instead, God is love. If we did not love each other, that alone would be sufficient proof that we did not know God at all, did not know Jesus Christ, did not know anything about the gospel, and were not Christian. So it is worth asking: Do we love each other? Do we know how to love each other? Do we want to love each other? Do we even want to know how? As John Calvin writes of this passage, true knowledge of God regenerates and reconstructs us into new creatures. That is, our rotten old selves are not capable of this high love. Only as we are born anew in Jesus Christ does this become possible.

John keeps coming back to this, pleading with us, urging us on: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." Why does he keep saying this? He does

## God First Loved Us!

so partly because it forms part of the very content of the gospel. He does so partly because such love does not come naturally, and we all need all the encouragement we can get. John keeps emphasizing our love for each other.

Surely the importance of what he said way back then continues to be true for the church today. “No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” We might ask: How do we know, how do we realize, and how do we experience the reality and love of God for us? Again and again the answer comes: through our mutual love for each other! And according to John, there is no other way. On the one hand, a confession of faith is the test of Christianity: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.” But on the other hand, mutual love is also the test of Christianity: “If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” There is the test. If we do not love each other, we cannot possibly love God. To claim otherwise would simply be nonsensical. That should be obvious. And yet, John continues to return to it and to emphasize it: “And this is the commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.”

How can we do this? Surely we are to love, cherish, include, and care for all the members and friends of the church, with special attention to the very young, the very old, the poor, and the sick. Surely we are to visit each other and to pray with and for each other. Surely we are to gather together here and support one another in the community of faith, worship, proclamation, learning, nurture, and fellowship. Surely we are to share with each other by giving of our time, talents, and treasures. This would be for starters. This would be simple, basic Christian faith and life. This would be what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ.

A few weeks ago it was my privilege to hear a talk by Dr. Samuel Moffett, retired professor of missions at Princeton Theological Seminary. I cannot now read this passage without remembering a story he told. One-hundred-ten year ago, his father was one of the first missionaries to Korea. He would walk into a village and say rather loudly, “I am not afraid of your evil spirits.” Immediately a crowd would gather. Again he would say, “I am not afraid of your evil spirits,” and he would have their complete attention, for their whole religion was based on the fear of evil spirits. “I am not afraid of your evil spirits,” he would say, “because I know the Great Spirit, and beside the Great Spirit your evil spirits are nothing. I am not afraid of your evil spirits, because the Great Spirit is a spirit of love.” Then they were eager to hear him tell about the love of God in Jesus Christ. And today, fifteen-million Koreans, one-third of the population, are Christians. For, you see, as John writes, “[P]erfect love cast out fear.” Dr. Moffett said that the Koreans used to give their children ugly names, like Wart-on-the-Nose, in the hope that the evil spirits would not bother such children. But with the advent of love and Christian faith, they were made brave to give beautiful names to their babies. So the love of God changed the families, changed the villages, and changed the nation.

“Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God.... We love, because he first loved us.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

# The Victory of Faith!

Psalm 34:1-22; 1 John 5:1-12

June 13, 1999

“Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God...and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.” This is a remarkable claim, that our faith has overcome the world! “Surely,” we must think, “not our faith!” For how could our faith be sufficient to overcome the world? The victory is not primarily because the faith is ours, but primarily because the content of the faith is that Jesus is the Christ.

And yet, given this content, the victory is primarily that the faith is ours. The victory is that we have been won over from the world to the creator of the world, from the universe to the Lord of the universe. The reality of our faith is evidence that sin has been forgiven, that death has been defeated, and that evil is on the retreat. This testimony we have within ourselves. And therefore, we extend it to others with good confidence. “Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God...and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.”

These words of John echo the words of Jesus Christ recorded in the Gospel according to John: “I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:32b-33). This direct connection establishes even more clearly that the victory of our faith flows out of and depends upon the always prior victory of Jesus Christ. To Christ belongs the victory! Despite his apparent defeat on the cross, indeed, because of what he accomplished on the cross, the victory belongs to him. This quote from the Gospel according to John also emphasizes again that Christ’s victory depends upon his connection with God.

What is the victory of Christ over the world, which victory we share with him through our faith in him? The victory of Christ over the world is a victory of love over hate, of good over evil, of forgiveness over sin, and of life over death. You will remember that he won this through his incarnation, through his life and ministry, and most of all through his death and resurrection. By his incarnation, the saving word of God was spoken into the world and into the terrible silences of our lives. By his life and ministry, he taught us the word and the love of God. By his death and resurrection, he defeated the massed powers of sin, death, and evil, and he won for us the forgiveness of our sins and the promised gift of eternal life. All of these are parts of the victory that Christ has won over the world.

How does the victory of Christ come to be ours? How is it that we share in its benefits? It is not the case that we can, or that we have to, fight again the same battles in order for us to claim the victory. If that were the case, or even a possibility, the victory would be our own and we would not need Jesus Christ. Instead, we receive the benefit of what Christ has already done for us, we appropriate to ourselves the reality of the victory he has already won, simply through faith. We receive the gifts of the grace of God, we appropriate the victory of the Christ of God, simply by faith in God, by belief in the goodness of God, by a lively confidence in the benevolence of God toward us, and by trust in all that God has said and done for us. And, of course, this initial faith which is trust and

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confidence in God leads also to that faith which is commitment to God and loyalty to God. Then we become not only the recipients and beneficiaries of the victory of Christ but also the agents and the means of communicating that victory to others and thus spreading the extent of its influence over the world.

And what is the content of this faith? Briefly put, the content of this faith is that Jesus is the Christ. That is the way that John says it in this letter. Of course, that is somewhat of an abbreviation, and we have to unpack it a little bit. The first question is, Who is Jesus? The Jesus to whom we refer is known also as Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish man who lived on the other side of the world almost 2,000 years ago. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

The second question is, Who is the Christ? The Christ is God's Messiah, God's chosen and anointed one, the one sent by God and from God to carry out God's will for the world. This savior had been expected for centuries before Jesus.

Given both of these, Jesus and Christ, what does it mean to hold them together by believing the affirmation that Jesus is the Christ? On the one hand it means that Jesus, while fully human, is also more than human, in that he is God's chosen one to come and save us. On the other hand, and at the same time, it means that the Christ, while fully divine, is also more than divine, in that he has come to us as one of us, fully human, just as you and I are. This is the faith to which, according to John, the victory belongs.

