

**PREACHING THROUGH 1 AND 2 TIMOTHY,  
TITUS, AND PHILEMON**

James C. Goodloe IV

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Richmond, Virginia

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Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor  
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
1627 Monument Avenue  
Richmond, Virginia 23220

Telephone: 804-359-2463  
Facsimile: 804-278-6298  
[goodloe@grace-covenant.org](mailto:goodloe@grace-covenant.org)

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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. By the time I preached the following sermons, I had 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.

# No Different Doctrine!

1 Samuel 3:1-21, 1 Timothy 1:1-20 (ESV)

May 7, 2006

On the south wall of this sanctuary, directly in front of most of you, is the Dr. J. Calvin Stewart memorial stained glass window. In the eastern most of its large panels, to your left, stands the apostle Peter holding two massive keys of the kingdom, presented to him by Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:19). In the center panel stands the apostle John, holding a large chalice, representing the Lord's Supper, which we shall receive today. And in the western most panel, to your right, stands the apostle Paul holding a sword in his hand. Yes, he is holding a sword, as politically incorrect as that may be today. Perhaps this would be of interest to some of the young men present here today. For you see, Paul is a warrior, and he is holding high a sharp, two edged sword, with which to do battle with the forces of evil. And the sword represents the word of God (Ephesians 6:17). Yes, the sword he holds high represents the word of God, the very gospel of Jesus Christ which Paul preached to the world.

It is this word of God which God entrusted to Paul. It is this word of God which Paul entrusted to Timothy. It is this word of God alone by which faith is born and by which alone the church of Jesus Christ lives. No wonder Paul wrote to Timothy, "I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine." No wonder Paul holds high the sword and says, "I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine." No wonder Paul declares, "I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine."

The occasion of this letter intensifies the urgency of this appeal. Paul was getting old. Timothy was young. Paul was an experienced pastor. Timothy was new. Paul was becoming limited in his ability to travel, perhaps due to imprisonment because of his preaching. Timothy was, effectively, his associate pastor in Ephesus, assigned there to extend Paul's work. And Paul was handing off that mighty sword to Timothy. Paul was entrusting him with the word of God, with the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, with the teaching of the Christian faith, and with the building up of the church. This was the changing of the guard. No wonder Paul wrote to Timothy, "I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine."

The significance of these words both then and now is profound and far reaching. First of all, they mean that there is a doctrine. There is a heart. There is a core to the gospel and to the Christian faith, and Paul taught it all those centuries ago, and it is not up to Timothy or to anyone else to change it. There is a core doctrine to the Christian faith, and we are not to add to it. We are not to take away from it. We are not to change it or to modify it. We are to teach it as is. We are to preach it as is. We are to believe it as is. That is our duty. That is our joy. That is our very life. Thanks be to God!

Second, these words mean that the doctrine is accessible, teachable, and learnable. It is not hidden, esoteric, or arcane. It is not secret. It does not have to be found. It does not have to be improved upon. It does not have to be adjusted or made to fit our predilections. It does not have to be updated. It is fine just as it is.

Third, that Paul had to urge Timothy at all to exhort certain persons in the church at Ephesus "not to teach any different doctrine" means, of course, that certain persons in

the church were already teaching different doctrine. Already, so close in time to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so close in time to the beginning of the church, certain persons were already teaching different doctrine, as if they knew better than God, as if they knew better than Jesus Christ, as if they knew better than the Scriptures, as if they knew better than the apostles, as if they knew better than Paul. Oh, the audacity and the insufferable arrogance! Certain persons were already abandoning the gospel of Jesus Christ. Certain persons were emphasizing law over gospel. Certain persons were ignoring redemption and the forgiveness of sin. Certain persons were forfeiting salvation and the promise of eternal life. In fact, certain persons had left the Christian faith but wanted to be teachers in the church. Does any of this sound familiar? Do we not have the same problem in the church at large today? Certain persons were attempting to teach different doctrine, though, in truth, there is no different Christian doctrine.

Fourth, this ancient doctrine has been carried through the centuries in the word of the Scriptures and in the historic faith of the Christian church. It has been well enshrined in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. It has been preached from faithful pulpits around the world. It has been taught in faithful homes around the world and lived in faithful lives around the world. There has always been a temptation to try to add to this ancient doctrine, to dress it up, to water it down, to tame it, to twist it, or to domesticate it. But at its best, the church has resisted such temptations and has tried to strip away centuries of accretions and traditions so that this ancient word may stand alone and unsullied, speaking to us clearly and truly, again and again, even today.

This effort at recovery represents the best work of the Reformation. And this sets forth the choice that is before the church today. Shall we continue to try to hear the one word of God, reaching back through the centuries to reclaim it unchanged, or shall we seek to modify or to improve it, to reimagine it in our own images, to bring it forward to conform with the sentiments of our day, pretending that such change is progress? Shall we be faithful, or shall we be fickle? Shall we take up the sword, or shall we fall to tolerance, diversity, pluralism, and inclusivity? Shall we remain true, or shall we take up the post-modern mantra that there is no truth, only personal opinion, none of which matters to anyone else? A terrible choice lies before the church of Jesus Christ again today.

In the middle of this first chapter, Paul gives a good and useful summary of the gospel: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." To say that it is "trustworthy" is to say that it is from God. To say that it is "deserving of full acceptance" means that it is received by faith. That Jesus is the "Christ" means that he is the anointed one of God, sent by and from God to carry out God's good will in the world. That he "came into the world" is what we celebrate at Christmas, and this is the most Paul has to say about that. And to say that Jesus came into the world "to save sinners" is to state the purpose of it all: He came for us! He came for us! He came to save us from our sin. Paul tells us elsewhere how Jesus does this, through his crucifixion and resurrection. But here Paul tells us why Jesus does this. And note carefully that the why has to do with salvation from sin.

If we were to refuse to acknowledge sin, then the gospel would be pointless and Jesus would have died in vain. If we were to say there is no sin, then there would be no salvation. If we were to think that nothing we do is wrong, then there would be no reason

for Jesus to have come. If we refuse to admit that we sin, if we want the church to condone as good everything we do, then we forfeit salvation, we reject the work and person of Jesus Christ, and we refuse the good gifts of God. “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Can we accept this? It is not the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ, of the doctrine of the church, or of Christian faith to make us feel good about ourselves. It is, instead, the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ, of the doctrine of the church, and of Christian faith to present us before the throne of God Almighty. A terrible choice lies before the church of Jesus Christ again today. Do we have enough of the warrior left in us to stand up and fight for the gospel of Jesus Christ?

On the south wall of this sanctuary is the Dr. J. Calvin Stewart memorial stained glass window. In the western most panel stands the apostle Paul holding a sword in his hand. Yes, he is holding high a sharp, two edged sword, with which to do battle with the forces of evil. And the sword he holds represents the word of God (Ephesians 6:17). Perhaps some of our young people here today are being called to take up this sword. It is this word of God which God and the church have entrusted to us. And it is this word of God which, if this congregation so votes to call him and if the presbytery so votes to approve, we will soon entrust to our new associate pastor, Christopher James Thomas.

We have before us today both the reality of, and the opportunity for, yet another generational shift in the ongoing ministry and life of the church. And the ancient warning still stands: “I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine.” Are we ready to support Mr. Thomas in the pure preaching of the gospel? Are we ready to support him in the pure teaching of doctrine? Are we ready to support him in the building up of the church? Are we, as a congregation, ready and armed with the word of God, so as to be able to stand with Mr. Thomas against any alien influences from outside and beyond the church that seek to redefine our doctrine or to teach any different doctrine than this historic faith of the church?

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

# Knowledge of the Truth

Isaiah 49:1-6, 1 Timothy 2:1-15 (ESV)

May 14, 2006

“God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” Here is the heart of today’s reading. Not only is there a God, and not only is God Creator of all things and also Judge of all things, but also God is “our Savior.” It is precisely as “our Savior” that God “desires all people to be saved,” Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor, young and old, north and south, westerners and easterners, black and white, Asian and Arab.

“God our Savior...desires all people to be saved.” This is one of the most sweeping statements of the gospel in all the Scriptures. Surely this statement describes the foundation of the ancient prophecy we have read from Isaiah: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Surely this statement was fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ—more about that in just a moment. And surely, so that our salvation does not remain vague or ill-defined, Paul clarifies the meaning of this statement by the second half of the sentence: “God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” “God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” “God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” I submit to you that the second half of this sentence is not so much an addition as it is a definition, a specification, and an explication of the first half of the sentence.

What, then, does it mean “to be saved”? It means precisely “to come to the knowledge of the truth.” What does God desire for us? “God...desires all people...to come to the knowledge of the truth.” This is what he wants for us. This is what he provides for us. This is what he gives to us. This is why we are here today. This is what the Christian church is all about. “God...desires all people,” and that includes even us, “to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Thanks be to God!

Consider with me what this means. First, in that “God...desires all people...to come to the knowledge of the truth,” there is truth. This, in and of itself, is a remarkable gift of the grace of God. There is truth. If there were no truth, this sentence we are considering would be senseless, and not only would Paul be a liar, but also, and more importantly, God who inspired him would be a liar. And we live in a world today eager to insist that there is no truth. It seems to be lost on most people that even that is a truth claim itself. But we live in a world today eager to insist that there is no truth but only opinion, perception, power, position, and privilege. Do not be deceived. That would be a cold and dark world, uninhabitable by human life, impenetrable to reason, full of chaos and disorder, meaning nothing to anyone. We are grateful that there is truth.

Second, in that “God...desires all people...to come to the knowledge of the truth,” not only is there truth, but also the truth is knowable. God’s desires are not in vain. His

word shall not return to him empty, but it shall accomplish that which he purposes, and shall succeed in the thing for which he sent it (from Isaiah 55:11 (ESV)). So the truth does not exist only in abstraction or in splendid isolation. The truth is knowable. It is accessible. It is available to you and me. It is there for you to have and to hold as your very own. It is there for you to know. It is there for you to possess. It is there for you to cherish. It is there for you to live by. Are you interested?

Third, not only is there truth, and not only is truth knowable, but also “God...desires all people...to come to the knowledge of the truth.” We have covered that already. This knowledge is what he wants for us. This is what he provides for us. This is what he gives to us. This is why we are here today. This is what the Christian church is all about. God’s knowable truth is not a useless reality. God’s knowable truth is a treasure serving the desire of God Almighty.

Fourth, as indicated above, “to come to the knowledge of the truth” is not so much an addition to being saved as it is a definition, a specification, and an explication of being saved. To be saved is precisely “to come to the knowledge of the truth.” So this is not a routine truth, such as “two plus two equals four.” This is a saving truth, and it is our life to know this truth. As Jesus prayed in John 17:3 (ESV), “This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” To know God and his Christ is eternal life. To know this truth is salvation. So it is that “God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Fifth, all of this having been established, Paul moves ahead to set forth clearly and distinctly, in a five line, creed-like statement, perhaps an early profession of faith, maybe even used at adult baptisms, the very content of the knowable and saving truth: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” This is the truth. This is the treasure. This is a summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is summary of the Christian faith. This is knowable, and to know it is salvation. We would do well to submit it to memory. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” Let us take up these lines one at a time.

“For there is one God.” This, of course, is the teaching of the single most important verse from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6:4 (ESV): “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” It was the first verse Jesus quoted when he was asked about the great commandment: “Hear, O Israel: “The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Mark 12:29 (ESV)). In the world of ancient Israel, this was affirmed over and against the faith and the gods of Egypt, of Assyria, and of Babylon. In the world of Jesus and Paul, this was affirmed over and against the faith and the gods of Greece and of Rome. And in our world, this is affirmed over and against the faith and the gods of Hinduism and Islam, as well as over and against the faith and godlessness of communism and secularism. It cuts both ways. To say, “There is one God,” is to say both that God is and that God is singular. This is the starting point. This is the beginning of the knowable and saving truth. This is the basis of everything that follows.

“For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men.” The existence and unity of God, who is Creator, Redeemer, and Judge, means that there is also an underlying unity to all humanity, despite our obvious differences. Far more important

than our differences of sex, race, color, nationality, language, culture, and even faith is the unity we share in God. In that we have one Creator, we are all his creatures. In that we have one Father, we are all one family. And in that there is one Father and one human family, “there is one mediator between God and men.” Again, this cuts two ways. It stands against the teaching of those who say that God is distant, unfeeling, and unknowable. It also stands against the teaching of those who say that God can be found and reached in a thousand or a million different ways: meditation, drugs, works, sex, politics, angels, demons, or money. That is to say, there is a mediator, and there is only one mediator. This one alone is sufficient, given by God, and this one allows of no other.

“For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” This is his title and his name. The one mediator between God and humanity is the Christ, the anointed one of God, sent by and from God to carry out the will of God. And the one mediator between God and humanity, the Christ, the anointed one, is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary. This is what we sing about at Christmas. The mediator is both fully divine and fully human. He is not half-divine and half-human. The mediator is the only one who can represent God to us, because he is God, and the only one who can represent us to God, because he is one of us. That is who the mediator is and what the mediator does.

“For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.” He “gave himself as a ransom for all.” The only mediator, the only connection we creatures have with our Creator, the only human being without sin, gave his life on the cross for us, so that our sin might be forgiven. As fully divine, he paid the price which only God could pay, and as fully human, he paid the price which was owed by humanity, the price which none of the rest of us was good enough to pay. So Christ Jesus is our mediator not only in terms of providing a connection between God and humanity, and not only in terms of providing communication between God and humanity, but also and especially in terms of providing reconciliation between humanity and God, reconciling us to our Creator and Father from whom we had estranged ourselves. Christ Jesus is our mediator and he fulfills his office by providing for a wonderful exchange: he takes on our sin and gives us his righteousness, he takes on our death and gives us his life, and he takes on our sadness and gives us his joy. Thanks be to God!

“For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” In the fullness of time, in the providence of God, not only did Christ Jesus come to be with us and for us, as our mediator, and to give himself as a ransom for all, but also the good news of Jesus Christ went forth to be proclaimed to the ends of the world. It did not go forth in the days of Noah. It did not go forth in the days of Abraham or Moses. It did not go forth in the days of David or Isaiah. But it did go forth after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And Paul was one of its greatest proponents. “For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle...a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.” That is who he was. That is what he did. And at least the preaching part of that, if not the apostleship, is what he was handing on to his young associate, Timothy. We continue to be beneficiaries yet today not only of the knowable and saving truth, not only of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, especially the

proclamation to the Gentiles, started with the apostle Paul, continuing with Timothy, carrying the gospel down through the centuries all the way to us.

“God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Have you come to the knowledge of the truth? Has the desire of God our Savior been fulfilled in you? Do you know the one God? Do you know the one mediator between God and humanity? Do you know the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all? And are you and I ready to bring in our own young, associate pastor to Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, to entrust to him the proclamation of the gospel of Christ Jesus and to learn from him the truth of God, and so to receive from him the testimony given at the proper time?

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

# Above Reproach

Exodus 18:13-23, 1 Timothy 3:1-16 (ESV)

May 21, 2006

“The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer,” if anyone aspires to the office of minister of Word and Sacrament, if anyone aspires to be a pastor or an associate pastor, “he desires a noble task.” “Therefore an overseer must be above reproach.” A minister of Word and Sacrament must be above reproach. A pastor or an associate pastor must be above reproach. That is clear. Paul spells out the details in ten specifications. It is a fairly standard list. But apart from going over those individually, the prior question has to do with why a minister must be above reproach? What are the underlying issues? What is the driving force behind this standard? Therein lies the gospel.