Part of the significance of this affirmation of faith can be seen in what it rules out. To say that Jesus is the *Christ* is to say as clearly and as strongly as possible that Jesus is not merely the greatest teacher the world has ever known and whose teachings are of great interest. That is not enough. More than a human teacher, Jesus brings us the very word of God. To say that Jesus is the *Christ* is to say as clearly and as strongly as possible that Jesus is not merely the greatest moral example the world has ever known and whose life is of great interest. That is not enough. More than a moral example, Jesus brings us the very commandments of God, fulfills them, and applies their benefit to us.

At the same time, to say the *Jesus* is the Christ rules out all the false claimants and pretenders to the position. The emperor is not the Christ. The nation is not our savior. The economy is not our protector. The military is not our strength. God has sent one Christ, one savior, and his name is Jesus.

What reasons do we have to believe this affirmation that Jesus is the Christ? Why would we want to hold on to this in life and in death? John gives us three reasons, three witnesses, as he says: the Spirit, the water, and the blood. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit of God, the presence and the power of God moving and stirring within us to lead us into faith and to give us confidence in God and in his Christ. Even faith is not a simple human possibility or accomplishment. It, too, is a work of God, through the Spirit working within us. What does John mean by the water and the blood? These refer to the baptism and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The baptism identified Jesus as the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And it was on the cross that the Christ fulfilled and accomplished this work.

These three witnesses together testify to us that Jesus is the Christ. And, if we believe them, we have their testimony within us, in our hearts and lives. The word of God is not something which appeals to a higher authority to win our belief. We do not believe it simply because it is ancient or anything else like that. The word of God is the authority,

and it carries its own authority. Either we receive it and know it as authoritative or we do not. Either the Spirit moves us to faith or it does not. And if and when it does, we have God's testimony within us, and "this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." Eternal life is not only life everlasting, forever beyond the power of death. Eternal life is knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. This knowledge and life, this knowing and this living, can and do begin here and now. So if you know God and his Christ, you know that you have eternal life, and you know that you are a child of God, and in this faith is the victory that overcomes the world!

Now, lest all of this sound too abstract, too esoteric, or maybe too religious in a way that seems disconnected from the world, I want to invite you to think together with me first about the world within which this letter was written and then second about the world in which we live. What can it possibly mean that Christ won a victory then or that we have a victory today through faith in him?

The world in which Jesus Christ lived, died, and was raised to life again, the world in which John lived and wrote, and the world of the early church for the first several centuries, was the world of the Roman Empire. Think about this context for the claim of the victory of the Christian faith. It was a part of the official faith of the Roman Empire that the Empire was eternal, and the Romans held to this faith despite massive unemployment, inflation, economic disparity, social unrest, and civil wars. It was a part of the official faith of the Roman Empire that the empire was universal, despite the obvious challenge to that provided by the threatening wars at the boundaries of the Empire. It was a part of the official faith of the Roman Empire that the City of Rome was the center of the universe, which shows how deceived they were by both pride and power. And it was even part of the official faith of the Roman Empire that the Emperor was divine, though every one of them was clearly fallible, flawed, and mortal. This was the world into which God sent Jesus Christ. The official faith of the Roman Empire was inadequate, wrong, failing, and desperate, even in the good times. It could not account for the realities of life and of the world. This is part of the world over which the Christian faith became victorious.

Though the Empire began to become Christian in the 300s, it did not realize its own neediness until A.D. 410, when the Visigoths from north Germany made their way to the center of the Empire and captured the capital City of Rome. Then the civil religion and faith of Rome was destroyed. Suddenly it became painfully clear that the Roman Empire was neither eternal nor universal. Suddenly it became clear that Rome was not the center of all things and that the poor emperor was not divine.

Into this vacuum stepped the Christian faith. The Christian faith provided the structure to hold the world together. It made better sense out of life and reality than did its competitors. The Christian faith was victorious over the world and over the failing, despairing official faith of the Roman Empire. The Christian faith affirmed and taught that God is eternal and that God created the world and everything in it, which is to say that all people and nations have both a beginning and end in time. The Christian faith taught that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, which is to say that among humans he alone is divine, not the emperors. He alone is to be worshiped, trusted, and obeyed in life and in death. The Christian faith taught that Jesus Christ is the Savior. He alone provides meaning, purpose, direction, sense, security, and ultimate reality. These are to be found on earth only in the

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eternal kingdom of God, not in any necessarily passing, failing, fading empire. It is not only the case that Jesus Christ conquered sin, death, and evil. It is also the case that the Christian faith was superior to, and victorious over, the false faith of the world.

And this is not simply a matter of history. The same applies to us today. It is an easy working assumption that the orders of this world and the nations of this world are eternal, but they are not. It is an easy working assumption of the world that we should tolerate all things, but behind this is hidden the insidious assumption that there is no truth, so that no claims can be ruled out. It is an easy assumption that all opinions are equally valid, though it should be clear to us that some are false, stupid, and even destructive. It is an easy assumption that meaning in life derives from social and economic success, but these are false and harsh masters.

Can we win the victory yet today? It has been said that the Christian faith out thought and out loved the Roman Empire. Can we do that again? Can we both out think and out love the world today? The Christian faith offers an alternative to the faith of the world, an alternative that is superior. We need to teach and proclaim again that God is God, and we are not. We need to teach and proclaim again that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and is Lord of the universe and of all people. We need to teach and to proclaim again that all meaning, purpose, direction, and salvation come from God and from God alone, in and through Jesus Christ. And as we do all of this again, we will realize and remember that the Christian faith is a matter of vital, passionate truth, not mere passing opinion. And “this is the victory that overcomes the world.”

What does this God require of us? What does this Christ require of us? What does this faith require of us? Very simply, we who believe in Jesus as the Christ are called upon to love and obey God and to love each other. As John writes, “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.” This is what John has been teaching us repeatedly throughout this letter, and this is again the direct implication of the foundational victory which he shares with us today. So, little children, let us love one another. “Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God...and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

## Pray Boldly!

Psalms 103:1-22; 1 John 5:13-21

June 20, 1999

“We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” You have to give this much to John: the man had the courage of his convictions! This is not some half-hearted, mealy-mouthed, die-the-death-of-a-thousand-qualifications, wimpy, little, barely-identifiable, hardly-worth-having, cowardly Christian faith. No one would bother writing about that. Instead, this is a full, plain, simple, straightforward, robust, mature, energetic, Spirit-filled, no-holds-barred, brave-hearted Christian faith ready to take on the whole world, which he did! And we are still reading his words as divine scripture today. We are still worshipping the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom he helped make known to us. And we are still eager to grow into the fullness of the faith he had.