One who would be a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ must be above reproach. Why? I submit to you the strange reason that the gospel of Jesus Christ creates enough offense in and of itself that we do not need the ministers of the gospel either adding to that offense, or distracting from it, by creating any offense of their own. Let me say that again: I submit to you the strange reason for ministers being above reproach is that the gospel of Jesus Christ creates enough offense in and of itself that we do not need the ministers of the gospel either adding to that offense, or distracting from it, by creating any offense of their own. How can that be? That can be because the gospel is not all sweetness and light. The gospel is, instead, truth and good news. It is not truth without good news. We could not bear that. But it is not good news without truth, either. That would be of no value or use to us. The gospel is truth and good news, or rather, it is good news and truth. The hard truth does not exist apart from, and is not known apart from, the good news. And yet, when the good news is heard, it carries the truth deeply and inseparably imbedded within it.

The good news is that our sin has been forgiven. The truth revealed by that good news, the negative presupposition of the gospel, is that we are sinners. Some people are so offended by that truth that they cannot, or they refuse to, hear the good news. But that truth is the necessary offense of the gospel. That truth is an offense which we cannot and must not remove. And so we must remove all other offenses, all of which are unnecessary, in order not to block the way to the encounter with the one offense that alone matters. We must remove all other offenses in order not to allow them to block the way to the gospel. For it is this gospel by which we live. It is this gospel which we must hear. It is this gospel which we must share. It is this gospel which we must not let be hidden by the petty offenses, or the not so petty offenses, of any minister of the gospel.

This is not to say that ministers must be without fault. That is not possible. If that were the requirement, we would have no ministers. All of us know that. And having said that, it is also the case that there are varying degrees of fault, or at least that there are faults of varying degrees of importance. For instance, a good friend of mine told me

recently that when he was a senior at Union Seminary he preached his senior sermon in a dark suit, a white shirt, and a tie. He was graded down for wearing a striped tie instead of a solid tie. That may seem ridiculous to us, and the teller of the story was shaking his head, but the point was for the preacher not to offer any distraction to the hearer. The point was for the preacher to present the gospel instead of himself. Still, there are faults of varying degrees of importance, and when Paul writes that ministers are to be “above reproach,” his concern is not so much with little faults as with major ones.

Moreover, it is important in any consideration of offense to remember what John Calvin said on the subject. He wrote that there are two kinds of offense. There is the offense given, and there is the offense taken. Some people are too ready to give offense, and some people are too ready to take offense. When there is an offense noted, it is important to know which kind it is. So, while we are talking about the importance of ministers not giving offense, we must remember to set aside the impossibly high standards set by those people who too easily and too readily take offense at every little thing. Again, if we allowed them to set the standard, we would have no ministers at all.

Still, having set aside frivolous matters, and even allowing for those too easily offended, there is still a large area of potential ministerial offense to be avoided. “Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” These are huge. These have to do with faithfulness, judgment, restraint, reputation, hospitality, helpfulness, sobriety, gentleness, agreeableness, and a lack of covetousness. Problems in these areas do distract from the preaching of the gospel and therefore detract from the hearers’ ability to receive the gospel. Problems in these areas are to be avoided not so much for the sake of the minister as for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel and therefore for the sake of the life of the church. The minister “must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”

What do these areas of potential ministerial offense have to do with all the rest of the members of the church? I am a minister. We are preparing to call an associate pastor. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will be making a decision this summer about ordination standards for ministers, elders, and deacons. But what do these have to do with the rest of the members of the church? “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach.” The standards are in place for the sake of a noble task. The noble task is the proclamation of the gospel. And this is of concern to you, to me, to all of us, to the church as a whole. It is imperative that these standards be maintained for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for the glory of God, for the edification of the church, and for the salvation of humanity.

What is this gospel? God the Father, eternally the Father of the Son, sent God the Son, eternally the Son of the Father, to live among us as one of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was and is the Christ. This, by the way, is the offense of the Christ, not that he was a good man, but that he was God himself among us. There may be many proximately good men. But there is only one man who is the only begotten Son of God. There is only one man who is God himself among us. To deal with him is to deal with God. To reject this man is to reject God himself. But to receive this man is to receive God

himself. Having been encountered by Jesus, we necessarily make one choice or the other. Therein lies the offense of Christ. Fully divine and fully human, at the same time, Jesus taught, he healed, he fed, he gathered disciples, and most of all he suffered though he was without sin, he gave his life on the cross on our account, and he died a death he did not deserve. Because he remained faithful to the very end, because his love was not broken, because he did not hate those who hated him, and because he prayed for those who persecuted him, God his Father accepted this perfect offering of himself, vindicated his offering and sacrifice, and raised him from the dead to life again. As Paul wrote, perhaps quoting an early creed, "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."

There are two major implications of all of this for us. The first has to do with the forgiveness of sin. The second has to do with the promise of eternal life. The first has to do with the perfect offering of himself which Jesus made on our behalf on the cross. Sin has unleashed a gonewrongness in the world. One time, on the cross, that wrong was all set right. The one person who had not sinned against God made a perfect offering of himself on behalf of all the rest of us. Sin could not defeat him. Sin could not break him. Sin could not make him cease to believe, cease to love, cease to obey, or cease to be himself. Instead, Jesus offered a sinlessness, a faith, a love, and an obedience that balanced out and undid the gonewrongness of the world. He has paid the price to set things right. He has won the forgiveness of our sin. And, through the inner work of the Holy Spirit, we appropriate this only by trusting in him for what he has done for us, which trust involves our deepening realization of how evil, sinful, lost, and helpless we are apart from him. Therein lies the offense of the gospel. There is nothing we can do for ourselves. Without him we have nothing. But with him we have everything. Thanks be to God!

The second implication of the gospel has to do with the promise of eternal life. God the Father did not raise God the Son to a new and eternal life simply for the sake of the Son. God raised Jesus Christ to a new and eternal life as the promise of our own eternal life. This earthly life here and now, as wonderful a gift as it is, is not all there is to life. There is another and even greater life beyond here, by the mercy and power of God. But this second implication of the gospel, this promise of eternal life, is not where the problem of offense lies. Most people are eager to hear the promise of eternal life. Most people are not offended by the good news of a better world beyond this one. So this is not the offense from which we must be careful not to turn people away. That offense has to do with the first implication of the gospel, the forgiveness of sin, and therefore with the sin that needs to be forgiven.

What does it mean that we are sinful? We can learn this only in the light of forgiveness. That we are sinful means not that we are finite, limited, less intelligent than we could be, or even immoral, though all of these are true. That we are sinful means that we have rejected precisely the God who forgives us, that we have despised the God who loves us, that we have disdained the God who made us, that we have averted our attention from God, and that we have pretended that we ourselves are the center of our lives. And once we have done that, there is nothing we can do ourselves to undo it. Once we have become self-centered, no effort of the self can make us not self-centered. The self has become estranged from God. The self has become weak and helpless. And that is what we hate to admit. Instead, we want to think that we are good when we are evil. We want to

think that we are strong when we are weak. We want to think that we are generous when we are stingy. We want to think that we are moral when we are obscene. We want to think that we are clean when we are filthy. We want to think that we are self-sufficient when we are dying. The power of self-deception is immense. No wonder the gospel is offensive. It offers us healing, and in so doing it exposes our disease. It clothes us in righteousness, and in so doing it reveals our nakedness. It fills us with riches, and in so doing it uncovers our poverty.

And yet, is not the prize worth the shame? Is not the goal worth the disgrace? Is not the forgiveness of sin the medicine we need, and are not the hope and the joy of it sufficient for us to admit and so leave behind the sin which clings so closely? Lord, help us! If people have to be offended, let them be offended by the gospel, and let them have the privilege of that struggle with the grace of God Almighty made known and present in Jesus Christ. Let us not as ministers, officers, or members of the church do anything in our personal lives or in our life together as the church to offend others before they can even hear the gospel, or to scare them away from the opportunity of hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. That is the point of what Paul wrote to Timothy and so to all of us: "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money."