“We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” John harbors no illusions here about the Christian life being easy or about the life of the church being some kind of charmed existence. It is clear that the whole world is against us! More of humanity is Christian now than when John wrote this, but that does not change the reality about which he was writing. The forces of evil would love to destroy the church, to obliterate it, to wipe it off the face of the earth, to make it seem as if it had never been. And if they cannot do that all at once, they are perfectly content to do it one soul at a time. We do not have the strength to stand against this, but God does. And, thank God, we belong to God.

“We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” Can you imagine anyone talking like that today? Think of the political incorrectness. Think of the cultural elitism. Think of the unabashed claims to absolute truth and knowledge. Think of the easy division between good and evil. Think of the refusal to bow before the thrones of historical conditioning and relativism. Can you imagine anyone talking like that today? And yet, I urge us all, hear, listen to, relish in, believe in, and live by these brave words of truth and faith.

“We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” It is not only the case that God has claimed us as his very own and saved us from the forces of evil, but it is also the case that God has come to us as one of us and made himself known in his Son Jesus Christ. We are not pawns in a cosmic battle of good and evil. We are the goal, we are the prize, we are the object of the struggle. We are the ones for whom Christ died. We are the ones called and drawn into relationship with the

living God. So, we are the ones to whom God has deigned to speak and from whom God will have an answer. We are the ones to whom Christ gives understanding and knowledge, and this true knowing of God through his Christ is eternal life. This is the goal for us. The glory of God will be made manifest not in perfect, solitary existence, but in the holy fellowship of the communion of the saints gathered around the throne of the Lamb.

“I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.” John acknowledges that we believe, and yet he wants God to help our unbelief. John realizes that we have been given the gift of eternal life, and he wants us to realize it and to appropriate it more and more. John addresses this to the very church of Jesus Christ, so that the current members of the church may continue to grow in the Christian faith. Life is not static. Faith is not a commodity which we can have and hold. What John envisions here is a life of progress in the Christian faith, of growth in knowledge and understanding, and for that reason we see the importance of learning from the word of God, read and preached, week in and week out.

“And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.” This is not everything that John has to say about prayer. But this is the first thing that he has to say about prayer in today’s reading. We believe in God. We know God. We have confidence in God. And so we are made bold to ask anything according to his will. We are made bold to pray, to speak, to address the Almighty, not only in praise and adoration, but also in prayer and petition, not only in confession and thanksgiving, but also in requests, supplications, and intercessions. John urges us to pray boldly in the confidence that God hears and acts.

Yes, we are to pray according to the will of God. At first, that may seem to sever a limit. But in our heart of hearts, we know it is for the good. Often we desire things for our immediate concerns and pleasures that may not work for our ultimate good. We do this out of ignorance, finitude, and self-centeredness. God, on the other hand, is subject to none of these limitations. And as we have come to know God in and through his son Jesus Christ, we have come to know that the will of God is for good, salvation, faith, courage, honesty, dignity, and love. So it is good that our prayers be brought into accord with this will of God.

The next thing that John says about prayer is this: “If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal. We know that any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.” We must admit that this includes the kind of paradoxical overstatement which we have heard before in John, when he talks about Christians not sinning. We know better. The point here is that God has an answer for that. God has a cure for that. God is not undone or defeated by sin and evil. In fact, God will keep his own in Jesus Christ, and there the evil one has no power over them.

But just before that powerful reassurance, in the one example that John gives of prayer in accord with the will of God, he tells us to pray for one another. Can you imagine that? He urges us to pray boldly, not for ourselves, but for each other. What would church be like then? He actually writes about praying for sinners, but that is us. We live and

struggle in the midst of the contradiction that on the one hand Christ has defeated the power of sin but on the other hand sin continues to be a nagging problem even in the life of the redeemed. So, John urges us to pray boldly for each other, in full confidence of the will of God and with full assurance of the goodness of God.

Think about what John is saying. God Almighty, the Creator, Sustainer, Judge, and Redeemer of the universe is available to us, to you and me, in and through prayer. God is not far removed from us but is close to us. John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, writes that the chief trial of faith is calling on God. That is to say, if you do not believe that God helps us, you do not believe in much of anything at all. And if you do believe that God helps us, such faith issues in prayer for help, deep, earnest, heart-wrenching prayers for help.

This also says, strangely enough, that God somehow wills for us to be involved in helping each other through prayer. God does not need our help to help us. God does not need us to inform him of just who it is that needs help, or what the nature of his or her need is. So, just how or why this works, we do not know. But it is the clear implication of John's exhortation for us to pray for each other that God desires and wills for us so to help each other.

This means that God wills that our prayer is a way of opening the floodgates for the outpouring of God's grace upon us, upon each other, upon our fellow Christians, upon the congregation, and upon the church of Jesus Christ. Do we need greater faith? Ask for it from God. Do we need greater love? Ask for it from God. Do we need greater knowledge and wisdom? Ask for it from God. Do we need greater hope? Ask for it from God.

So it is that prayer for each other is the starting point and foundation for all ministry to others. Preaching the gospel starts in prayer. Feeding the hungry starts in prayer. Housing the homeless starts in prayer. Clothing the naked starts in prayer. Healing the sick starts in prayer. Visiting those in prison starts in prayer. Comforting the distraught starts in prayer. Building up the church of Jesus Christ starts in prayer. Reaching out to the unchurched starts in prayer. Everything that we do as Christians and as the Christian church, to the extent that we do it in accord with the will of God, starts in prayer.

When I began this series of sermons on 1 John, I told a story of John as an old man. It is said that he said, over and over, "Little children, love one another. Little children, love one another." The young ministers grew tired of this and were exasperated. They asked him why he would not teach something else for a while, something new and different, something fresh and relevant, something creative and applicable to the life of the church. "Because," John said, "when you have loved one another, you have done everything." From what we see and read in this letter, the story is plausible. Over and over again, John urges us toward mutual Christian love.