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

## Some Will Depart

Genesis 1:26-31, 1 Timothy 4:1-16 (ESV)

May 28, 2006

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith.” Thus this chapter begins with hard words: “Some will depart from the faith.” We will get to more comforting words in a moment, encouraging words, life giving and life sustaining words, but the chapter begins with these hard words, so we need to hear these first: “Some will depart from the faith.” How could that possibly be? How could anyone leave the faith? How could anyone cease to be Christian? What does this mean?

First of all, it means that there is a faith. For anyone to have departed from the Christian faith means, first of all, that there is a true Christian faith from which he or she departed. And for there to be a Christian faith from which he or she departed means also that there is a gospel of Jesus Christ which engendered that faith. And for there to be a gospel of Jesus Christ means that Jesus Christ lived and died and lives again for the forgiveness of our sin and for the promise of eternal life. And for Jesus Christ to have lived and to have died and to live again means that God his Father is “the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.” And for us to be able to know and to believe that God his Father is the living God means also that there is a Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts and minds and lives. So, even these hard words, “Some will depart from the faith,” imply immediately the full content of the Christian faith and imply also the goodness and power of God who alone is the author of faith. For this we are profoundly grateful.

Second, that some departed from the faith even then, in the very earliest days of the church, when there were some still alive who had seen and known Jesus during his earthly life—that some departed from the faith even then, and that the church still exists yet today, nearly 2,000 years later, as we gather together here to read these very words about their departure—taken together, all of this means that those who departed were not successful, that they did not destroy the church, that they did not defeat the church, and that they did not cause the church to cease to exist. The false teachers did their damage. They wandered astray themselves and, what is worse, they led others astray with them. That is why Paul was warning Timothy about them and instructing him about how to work against them. But it is important for us to realize that the false teachers did not subvert the faith of the Christian church. They did not end the gospel of Jesus Christ. They have not driven Christ, or God his Father, or the Holy Spirit away from this good earth. For this we are grateful.

I mention this not only for historical purposes but also and especially for the encouragement that even today not only should we not be surprised if and when there are false teachers of the church leaving the Christian faith and disturbing the Christian church—we should not be surprised because we have seen it all before—but also we should believe and expect that they will fail in their efforts to subvert the faith and to destroy the church. They will fail! They will do their damage, and we should resist them and try to protect the church against them, but we should do all this knowing that they will fail. God will destroy his enemies, and God will uphold his church. Thanks be to God!

Third, that some departed from the faith raises the questions of how and why they departed from the faith. The two are related. They both have to do with lies and falsehoods. “Why” they departed from the faith has to do with their listening to lies “by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.” “How” they departed from the faith has to do with their telling lies in that they forbade marriage and required abstinence from foods “that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”

They started out listening to lies, which meant that they put themselves in league with the Devil, the Prince of Lies, the great purveyor of untruths. His basic strategy is to lie. That is what he does, and he does it very well. Moreover, it is of the very nature of Satan to lie. It is of the nature of Satan to deceive. It is of the nature of Satan to present and to promote anything other than the truth. So of course he is opposed to the faith, of course he is opposed to the gospel, of course he is opposed to Jesus Christ, and of course he is opposed to God the Father of Jesus Christ. And all those who listen to the lies, all those who devote themselves to falsehood and deceit, and all those who study at the feet of demons necessarily lose all sense of judgment and necessarily leave the Christian faith, which is a faith of truth.

What particular lies did these particular false teachers tell in Ephesus? In direct contradiction to the word of God, they said that marriage was forbidden to Christians and that some foods were forbidden to Christians. It was as if they thought that they could be more holy by being more strict than the word of God required, without even realizing that the arrogance involved in such presumption is itself the opposite of all holiness. Oh, the audacity of those who think they know better than God! And is it not interesting how audacity and mendacity so often run together? We have read today from Genesis 1, the very first chapter of the Bible, that God created man and woman to be together, gave them the food of the earth, and declared his whole creation “very good.” But these false teachers said that creation was not good, that food was not to be eaten, and especially that man and woman were not to be together. That was a direct and explicit rejection of the very word of God. That is to say, these were big, blatant, flagrant lies. These did not deal with minute or obscure points of human behavior. These cut to the very core of human life, family, and community. And these lies are not even self-sustaining. You would think that if a group of people did not eat and did not procreate, neither they nor their teachings would be around very long. But the devil must keep finding new recruits. And such liars keep attacking the church.

I regret that these lies continue to be so familiar to us even today. Perhaps we are not plagued by those who say we need to be more strict than the word of God requires, but we are beset by those who say we should be less strict, which is simply a mirror image way of trying to set aside the word of God. The effect is the same. If there are not people today encouraging us toward fasting, there are those encouraging us to gluttony and profligacy, which can be just as destructive. If there are not people encouraging us toward an over strictness, there are those encouraging us to believe instead that anything goes, which has never been a good way to try to live a Christian life. Moral laxity is not a virtue. And what is perhaps most pernicious, as we need to be aware, there is a group of teachers even in the larger church today, liars one and all, by definition in league with the Devil, though perhaps not consciously so—it is more likely that they are grossly deceived—there

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are teachers and leaders in the larger church today who say that marriage is not simply for a man and a woman, but that “marriage” should also be entered into by a man and a man or enjoyed by a woman and a woman, and that the church should perform such “marriages” right in its sanctuaries and even that the church should ordain to the ministry people bound together in such same sex “marriages” as a way of condoning and celebrating their lifestyles. Do you not see that all of this is in direct contradiction to the Scriptures, and therefore rejection of the word of God, all the way from Genesis to the very end?

Paul warned us about such teachings and such teachers! We should know better than that! Why do we tolerate this? Why do we allow such people to continue to speak? When we hear these lies in the larger church today, we need to realize that the perpetrators of such lies have departed from the faith. We may be saddened by that, and we may be distressed by that, but we should never be surprised by it, and we certainly should not be overwhelmed by it. Instead, we should first realize, and then we should publicly declare, that such false teachers have departed from the Christian faith and that they have departed from the church of Jesus Christ. It has happened before. Paul told us about it precisely so that we would recognize it and take such appropriate action when it happened again.

What then are we to do? What are we to do in the face of such false teachers? Paul told Timothy and the church at Ephesus what needed to be done, and it still applies to us today. If the problem is that liars depart from the word of God, then the solution is that people of the truth should immerse themselves in the word of God. Now is the time that we need to hear those life giving and life sustaining words which I mentioned earlier. “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness....Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching....Practice these things, devote yourself to them....Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” In short, “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” That is the way to life and salvation.

What Paul writes to Timothy he expects the church to overhear. And the purpose of these three ministerial activities is the building up of the church of Jesus Christ. First, we are to devote ourselves to the public reading of Scripture. We do that every Sunday morning here, usually reading one selection from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. We do this as an act of obedience. We do this as an act of submission. We do this as an act of prayer. We do this as an act of receiving sustenance, of receiving food, of receiving life, of receiving breath. Of course, we supplement this with the private reading of Scripture in our homes. Our private reading helps us to hear, to understand, and to appreciate what we hear in our public reading. But our private reading could never replace our public reading. We are the community of the people of God. We are called into existence by the reading of this word, we are sustained in our existence by the reading of this word, and we are sent out in mission to the world by the reading of this word. There is nothing magic about it. But there is something very powerful about it. Thanks be to God! By the careful, systematic, faithful, week in and week out, book by book, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse reading of the word of God, such as we do here, God opens us to his saving truth and immunizes us against the lies of the enemy.

Second, we are to devote ourselves to exhortation, that is to say, to the preaching of Scripture as the gospel of God. We cannot do without the public reading of the word, but it is not enough only to read the word. We are also to preach the word. We are to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are to proclaim the good news. We are to shout it from the rooftops: Christ is risen! We are, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, not only to read the Scripture as written, but also to hear and to proclaim what God is saying to us yet today. I have preached here at Grace Covenant more than 400 times now. You have heard me proclaim again and again that God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came and lived among us as one of us, that he sacrificed himself on the cross for the forgiveness of our sin, that God raised him from the dead as the promise to us of eternal life, and that God calls us to faith and obedience individually and as the church. This is the gospel. This is the good news we proclaim. This is the good news by which alone we live. Thanks be to God!

Third, we are to devote ourselves to teaching, to the teaching of the Scripture as the word of God. In addition to the reading of the word, in addition to the preaching of the word, we also study and teach the word. We use dictionaries, we use grammars, we use concordances, we use atlases, we use ancient literature, we use the history of Christian thought, we use creeds and confessions, we use every means available to us to study, learn, and teach the word of God. We do such teaching during this service, we do it during Sunday school, we do it during circle meetings, and we do it in countless other settings. We cannot overdo it. This is who we are. We are a people who study and teach the Scripture as the word of God. We do this because God says for us to do this. We do this because God told Paul to tell Timothy to do this. We do this because it is by the word of God alone that we live. Here we stand; we can do no other.

Hence, “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” These three form the heart of the ministry of the word. These are three means of grace by which God gathers and sustains the church. It is by these three that we can fulfill the other exhortations which Paul gives to Timothy: “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness....Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching...Practice these things, devote yourself to them...Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

That is to say, it is only on the basis of these three practices—reading, preaching, and teaching the word of God—that we will be able to realize even in these later times that some have departed from the faith “by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.” It is only on the basis of these three practices that we will be able to avoid and to resist “the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” It is only on the basis of these three practices that we will be able to know that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

Paul’s advice to his young associate, Timothy, all those years ago in Ephesus, continues to give good encouragement to all of us today as we seek to be the good and obedient church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ now in the early years of the twenty-

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first century here in Richmond, Virginia: “If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

# Keep Yourselves Pure

Deuteronomy 19:15-21, 1 Timothy 5:1-25 (ESV)

June 4, 2006

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching....Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear....Keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.” Here we have a series of imperatives delivered from the apostle Paul to the pastor Timothy. At one level, these directives have to do with a difficult situation in the church at Ephesus, at some remove from us in both miles and years. But at another level, these instructions are based upon, reflect, and help to embody the very gospel of Jesus Christ. For that reason, they continue to be of interest and importance to us yet today. So think together with me about the gospel assumptions and implications of these very imperatives.

In that the elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, it is at least suggested that other Christians, maybe so-so elders or even ordinary church members, are recipients of a singular honor. We have already read that widows, for instance, are deserving of honor. And given that few of us are especially honorable in and of ourselves, I submit to you that it is necessarily the case that we have received such honor from another, from one greater than ourselves, from one who alone is truly honorable, from one who alone deserves our worship and praise, from one who alone took upon himself our dishonor precisely in order to cover us with his honor. The sheer fact that there is any honor at all in the Christian church points unfailingly to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, who came down from heaven to earth to live among us as one of us, who though he alone was without sin took our sin upon himself so that we might be forgiven, and who died as one of us in order that we might live forever with him. He suffered ignominy in order that we who are but worms might be accounted and so made children of God. What an honor! Thus, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor.” Thanks be to God for the whelming generosity of Christ!

There is more. “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” According to what we have just read from the Old Testament, that was standard procedure for all the people of God, not only the elders. The fact that such a rule was needed in the first place and then had to be reiterated by Paul suggests both that some Christians, including elders, were misbehaving and also that some other Christians were so eager to point that out that they may have exaggerated their claims. As John Calvin pointed out centuries later, some people are too ready to give offense and some people are too ready to take offense.

Again, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Consider that behind the immediate problems of possible misbehavior and potential false accusation lie both the reality of justice and also the commitment of God to justice. That is a good and wonderful realization. We do not live in a universe of

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moral caprice. We do not live in a world of moral indifference. We live, instead, in a world where what we do matters. And that is good.

What is particularly interesting for our purposes today is that Paul continues this teaching about elders saying, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” Think with me about what this means. In that he identifies “those who persist in sin” for particular treatment, it is at least suggested that it is possible that there are some among us who do not persist in sin. He does not say that any are without sin. Only one has been without sin. We shall return to him in a moment. For now, consider the enormity of the reality that it might be possible for at least some of us who were born in sin and who lived in sin not to persist in sin, if only for a little while.

Do you see what this means? In that it is even possible at all that we not persist in sin surely means that we have been redeemed, that we have been saved, that our sin has not been counted against us, that we have been cleansed, that we have been reborn, that we have been made new and whole, and that we have been given a new life. Thanks be to God! As we said earlier, there has been one without sin, and only one. But his sinlessness was not only for himself. His sinlessness was for you and for me, in order that we might be redeemed, in order that we might be removed from the realm and power of sin, in order that we might not persist in sin, in order that we might be good and faithful servants of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” Again, even the ability for the rest to fear a godly rebuke, or to fear merely a pastoral rebuke, suggests a sensitivity heightened beyond the natural. The natural response is often to reject and ignore a rebuke. And anyone who does not know God would have no capacity to fear God at all. But for one to be able to stand in fear of a rebuke of sin indicates an awareness of the one who is greater than sin, an awareness of the one who gave himself to defeat sin, to pay the price of sin. For one to be able to stand in fear of a rebuke of sin means that God has been at work in the world, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not only to forgive sin but also to purge the world of sin. So the very rebuke itself points directly to the gospel undergirding it. For this gospel we are grateful.

Continuing along these lines of rebuking sin, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others.” The fact that ordinations can be performed inappropriately hastily means also that they can be performed with appropriate deliberateness. The fact that ordinations can be performed with appropriate deliberateness means that they can be performed appropriately. That ordinations can be performed appropriately, that ordinary human beings can become officers in the church of Jesus Christ, again means that one who is greater than we are has claimed us for his very own, has rescued us from ourselves, has lifted us to himself, and has joined us to himself. That we can be ordained at all is indicative of the far reaching mercy of God. Thanks be to God for that! At the same time, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands.” That is to say, some proposed ordinations should never take place. Not everyone who wants to be ordained is to be ordained. But at least some other ordinations are good and divinely intended. And that in and of itself is evidence of the mercy of God. The church is a divine institution. And God will order it, which is the purpose of ordination, as he sees fit.

Why take such care about ordination? “Do not...take part in the sins of others.” Oh, we are painfully aware of the sins of others. We may even be sinfully aware of the sins of others. But the fact that we can be instructed not to take part in the sins of others means that a new day has begun in human history, that the extensive, invasive, corruptive, and corrosive power of sin has been severely curtailed, that the contagious and deadly force of sin has been held back, that a new possibility for Christian life has been created, and that real obedience has become a genuine option. That is no little matter. That is, instead, astounding. That is good news.

Finally, in a more positive restatement, “Keep yourself pure.” In what may be the summary of this chapter, Paul writes to Timothy, “Keep yourself pure.” And I submit to you that, by extension, this imperative reaches to us all: “Keep yourselves pure.” No one said it would be easy. But the fact that it can be commanded at all means that it is at least possible. And the fact that it is possible, the fact that miserable sinners like you and me might possibly keep ourselves pure, is a great and wonderful blessing, a benediction beyond comprehension. Something new and different has happened in the world. Our old rebellion has been undone. Lives have been turned around. The kingdom of God is emerging. And even people like you and me are being included. Thanks be to God!