It is hard to preach a series from this short book without becoming equally repetitious. And yet, this exhortation to mutual Christian love is why I chose this book from among the sixty-six books which make up the Bible. I have a deep yearning in my heart that we love one another. And maybe now, at the end of the book, we have found a beginning point for loving one another. John urges us to pray boldly for one another, sinners that we are. If we pray boldly for one another, surely the fountains of God's grace will pour out upon us, and just as surely, we will love one another.

## Pray Boldly!

Some years ago it was my privilege to take my wife and our daughter to see Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. It depicts well not only the misery of human life, for which the title prepares us, but also the majesty of human life, which comes to us as a wonderful surprise. The misery of human life has to do with people caught and trapped in gross injustice, pettiness, crudeness, mean spiritedness, tragedy, betrayal, senselessness, crushing poverty, cruelty, disease, death, and finally, the inability and refusal to accept love, forgiveness, and grace. But the majesty of human life lies in the completely surprising reality that some of the people, some of the time, are lifted above the misery, and this has to do with courage, honesty, love, faithfulness, strength, dedication, loyalty, dignity, gentleness, and most of all with the surprising, inexplicable, and uncontrollable workings of the grace of God in and through human lives. This all starts when a Christian gives an incomprehensible and uninvited gift of freedom to a man who had robbed him, and this one act claims his life for God forever. It bears fruit across the decades, in all relationships, confounding human misery. We see there, as clearly as anywhere, the stark contrast between the miserable characters who look out for themselves in shortsighted and failing ways, and the majestic characters who pray for others, who pray for God's grace, mercy, and protection for others.

I submit to you that it is the purpose of the gospel, the purpose of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the purpose of the church of Jesus Christ, to cajole, to invite, to lift, and to carry us out of the misery of the gracelessness of human life and into majesty of the gracefulness and graciousness of human life. God is calling us out of our failing self-centeredness and into relationship of love with God and so into a relationship of mutual love and caring with each other. We are not there yet. If we were, John would not have had to have written this letter for us. But that is where we are heading. And we start with the grace of prayer.

"We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

# Abide in Christ!

Leviticus 19:17-18; 2 John 1-13

June 27, 1999

When terror strikes your soul, when disease assaults your body, when death claims a loved one, or when anarchy threatens to reign in your heart, in the streets of the city, or in the halls of government, where do you stand? Where do you plant your feet? What do you count on? What do you rely on?

When families dissolve or fly apart, when the economy goes bad or jobs are taken away, when your fondest dreams are lost forever, or when nothing makes sense anymore, what do you fall back on? What is your anchor? What is your foundation? What is the one thing to which you cling for dear life when nothing else is left?

When the sun is shining and the living is easy, life is good. Hard questions do not have to be asked, let alone answered. But when the night comes and the living is hard, life itself can become difficult. Unwelcome questions for which we are not prepared impose themselves anyway. The superficial and the superfluous fall away. The false and the pretentious are swept away. The wind first howls and then cuts through us. When everything we have is taken away, when everything we are is threatened, what do we have left? Who are we, what are we, and where are we then?

Let me suggest that we would do well to try to answer these questions before we have to. We would do well to take a trial run into the night. We would do well to find the firm foundation and to anchor ourselves firmly to it now, in advance, before the storm, while the light is still shining. Then we will know where we stand and why we stand there. Then we will know who we are and what we are about. Then we will be as ready as we can be for the inevitable onslaught.

I submit to you today that the Second Letter of John names the reality which we seek, proclaims the good news we need to hear, and offers to us the gospel of Jesus Christ upon which alone human life can rightly be based. This is what I intend to share with you in this sermon.

John tells us of this wonderful reality which we all need in two distinct, opposite, and yet intimately related ways. The first represents the divine perspective and initiative. The second represents the human perspective and responsibility. We will do well to follow this same order and take up first things first.

John begins this letter with a wonderful profession of his love for the church to which he is writing and for its members, a love which he says is shared by all who know the truth. And the reason for this love, the basis of this love, the very foundation for its possibility and reality, is “the truth which abides in us and will be with us for ever.”

By now we should realize that “the truth” of which John speaks is not some simple saying, not a scientific fact, and not a mathematical formula. “[T]he truth” of which he is speaking here is a person, the person of Jesus Christ. This fits exactly with the way the same word is used in the Gospel according to John, where it is written: “[T]he Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), and where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). So when John writes here of “the truth,” it is a way he has of speaking of Jesus

Christ. And when he writes, “the truth...abides in us and will be with us for ever,” he is proclaiming the wonderful gospel that God has come to us in Jesus Christ to be with us and to stay with us now and forever.

To appreciate this, perhaps we should return to our initial questions. When terror strikes your soul, when disease assaults your body, when death claims a loved one, or when anarchy threatens to reign in your heart, in the streets of the city, or in the halls of government, where do you stand? Where do you plant your feet? What do you count on? What do you rely on? What John tells us is that when every other floor drops out from underneath us, Jesus Christ is still there with us, to sustain us and to uphold us. When every other person we trust has fallen away, Jesus Christ is still there, with us and for us, and he can be counted upon. His faithfulness to us and his presence with us count against every assault made upon us. “[T]he truth...abides in us and will be with us for ever.”

When families dissolve or fly apart, when the economy goes bad or jobs are taken away, when your fondest dreams are lost forever, or when nothing makes sense anymore, what do you fall back on? What is your anchor? What is your foundation? What is the one thing to which you cling for dear life when nothing else is left? What John tells us is that even if everything else in our lives falls apart, Jesus Christ will not fall away from us. Sometimes, he will help us put the broken pieces back together. Other times, he will help us live through it. But he will not fall away. He will not abandon or forsake us. “[T]he truth...abides in us and will be with us for ever.”

When the night comes, unwelcome questions for which we are not prepared impose themselves. The superficial and the superfluous fall away. The false and the pretentious are swept away. The wind howls and cuts through us. When everything we have is taken away, when everything we are is threatened, what do we have left? Who are we, what are we, and where are we then? What John tells us is that we are the ones with whom Christ abides, now and for ever, and that counts against every challenge to our existence and to our identity. We are the ones for whom Christ came and with whom Christ is, and this, more than anything else, is who we are and what we are about. “[T]he truth...abides in us and will be with us for ever.” This is the wonderful reality which you and I need, and which you and I have, as John describes it from the perspective of the divine initiative in coming to us and the divine reality of being with us.