So, hear and receive the good news of Jesus Christ, even as it is inextricably intertwined with these pastoral imperatives: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching....Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear....Keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

# Fight the Good Fight!

Psalm 49:1-20, 1 Timothy 6:1-21 (ESV)

June 11, 2006

“As for you, O man of God...Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” “Fight the good fight of the faith.” In the middle of these pious exhortations about righteousness and eternal life, we have this militant imperative: “Fight the good fight.” In fact, it is immediately after the Christian encouragement to love and gentleness that we have this militant imperative: “Fight the good fight.” We probably are not accustomed to such language in the church today. Such militancy might suggest militarism and all of its concomitant political incorrectness. What, then, can it possibly mean?

As we work our way through this letter of instruction to a young pastor, we encounter a lot of pastoral advice, a number of rules about church officers, some insights into ancient heresies that were disturbing the church, and not a little encouragement as Timothy goes about building up the church. That is to say, this kind of writing is different from the Psalms, different from the prophets, and very different from the gospels with the parables of Jesus and the accounts of his healing miracles and even of his birth, crucifixion, and resurrection. In fact, in passages like John 3:16 (ESV), “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life,” the gospel is right there on the surface for all the world to see, which is not at all the case in the kind of writing we are reading today. And yet, that does not at all mean that the gospel is absent from this writing. Quite the opposite. This is letter from an apostle of Jesus Christ to an early Christian pastor. The gospel of Jesus Christ is everywhere assumed. So I invite you to think together with me about the foundations, the underlying gospel assumptions, the good news so deeply imbedded in these strong words: “Fight the good fight.”

The first thing this says is that life is worth living. Life is a gift. And life is worth living. It may be hard. It may be a struggle. It may crash down upon us. But life is a remarkable, wonderful gift. And life is worth living. This good news stands not only over and against the cheapness of life during the days of the Roman Empire but also and especially over and against the gross devaluing of life in our own days by those who so blithely assert that life is meaningless and pointless. Secularists say that there is no God, that there is no creator, that there is no purpose or goal to life, and that life itself is a cosmic accident, a coincidental collision of molecules into complex, self-replicating structures. The conclusion would have to be that life has no meaning and that there is no right or wrong. But I submit to you that they are wrong. And not only are they wrong, but also they are insidious and pernicious, encouraging death and destruction. They are enemies of humanity. The gospel of Jesus Christ stands against such lies.

In one church which I served as pastor, in another state, a man committed suicide. There is no way now that we will ever know in this life what drove him to such despair. But this much I do know: at some level, his suicide represented a failure in my ministry to

communicate to him this very basic piece of the gospel, that life is worth living. There is more to the gospel than that, much more, but if you do not hear this piece first, you may not have a chance to hear the rest. And he may not ever have come to church enough to have heard that. So, whatever else you hear today, hear this: life is worth living. “Fight the good fight.”

Second, and building upon the first, the fight is worth fighting. This has more of an edge to it. To say only that life is worth living at least runs the risk of passivity. It at least runs the risk of suggesting that life is what happens to you. But life is more than passivity. Life is activity. Life is a struggle. Life is a fight that is worth fighting.

Of course, the question arises as to which fight is worth fighting. There are many which could be engaged. But here we are talking about the Christian life. So when we say, within the context of the Christian life, that the fight is worth fighting, we make particular reference to the Christian faith. And this is the fight that is worth fighting, the fight for which Paul gave his life, the fight which Paul urged Timothy to enter: the fight for the correct articulation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and therefore for the true content of the Christian faith. The false teachers distorted the gospel and therefore destroyed the Christian faith. And for Paul, and for us, this is worth fighting for.

Paul was not tolerant of falsehoods and lies. That would have been stupid and faithless. Paul was not inclusive of that which denied the person and work of Jesus Christ. Neither do we have to include such silliness in the church. Paul was not pleased with a diversity of faith among the one people of God, though he was quite aware that the one true faith would attract a diverse group of people. We do not need to celebrate diversity as such. Diversity is a simple fact. What we do celebrate is the wonderful unity we share in Christ despite our obvious diversity. That is what is remarkable. Neither was Paul a pluralist, though he lived in a pluralist empire that would make even our neo-pagan world seem tame. Paul was committed to the singularity and unity of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The fight is worth fighting. It was then. And it still is now. “Fight the good fight.”

Third, not only is life worth living, and not only is the fight worth fighting, but also there is a good fight, and it is this good fight that is worth fighting, for the sake of the good life, the Christian life. John Calvin offers a good insight into the nature of this urging: “Carelessness and self-indulgence spring from the desire of men to serve Christ without trouble, as if it were a pastime, whereas Christ calls his servants to warfare.”<sup>3</sup> Do you see the difference? How many people yet today approach their Christian life as if it were a hobby, one hobby among many, and pretty far down the list at that? How many people yet today treat their churchmanship as if it were just one more extra-curricular activity, and not a very important one at that, just something to do if nothing better comes along? No wonder Paul calls upon Timothy to fight the good fight. Warfare demands your full attention, your complete commitment, your unswerving dedication. If you blink, you lose. This good fight is the cause for which other things should be set aside. With anything

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<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas W. Torrance, vol. 10, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 10:276.

## Fight the Good Fight

less than military attentiveness and combat, we will not make it through the daily struggle fo life.

Calvin continues:

To encourage him [Timothy] to fight this fight bravely he [Paul] calls it good, that is blessed, and therefore not in any way to be avoided. For if earthly soldiers do not hesitate to fight when the outcome is uncertain and they are in danger of death, how much more bravely ought we to fight under the guidance and banner of Christ, where we can be certain beforehand of victory, more especially since a reward awaits us, far beyond the rewards usually given by commanders to their men, a glorious immortality and heavenly blessedness. It would be unworthy, if with such a hope before us we should faint or grow weary.<sup>4</sup>

I think Calvin expresses well the urgency which Paul places before us. “It would be unworthy, if with such a hope before us we should faint or grow weary.” So let us fight the good fight.

We have already begun to touch on this good fight in terms of fighting for the faith and the gospel. But Paul goes on to define it even more precisely when he uses the same word, “good,” to refer not only to the fight of the Christian life but also to the “good confession” that Jesus Christ himself made in his testimony before Pontius Pilate. What was the good confession that Jesus made?

Christ made His confession before Pilate not in many words but in reality, that is by his voluntary submission to death. For although Christ chose to keep silent before Pilate rather than speak in His own defence, since He had come there already devoted to a certain condemnation, yet in His very silence there was a defence of His teaching no less magnificent than if He had pleaded His case with a loud voice. For He ratified it with His own blood and with the sacrifice of His death better than with any words.<sup>5</sup>

That is to say, Jesus maintained his faith in God. He refused to hate those who persecuted him. He refused to sin. He fulfilled his calling. He gave himself up for you and for me. Jesus made the good confession before Pilate, the confession of his faith in God, the confession of his absolute commitment to God, not with something like the Apostles’ Creed which we use every Sunday but with his actions and with the giving of his life, with the result that he won for us the forgiveness of our sin and the promise of eternal life. How can we do any less than to follow him? “Whenever our hearts waver, let us

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<sup>4</sup>Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 10:276.

<sup>5</sup>Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 10:278.

remember immediately to look to the death of Christ for strength. What cowardice it would be to desert such a leader who goes before us to show us the way.”<sup>6</sup>

Because Jesus made the good confession of his faith in God, so is the good fight which we are to fight defined in terms of the Christian faith. Thus, “Teach and urge these things.” Stand up for the gospel of Jesus Christ and for the Christian faith. And that does not mean making nice. It means speaking the truth and therefore speaking out against those who do not speak the truth. There is still plenty of opportunity for that today.

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

This is not the way to get along with everybody. But this is the way to stand up for Jesus Christ. “Fight the good fight.”