John also gives us a second perspective on this reality, the perspective of human responsibility. This has to do with our response to the gospel, with how we receive and appropriate it. This second perspective is secondary, while the first remains primary. And yet, what John tells us to do here is also of vital importance. John says, “he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son.” That sounds simple enough. What does it mean?

The word, “doctrine,” which John uses here, means “the doctrine of Christ.” It has to do with the reality of the gospel. It has to do with the basic content and teachings of the Christian faith and gospel. And note that the word “abide” is used again. Just as Jesus Christ, who is “the truth,” “abides in us and will be with us for ever,” so are we, in order to appropriate this wonderful gospel, in order to claim Jesus Christ as our own, in order to realize the benefits of this good news, and in order to be able to cling to it through the darkness of the night, so are we called upon to “abide in the doctrine of Christ” and thereby to have “both the Father and the Son.” Again, this is in direct continuity with the

Gospel according to John, where Jesus said, “If you continue [the same Greek word translated here as “abide”] in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31b-32).

To “abide in the doctrine of Christ” means to stay firmly planted in the truth and faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The only alternative is not to “abide in the doctrine of Christ,” and John says that any one who moves beyond the Christian faith in this way “does not have God.” We do not want to do that! We do not want to forfeit God! We do not want to abandon Christ! We do not want to forsake the Christian faith! So, we need to “abide in the doctrine of Christ.”

How can we go about that? First of all, we are to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This is the appropriate response to the gospel. This is what the Bible teaches us to do. This is what the Christian faith tells us to do. This is what the Christian church urges us to do. This is the profession of faith which forms the basis of membership in the Presbyterian Church. We are to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. “[H]e who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son.”

Second, on the basis of this initial profession of faith, we are to seek an understanding of the Christian faith and teachings. They cannot be understood apart from faith, so faith comes first. But for faith to be exercised and grow, it needs to seek understanding. And such understanding of the Christian faith and teachings obviously depends upon knowing the Christian faith and teachings. So, it is incumbent upon us to learn basic Christian doctrine. And having learned such basic Christian doctrine, it is incumbent upon us to stick with basic Christian doctrine, and to abide in basic Christian doctrine, for John says that to move beyond it, to leave it behind, to use it as a springboard to reach some esoteric and alien faith or philosophy, is actually to forfeit God and his Christ! “[H]e who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son.”

It is the very God-given purpose of the preaching of the gospel both to bring us to faith and to instruct us in this basic Christian doctrine, by proclaiming the word of God from the Bible and by reflecting upon it. I urge our attention to it. In addition to the preaching of the gospel, I urge our commitment to daily Bible reading and prayer as a way of learning and practicing the Christian faith. And I encourage our regular participation in the whole range of classes the church offers: Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, women’s Bible study circles, the Men’s Prayer Breakfast, and on and on. “[H]e who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son.”

Again, let us return to our initial questions. When terror strikes your soul, when disease assaults your body, when death claims a loved one, or when anarchy threatens to reign in your heart, in the streets of the city, or in the halls of government, where do you stand? Where do you plant your feet? What do you count on? What do you rely on? It is good to know that Christ abides in us. And at the same time, it is our responsibility and privilege to “abide in the doctrine of Christ” and so to take our stand. These are the times, when faith is tried and tested, that we are called upon not to abandon the faith but to stand firm on the gospel and the promises of Jesus Christ. The attacks may or may not be repelled, but they do not have to be allowed to succeed.

When families dissolve or fly apart, when the economy goes bad or jobs are taken away, when your fondest dreams are lost forever, or when nothing makes sense anymore, what do you fall back on? What is your anchor? What is your foundation? What is the one

## Abide in Christ!

thing to which you cling for dear life when nothing else is left? It is good to know that Christ abides in us. And at the same time, it is our responsibility and privilege to “abide in the doctrine of Christ” and so to cling to Christ for all we are worth, despite whatever tries to tear us away from him. To Christ belongs the victory!

When the night comes, unwelcome questions for which we are not prepared impose themselves. The superficial and the superfluous fall away. The false and the pretentious are swept away. The wind howls and cuts through us. When everything we have is taken away, when everything we are is threatened, what do we have left? Who are we, what are we, and where are we then? It is good to know that Christ abides in us. And at the same time, it is our responsibility and privilege to “abide in the doctrine of Christ” and so reaffirm to ourselves and declare to all the world who we are by knowing and saying whose we are. “It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Psalm 100:3b,c). Nothing can take that away from us!

John begins this letter with a wonderful profession of his love for the church to which he is writing and for its members. I know just what he is talking about. And he concludes this letter with a similar affirmation: “Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.” I concur with him in that, too. In between these, John names the reality which we seek in our lives, proclaims the good news we need to hear especially in the hard times, and offers to us the gospel of Jesus Christ upon which alone human life can rightly be based. And John tells us of this wonderful reality from two perspectives, the divine initiative and the human responsibility: “[T]he truth...abides in us and will be with us for ever.... [H]e who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

# Follow the Truth!

Psalm 119:153-160; 3 John 1-15

July 4, 1999

Whom shall we follow? Whom shall we not only admire or even emulate but actually obey? To whom shall we commit ourselves heart and soul, mind and strength, in life and in death?

The question may seem quaint or archaic. Some of us would bristle at the notion of obeying anyone. But let me suggest that not one of us exists in absolute isolation from others. All of us relate to, and to some extent are dependent upon, each other. And none of us follows paths completely unknown. Instead, for the most part, we go where others have gone before us. And that, of course, brings us back to our initial question.

Whom shall we follow? Whom shall we not only admire or even emulate but actually obey? To whom shall we commit ourselves heart and soul, mind and strength, in life and in death?

I trust we can set aside fairly quickly the myth of self-sufficiency. That is simply not the way human beings operate. If nothing else, we eat food others have prepared, we wear clothes others have made, we drink from wells others have dug, we inhabit buildings others have built, we drive cars others have manufactured, we sing songs others have written, we think with concepts articulated through the centuries, and we speak with sounds originated by others before the dawn of written history. We follow those who have gone before us. But which ones? Whom shall we follow?

Another frequently encouraged option is to follow one's heart. That is normally set over and against thinking too deeply about anything. In some situations it sounds good, to enjoy and perhaps be carried away by emotion. But there we begin to see how this works. The heart follows the perceived good. That is, the heart urges us toward what we perceive to be good for ourselves, but one problem with that is that we do not always know what is good. Sometimes our perceptions are skewed or twisted, based on incomplete data or misinformation, or tainted with self-interest. Sometimes the view of our own good is too narrow to take account of the greater good. I suspect that we have all be deceived by the heart at least enough to be wary of it. But if we cannot follow the heart, whom shall we follow?

Another popular candidate is for us to follow our conscience. Particularly in an age of flagrantly decaying morals this becomes attractive. And yet, even that observation begins to point us toward its limitations. The conscience is only as good as what the individual has been taught and has learned and absorbed from family, community, and the world. I see no evidence of some preset moral compass whose presence we can assume or upon which we can rely apart from training and instruction. So, relying upon the conscience is good advice only and precisely to the extent that the conscience is well formed, indeed, nearly perfect. If we cannot simply follow the conscience, whom shall we follow?

Another powerful suggestion is for us to do what the country says for us to do. On this day, especially, we give thanks for all that the country has done for us, all that it means for us, and that all it shall continue to be for us. We remember those who have

given their lives to make this possible, and we recognize with great joy and wonder that we are living in the midst of what must be the noblest experiment yet of the human spirit, the accomplishment and maintenance of freedom and democracy. And it is those of us who love this country the most who realize that democracy and independence move forward and improve only by the free exchange of ideas, which always means that any particular decision or policy can be criticized. The best citizens do not follow blindly, but critically. And if we cannot simply follow the country, whom shall we follow?

As the stock markets go up and up and up, the unabashed pursuit of wealth becomes more and more enticing and, in at least some instances, more and more rewarding. Can we appropriately structure human life simply around the pursuit of wealth? There is no doubt that such an endeavor can be a very powerful organizing force and focus. But several questions emerge. To what end and for what purpose shall wealth be pursued? Are there great aims and ambitions in life to which that wealth can be applied, or does it become an end in itself? What price is one willing to pay for that pursuit, and why? And what is left when the markets come down? If life cannot be lived, or fulfilled, simply by the pursuit of wealth, whom shall we follow?

Closer to home, we are encouraged to follow the family. Again, in general it is a good thing to support, uphold, and even to follow the family. But many today do not live in families, and many families are visibly broken, and many others which may not appear broken on the outside very well be unworkable on the inside. So that may not be good or possible, either. The failure of these various suggestions brings us back again to our initial question.

Whom shall we follow? Whom shall we not only admire or even emulate but actually obey? To whom shall we commit ourselves heart and soul, mind and strength, in life and in death?

John commends to us, in this his third letter and in answer to this very question, “the truth,” by which he means, of course, Jesus Christ. As Jesus says in the Gospel according to John, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6). This is the one whom we are to follow. This truth comes from God, who made us and calls us his own. The Gospel first presents Jesus, in similar language, by saying, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). This truth, in fact, is not only from God, but is also God with us. Again, the Gospel says, “[T]he Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14a). This truth is of such a nature that it calls for recognition and elicits appreciation from us, that we would see and know that it is the truth. John continues, “[W]e have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14b). And it is on this basis that this truth, Jesus Christ himself, calls for our commitment, heart and soul, mind and strength, in life and in death.

Jesus Christ calls us both to believe and to obey him. Jesus Christ calls us both to worship and to serve him. Jesus Christ calls us both to rejoice in the gospel and also to follow him. It is not only the case that we are to believe, worship, and rejoice. Those are important, but they are not all that there is. We are also to obey him, to serve him, and, yes, to follow him. And John has made it clear throughout these letters and the gospel that

following Jesus Christ means obeying his commandments, and his commandment is this, that we love one another.

Today is a communion Sunday. And even as we talk about “the truth” which is Jesus Christ calling out to us and bidding us to follow him, we see before us on this table, in the bread and the wine, powerful symbols of the extent of the reality of the sacrifice which Jesus Christ has already made for us, on our behalf, in order to reclaim us as his own. The broken bread and the poured wine call to our remembrance his pierced body and spilled blood on the cross, which he did not deserve. We dare not belittle his sacrifice! We dare not take lightly his death! We dare not walk away from this offering of himself to us on this very table! I plead with us all: follow the truth! Eat the bread! Drink the cup! Live the life! Walk the talk! And let us love one another!

We can meet the truth and learn the word of God by reading and studying the word of God each day and by attending diligently to the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word of God here each Sunday morning. As Jesus says, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31b-32). And we can share that word with each other, here in the church.

Beyond here, we are involved in mission to the city, the country, and the world. John writes of early missionaries who were sent out from the church and who labored among unbelievers, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ and seeking to convert them to the Christian faith. Of these John write, “So we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers in the truth.” In addition to loving one another within the church, it is also the responsibility and high privilege of the church to follow Jesus Christ by sharing and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ beyond these walls. Some will go as full time missionaries and evangelists. Mr. Steed has done some of this already. Maybe some of our young people will be able to join him in that. For others of us, it is our privilege to be able to give and to give generously to the church in order to support missionaries and evangelists and in so doing to share in their work. And all of us can do the work of evangelists in bringing people here to hear the good news, so that hearing it people might believe, obey, and follow Jesus Christ.

Recently, I had the wonderful opportunity to hear Dr. Samuel Moffett, retired professor of missions at Princeton Theological Seminary, speak on early missions in Korea. It was a little over 100 years ago that his father was one of the first missionaries there. At one village which he tried to enter, the Koreans came out and threw stones at him. Again and again, over some period of time, he tried to come into that same village, always with the same response, that the people came out and threw stones at him. Finally, after the sixth or seventh time he tried to come in, they asked him why he wanted so badly to come there and why he persisted. Then he was able to tell them about the wonderful, sacrificial love of Jesus Christ for them.

Many were converted and became Christians. Some were trained and called as pastors. Eventually the first presbytery in Korea was organized there, with seven new Korean pastors. The seven chose one to be sent out as a missionary himself. He was one who had thrown stones at Dr. Moffett’s father, and it turns out that he was sent to an island of Korea where he had stones thrown at him! But what I want to emphasize today is the reason *why* this first Korean presbytery sent one of its only seven pastors out as a missionary.