So, the underlying gospel here, the gospel everywhere assumed here, is that life is worth living, the fight is worth fighting, and the good fight has been defined by Jesus Christ. What are the ongoing implications of this gospel? Paul writes, “Fight the good fight of the faith.” What does that mean? Hear the gospel. Believe the gospel. Live the gospel. There are the implications for the Christian life. “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time.” We are called to live our lives in ways that are appropriate to the gospel.

Finally, the book concludes with the highest and most pointed exhortation that the aim of the good fight is to keep the gospel pure and to protect the content of the faith: “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.” This is the treasure of the gospel and of the faith. It is worth protecting.

The time may come in your life and in mine when false teachers invade the church even at the highest levels and try to teach us any number of falsehoods: that Jesus Christ is not divine, that God can be reimagined in any way we please, that the Trinity can be renamed in any way we please, that the Scriptures are not reliable, that we know better today than did the authors of Scripture what is right and what is wrong, that the content of the faith we have received does not matter, that obedience does not matter, and that the

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<sup>6</sup>Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 10:278.

## **Fight the Good Fight**

Christian life does not matter. If and when that day comes, let us remember what Paul wrote to Timothy: “Fight the good fight of the faith.” Let us take up arms appropriate to defending the Christian faith.

*To the blessed and only Sovereign,  
the King of kings and Lord of lords,  
who alone has immortality,  
who dwells in unapproachable light,  
whom no one has ever seen or can see,  
be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.*

# Do Not Be Ashamed

Psalm 10:1-18, 2 Timothy 1:1-18 (ESV)

June 18, 2006

“Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.” “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord.” That is, do not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We know all too well that people are ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ today. But what we may not realize is that being ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ was already a problem in the early days of the Christian faith. People today want to make the gospel fit into the way everyone else thinks about the world, as if it were only one faith among many, a matter of personal preference and choice, a quaint but harmless acknowledgment of the God of one’s ancestors. But a gospel that is not threatening is a gospel that cannot comfort, and so it is no gospel at all. Beware a gospel that makes no demands.

Already in ancient Ephesus and Rome, even people who at some level wanted to be members of the church were uncomfortable with all the fuss being made over the faith, uncomfortable with the suffering of Jesus Christ, uncomfortable with the challenge being made to Rome, and uncomfortable with prospects of suffering themselves. “Let’s be reasonable,” I can just hear them saying. “You can love Jesus in your heart. Just don’t make a public stand.” Some had already turned away from Paul, embarrassed, no doubt, and perhaps not a little afraid that he had been arrested and imprisoned. How unbecoming a minister of the gospel! Surely God would not approve of that! They wanted a respectable pastor. The priests of the other gods were not being arrested! Why did theirs have to be? So it was that Paul found it necessary to encourage Timothy and, perhaps, through him even admonish others not to be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We would do well to hear that word yet today.

“Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.” The basis of these powerful imperatives is the underlying gospel to which they refer. We need to hear that first before we can hear anything else. Paul presents that gospel to us here very succinctly. It has two parts: God saved us and called us to a holy calling. God saved us from what we were and called us to what we are to be. These two parts are distinct but inseparable. One looks back while the other looks forward. To have the first without the latter would go nowhere. But it would not be possible to have the latter without the former. So, God both saved us from what we were and also called us to what we are to be. We will expand upon that in just a moment.

Before we get into those details of the gospel, it is worthwhile to acknowledge the reason and cause of the gospel. There is always someone who thinks that the gospel of Jesus Christ has to do with how good we are and with what wonderful things we do. It should be evident on the face of it that such a position is ridiculous, but it continues to get articulated and advanced down through the centuries. Again, there is always someone who thinks that the gospel of Jesus Christ has to do with how good we are and with what wonderful things we do. But think about that. If the gospel had to do with how good we already are, we would not need the gospel. If the gospel had to do with what wonderful

things we already do, we would not need the gospel. If we were already that good and we already did such wonderful things, we would not need to be saved. The gospel would make no sense at all. But since we do have a gospel, that indicates that we do need to be saved, which is to say that we are not as good as we think and that the deeds we do are not so wonderful as we assume. Again, that should be obvious.

Nevertheless, Paul found it necessary to say again right here at the beginning of his articulation of the gospel that it is “not because of our works.” That had been a major argument running throughout his ministry. This assertion runs throughout his writings. Martin Luther rediscovered this in Paul’s writings 1500 years later, and that sparked the Protestant Reformation. The gospel of Jesus Christ is “not because of our works,” that is to say, it is not caused or brought about because of our good works. If anything, it is occasioned by our evil works. William Temple has expressed this as well as anyone:

All of is God; the only thing of my own which I can contribute to my own redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed. My capacity for fellowship with God is God’s gift in creation; my partial deliverance from self-centeredness, my response to truth, beauty and goodness is God’s gift through the natural world which he sustains in being and the history of man which he controls. One thing is my own—the self-centeredness which leads me to find my apparent good in what is other and less than the true good. This true good is the divine love and what flows from it appreciated as its expression. In response to that good, man finds his only true freedom, for only then does the self act as what it truly is and thus achieves true expression....As the experience of grace becomes deeper, the conviction of its all sufficiency becomes more inevitable and more wholesome, until at last a man knows, and is finally ‘saved’ by knowing, that all good is of God alone. We are clay in the hands of the potter and our welfare is to know it.<sup>7</sup>

Now, given that the gospel is “not because of our works,” it turns out that the opposite is true, that the gospel is due solely to the “purpose and grace” of God Almighty. The gospel has its origin solely in the goodness and initiative of God. The gospel has its accomplishment solely in the will and power of God. The gospel had its beginnings in the eternal decrees of God, and it came to its open expression in God’s good time in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was this “purpose and grace” of God “which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.” Again, it could not possibly be based on our works when it was given to us before we were. Instead, this has been part of the eternal will of God. And it was this “purpose and grace” of God “which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus.” Jesus was not a patch up job for a botched creation. Jesus was the point of the plan all along. So it is that all is of God, and for that we are grateful.

Given this background of the source of the gospel, now we come to the specification of the content of the gospel. Our Savior Christ Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Again, there are two parts to the

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<sup>7</sup>William Temple, *Nature, God and Man* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1934), 401-402.

gospel: Christ abolished death and brought us life instead. He put an end to our final enemy and he opened the door to life eternal. Of all the problems of human life—food and drink, clothing and shelter, social problems, psychological problems economic problems, political problems, military problems—of all the problems of human life and existence, this is the final one: in the end, we die. And it is not only the case that we die, but it is also the case that death is the wages of sin (Romans 6:23), which is to say that we die not merely of natural causes but even more we die because of our sin, our self-imposed estrangement from God. The greatest human problem has to do with this brokenness of our relationship with God. The true perspective on the human predicament is this theological one. The help we need most of all is help that God alone can provide.

All of this is to say what Paul says in many places, though he does not say explicitly here, that Christ's conquering of death on our behalf is tied directly to the forgiveness of our sin. The way he abolished death for us is, oddly enough, that he died for us. He took upon himself on the cross the punishment for our sin. And because he died for our sin, the price has been paid for our sin, and thus we are set free from eternal death. That is how he abolished death. And that is why this is gospel, good news, a saving word of grace, beyond what we could imagine or dare to hope. In Jesus Christ, God has provided for the forgiveness of our sin and therefore for the abolishment of our death. This by itself is more than we deserved. And this is only the first half of the gospel.

The second half of the gospel is that he "brought life and immortality to light." Not only did Jesus Christ abolish death for us, but also he has brought life to us. The second would not be possible without the first, but the second is more than a simple extension of the first. Not only has eternal death been abolished, but also and especially eternal life has been initiated. Not only has our estrangement from God been forgiven, but also provision has been made for us to live in the presence of God. Not only have we been justified, but also we have been redeemed. And even as Jesus conquered death by dying, so did Jesus bring "life and immortality to light" by his resurrection, by God raising him from the dead to a new and different life, eternal life, forever beyond the reach of death, and his resurrection is the promise of our own. That is the gospel. That is the good news. That is the word of God by which alone we live.