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Their only experience of Christianity and the Christian church up to that point had been, of course, through the missionaries. And so their reasoning was, “Real churches have missionaries!” That is powerful! “Real churches have missionaries!” Not content to be a second rate church, they made a commitment from the very beginning to be a real church, to have missionaries of their own. And their early commitment has become an enduring commitment that continues to bear fruit today in rapidly growing churches and mission work around the world.

“Real churches have missionaries!” Real churches also support missionaries and by such support become fellow workers in the truth. I urge us all to continue to give and to give generously to support the mission work of the church. This is a way that we are and can be the real church. This is a way that we are and can be fellow workers in the truth. And we can also continue to bring people here to hear the gospel, to learn the truth, to follow the truth, to meet Jesus Christ, to obey Jesus Christ, to love and be loved, and to become part of the real church.

Whom shall we follow? Whom shall we not only admire or even emulate but actually obey? To whom shall we commit ourselves heart and soul, mind and strength, in life and in death? John writes, and I add my voice to his, “No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

# Contend for the Faith!

Ezekiel 34:1-10, Jude 1-25 (ESV)

February 12, 2006

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” “Contend for the faith!” That is the rallying cry of the letter of “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.” “Contend for the faith!” Yes, these are fighting words. They were written when a time of fighting had come upon the church. And that makes us uncomfortable. Fighting seems to be antithetical to the Christian faith. And for the most part, Christians should not fight. Instead, Christians should submit to persecution and even to crucifixion rather than fight. We know that. God, help us!

And yet, as today’s reading from the Letter of Jude indicates, there are times when Christians should fight. When the very gospel of Jesus Christ is being perverted, we have to fight for the truth. When the very grace of Jesus Christ is being perverted, we have to fight for the truth. When the very content of the Christian faith is being perverted, we have to fight for the truth. And when the very words of scripture are being twisted, we have to fight for the truth. So, in those times, “Contend for the faith!” Do not surrender. Do not give up. Do not walk away. Do not let the enemies of the gospel have their way. Do not give away the church of Jesus Christ. Instead, “Contend for the faith!” Fight the good fight. Hold fast to God’s grace. Stand up for the gospel. Name the name of Jesus Christ. Proclaim the good news. Preserve the church.

“Contend for the faith!” Yes, these are fighting words. They were written when a time of fighting had come upon the church. And by the grace of God in the Holy Spirit, these words shall be heard again if and when another time of fighting comes upon the church. Lord, is such a time upon us now? More of that in a moment. But before we get to application, let us hear the proclamation of what God is saying to us in today’s reading from the Letter of Jude. “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” Do you hear what is being said here? Jude tells us that there is a true Christian faith. It was once for all delivered to the saints. It does not need to be changed. Indeed, it cannot be changed. That is the whole point of this letter.

So, before we get to contending for the faith, we need to receive, to have, to hold, and to cherish “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” What is the content of that faith? For starters, Jude identifies himself as “a servant of Jesus Christ.” The faith of which he writes is focused upon the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, and through him it is focused upon the God and Father of Jesus Christ. So any faith which denies the resurrection of Jesus Christ, any faith which denies the lordship of the living Jesus Christ, any faith which denies that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, or any faith which denies that God is the Father of Jesus Christ, is not, and cannot be, the true “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Moreover, this identification of Jude as “a servant of Jesus Christ” tells us that the appropriate life of a Christian and particularly that of a leader of the Christian church is a

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life of service and servanthood. That is who we are. We are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not masters over Christ. We are not superiors over Christ. We are not to tell Christ what we think is good and right or what we think we ought to do. We are not peers with Christ. Neither are we unknown to Christ. Instead, we are servants of Christ, and we know that said service is the joy of our lives. So any faith which teaches the opposite, any faith which suggests that we can set our own standards, or any faith which implies that we can lord it over Jesus, is not, and cannot be, the true “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Jude also indicates his eagerness to write to his beloved recipients of his letter about the “salvation” they shared. Again, that is to say that there is salvation, that it has been accomplished for us, that it has been communicated to us, and that it is true, real, vital, and life-giving. So any faith which denies the reality of salvation, any faith which denies the need for salvation, any faith which belittles the cost of salvation, any faith which scoffs at the accomplishment of salvation, or any faith which reduces the significance, impact, results, and consequences of salvation is not, and cannot be, the true “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Given that there is a true Lord of the church and given that there is a true salvation, then it is necessarily the case that there is also a true gospel from the Lord which communicates this salvation to us. Without the true gospel, there would be no faith and there would be no life of service and servanthood. So any faith which denies the reality of the gospel, any faith which questions the veracity of the gospel, any faith which belittles the proclamation of the gospel, any faith which limits the power of the gospel, or any faith which confuses the gospel with permission for licentiousness is not, and cannot be, the true “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” All of this is to say that the very foundation of the exhortation we have received is the truth of the lordship of Jesus Christ, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the truth of the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ, and therefore the truth of faith in Jesus Christ and of service to Jesus Christ. No wonder Jude stands so strongly against those—even within the church! especially within the church—who deny the truth.

Who are they? “Certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” Therein lies the problem. “Certain people have crept in unnoticed... who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” It is an ancient problem. And yet, the ancient word of God rings true in regard to the current situation of the church at large. Look around the nation. The true faith has been corrupted again and again by those who think that forgiveness means that anything goes. It has never meant that. But there has always been a temptation to think that it means that. The true faith has been corrupted again and again by those who think they know better than Jesus Christ what is right and what is wrong and who thus deny Jesus Christ by rejecting his lordship.

We must admit that there is a danger of simply identifying those with whom we disagree as enemies of the faith and as enemies of the Lord. Such is not to be taken lightly. And yet, we also have a responsibility to hear the word of God. And I submit to you that the teachings and character of false teachers within the church are specified here in the Letter of Jude precisely in order that we may identify them in our own day and so contend for the faith against them. Failure to do so would be a dereliction of duty. It is not a task

for the faint at heart. And yet, it is ultimately a mission of mercy, meant for the proclamation of the gospel and the edification of the church. So, the problem we are addressing here is more than a simple disagreement. It goes to the heart of the Christian faith.

What are these false teachers like? Jude gives quite a description. “These people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones.” “These people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively.” “These are blemishes on your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, looking after themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.” “These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage.” “In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.” “It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.”

Is there anything untimely about this list? Is there anything restricted to the first century? Or is it not the case instead that the church at large has once again been invaded by enemies of the gospel, enemies of the faith, and enemies of the Lord? Let us open our eyes! The very reason this letter is in the Bible is to tell us that this would happen. The very reason this letter is in the Bible is to prevent us from being caught off guard. And the very reason this letter is in the Bible is to strengthen us for a time of trouble and to embolden us, yes, even us, “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” If we were supposed to ignore the truth, or if we were supposed to pretend that false teachers did not exist, then this letter would not have been in the Bible. But it is in the Bible. It is in the Bible for a reason. It is in the Bible for us. God, help us!

How are we at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church supposed to try to be a congregation of faith and truth? Jude spells it out for us. “You must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That is to say, we are to immerse ourselves in the apostolic witness, we are to saturate ourselves with the scripture, and we are to live and to breathe the word of God so that the gospel of Jesus Christ can sustain us. “You, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith.” Do not ignore the faith. Do not be content with a childhood Sunday School education. Do not behave as if the faith does not matter. Build up your faith! Worship God! Believe the gospel! Obey the commandments! “Pray in the Holy Spirit.” Pray! Pray in the morning. Pray at meals. Pray at night! And pray, not in weakness or timidity, but in the power and courage of the Holy Spirit.

“Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.” We do not need to wander away into the enticements of the world. We need to stay true to the gospel, true to the proclamation of God’s love for us, keeping our eye on the eternal goal. “Have mercy on those who doubt.” Jude never says to cut off those of little faith. He says to contend with those of alien faith. He says to contend with those who are wrongheaded. But for those who are weak, for those who waver, and for those who want to believe what is right, we are to have patience and good will. “Save others by snatching them out of the fire.” Pull them away from the flames of destruction. Rescue them from perdition. Pull them out of harm’s way. Snatch them from eternal destruction. See how this is the opposite of the perverse and pervasive error of

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thinking that forgiveness means anything goes? “To others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.” Show mercy! We are a people who have received mercy, and so we are a people to show mercy. We are a people who have been saved, so we know the power of salvation, and we are not to give up on others. Show mercy! This is how we live the faith.

At the same time, we are to stand up for the faith against those who would destroy it. Two weeks ago several of us attended a Calvin Colloquium at Erskine Theological Seminary in Due West, South Carolina. Many learned people read many learned papers about John Calvin, a great contender for the faith. One of our two after dinner speakers on Friday evening—we did not waste a moment!—was The Reverend Dr. Richard A. “Dick” Ray. Perhaps some of you know him. Among other things, Dick told us that he had told his wife that at his funeral he wanted the congregation to sing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” When she protested that it was out of style these days he said that he wanted it sung twice, once at the beginning of his funeral and again at the end. And then, to drive the point home, he told us that he wanted engraved upon his gravestone these words: “Here lies a warrior.” Here lies a warrior! He gets it. He understands the nature of the Christian life.

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” “Contend for the faith!” That is the rallying cry of the letter of “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.” “Contend for the faith!” Yes, these are fighting words. When the very gospel of Jesus Christ is being perverted, we have to fight for the truth. When the very grace of Jesus Christ is being perverted, we have to fight for the truth. When the very content of the Christian faith is being perverted, we have to fight for the truth. And when the very words of scripture are being twisted, we have to fight for the truth. So, “Contend for the faith!” Do not surrender. Do not give up. Do not walk away. Do not let the enemies of the gospel have their way. Do not give away the church of Jesus Christ. Instead, “Contend for the faith!” Fight the good fight. Hold fast to God’s grace. Stand up for the gospel.

*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling  
and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy,  
to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority,  
before all time and now and forever. Amen.*

## Appendix: Texts, Psalms, and Hymns

The sermons above are based on the readings from 1, 2, and 3 John and Jude. At the same time, each reading was paired with a reading from the Old Testament. And each Sunday, of course, hymns were sung as a part of the service. In case any of this information might also be helpful (even as a starting point which is rejected) to others who are called to preach and to lead worship in this way, it is provided below.

1 John 1:1–2:6, “The Word of Life!”

Psalm 19:1-14

“O Day of Radiant Gladness”

“Holy Spirit, Truth Divine”

“All Beautiful the March of Days”

1 John 2:7-17, “Love One Another!”

Leviticus 19:17-18

“Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!”

“In Christ There Is No East or West”

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

1 John 2:18-29, “The Promise of Eternal Life!”

Psalm 90:1-17

“Come Sing, O Church, in Joy!”

“Fairest Lord Jesus”

“O God, Our Help in Ages Past”

1 John 3:1-10, “Children of God!”

Exodus 33:12-33

“Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”

“O My Soul, Bless Your Redeemer”

“My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less”

1 John 3:11-24, “Love in Deed and Truth!”

Genesis 4:1-16

“On Pentecost They Gathered”

“Be Thou My Vision”

“Come, O Spirit, Dwell Among Us”

1 John 4:1-6, “Test the Spirits!”

Psalm 1:1-6

“Come, Great God of All the Ages”

“Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove”

“Eternal Father, Strong to Save”

- 1 John 4:7-21, "God First Loved Us!"  
Deuteronomy 6:1-9  
"Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing"  
"Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me"  
"Blest Be the Tie That Binds"
- 1 John 5:1-12, "The Victory of Faith!"  
Psalm 34:1-22  
"Come, Thou Almighty King"  
"O for a Closer Walk with God"  
"Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation"
- 1 John 5:13-21, "Pray Boldly!"  
Psalm 103:1-22  
"Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven"  
"This Is My Father's World"  
"Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"
- 2 John 1-13, "Abide in Christ!"  
Leviticus 19:17-18  
"O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing"  
"God, Bless Your Church with Strength!"  
"Called as Partners in Christ's Service"
- 3 John 1-15, "Follow the Truth!"  
Psalm 119:153-160  
"I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art"  
"O Beautiful for Spacious Skies"  
"God of the Ages, Whose Almighty Hand"
- Jude 1-25, "Contend for the Faith!"  
Ezekiel 34:1-10  
"God Is Our Refuge and Our Strength"  
"Fight the Good Fight"  
"The King of Love My Shepherd Is"

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