Given that this is the gospel of Jesus Christ, note what its implications were for Paul. It was this gospel for which, in his own words, "I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do." His being a preacher and apostle and teacher did not lead to a life of ease. It did not lead to fame and glory. His being a preacher of the gospel, an apostle of Jesus Christ, and a teacher of the Christian faith led directly to his suffering, not only in various mistreatments along the way but also and particularly in his arrest, imprisonment, trial, and eventual execution. And how better could he preach the suffering of Jesus Christ than by suffering himself? Why should the servant expect any better than the master? Our Lord and Master suffered on our behalf. Why should we who would follow him expect any other? And this is where we get back to the initial imperatives about not being ashamed, since suffering is, in our feeble minds, intimately associated with the shame of suffering.

Not only is suffering bad in and of itself, but also and even more so there is always the suspicion, the assumption or even the presumption that the suffering is somehow deserved, that the sufferer had it coming, that the sufferer brought it upon himself, and

## Do Not Be Ashamed

that is the source of our shame. And that is why Paul had to say, in direct contradiction of the natural human response and in order to counter the misunderstanding of the suffering necessarily inherent in the gospel, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.” “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord.” That is to say, do not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Of what was there to be ashamed? The suffering, of course. The suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross. Think about it. Everyone else was worshiping great and glorious Roman gods. The Christians were worshiping a Jewish teacher who was crucified by the Romans outside Jerusalem. He had been crucified, dead, and buried. Who could be proud of that? So it was that Paul had to teach his hearers about the majesty of God hidden in the humility of Christ, about the glory of God hidden in the suffering of Christ, about the gift of God hidden in the sacrifice of Christ, about the divinity of Christ hidden in the humanity of Christ. It all seems backwards or upside down. It all seems shameful. But Paul has taught us that it is praiseworthy. And we are called to share in the suffering of the gospel by the power of God. It is not something we can do on our own. But God can work in us that which is greater than we can do on our own..

As an encouragement to Timothy and so to us, Paul offers himself as an example, even while he was writing from prison: “I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.” What joy, what confidence, and what faith is embodied in these words! Paul is not ashamed either of the prior suffering of Jesus Christ or of his own current suffering. And note that his joy about knowing Christ is not in the past tense. He is not talking about the earthly life of Jesus. He is talking about knowing Jesus Christ now, after the resurrection and ascension but before Christ’s return. He is talking about knowing the resurrected and living Jesus Christ now, and for this we give thanks. Moreover, he is confident in the continuing goodness and power of God, for he knows that Jesus Christ will guard and protect the gospel far beyond Paul’s ability, power, or responsibility to do so. “I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.”

As an additional encouragement to Timothy and so to us, Paul offers a friend as an example. “May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me.” Here was a man who understood the gospel. He was not ashamed of the cross of Jesus Christ, and he was not ashamed of the chains of a servant of Jesus Christ. He knew they were signs of authenticity and veracity. May God bless us with such faith and insight.

So it is that Paul exhorts Timothy to keep the faith. “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” Stand by not only the general content of the Christian faith but the very words by which you have learned and received it, the confession of faith which you learned from your grandmother and your mother, the confession of faith which you made when you were baptized, the confession of faith you were taught when you were ordained. Keep the faith! “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me...Guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” Why is it today that so many people think that innovation is a good thing? Why is it today that so many people think it is a virtue to rewrite the Christian

faith? Why is it today that so many people want to refashion the gospel to fit their own predilections? Why should we not be content to follow the pattern of the sound words we have received from those who have gone before us? Lord, help us!

Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

# Remember Jesus Christ!

Isaiah 43:1-7, 2 Timothy 2:1-26 (ESV)

June 25, 2006

“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!” “Remember Jesus Christ!” Can you imagine having to tell that to a minister? “Remember Jesus Christ!” Can you imagine having to tell that to a church? “Remember Jesus Christ!” Can you realize that Paul is telling that to us yet today? “Remember Jesus Christ” is more than good advice. “Remember Jesus Christ” is a battle cry for the proclamation of the gospel, a banner for rallying the church, a call to arms for all believers, and an exhortation and a challenge to us yet today.

“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!” When all else fails, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.” When the world turns against you, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.” When society becomes confused and lost, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.” And when even the church refuses to hear the gospel, then, especially, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.”

For you see, Jesus Christ stands at the center of history, as well as at the beginning and the end of time. Jesus Christ stands at the center of the world, whether the world knows it or not. Jesus Christ stands at the heart and center of the church, no matter what else we do. And Jesus Christ stands at the center of our lives, your life and mine. This is why we are here today, not any other reason. This is why we bear the name, “Christian.” This is who we are and what we are about.

Whatever else we think, whatever else we say, whatever else we do, we want to be sure to remember Jesus Christ, to keep him front and center, to believe in him, to honor him, to obey him, and to cherish him. Otherwise, we have nothing at all. There is always the temptation for us to turn our attention to other persons, to other figures and events, to other powers and would-be powers,<sup>8</sup> but we are forbidden to do so. We are forbidden to do so, that is, if we wish to continue to be faithful and if we wish to continue to be Christian.

Money is not the center of life, though it would like to make us think it is. Political power does not have the final say so about who we are, though some live and die for it. Even nuclear bombs are not the greatest power on earth, though we are sorely tempted to think so. And within the church of Jesus Christ neither the ministers, the elders, nor the members are the center of attention. Instead, we are centered upon the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This is what we are to remember.

It is significant that Paul did not write today’s reading from a position of ease and comfort but from one of suffering and bondage. Paul did not write this letter as a free man but as one in prison and in chains. And yet, his lack of freedom does not mean that the

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<sup>8</sup>*The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2004), “The Theological Declaration of Barmen,” 8.12, p. 249.

word of which he writes is without freedom. Quite the opposite. For Paul contrasts his bondage with the freedom of the word of God: "I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!" Paul is a preacher whose significance does not derive from position, status, or even the approbation of the people, but entirely from the word of God. For the word of God is free from the constrictions of human conventions. The word of God shall be spoken whether the people want it to be or not. The gospel of Jesus Christ shall be preached whether people care about it or not. The saving word of God shall be proclaimed to the ends of the earth, without hindrance and without obstacle, for nothing can stand in its way. The inevitable victory of the gospel has to do with the freedom of the word of God.

Paul's suffering did not diminish the validity of the gospel he preached. If anything, his suffering validated the gospel he preached. For despite Paul's suffering, the gospel went forth. Through his very weakness, the healing power of God touched others. By his undeserved suffering, people were reminded of the undeserved suffering of Jesus Christ, made to remember the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and therefore given good reason to remember Christ raised from the dead. "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." Everything Paul did, and everything that happened to him, was all for the sake of the hearers of his gospel, all so that they might come to know the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and so knowing, believe and be saved.

With this call to remembrance and this ringing proclamation of the freedom of the word of God, Paul now turns to the most striking affirmation of all:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;  
if we endure, we will also reign with him;  
if we deny him, he also will deny us;  
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself.

Did you catch the change at the end? Even when we are faithless, God is still faithful! That is the very nature of God, to be faithful. When life fades away, when friends fail, when the world dissolves, God is faithful yet. This is something we can hang onto! Better yet, we know that he hangs onto us. When the hard times come and when the storms roll in, God is faithful yet. God has called us to be here, to be together, and to be God's church in this time and place, and God has not abandoned us. We rejoice in the goodness and glory of God.

Now, think with me about the implications of this good news. On the face of it, today's reading was written by an older apostle to a younger pastor in Ephesus whose ministry had been disrupted by false teachers stirring up trouble in his congregation. And where better for Timothy to find courage and hope than in remembering Jesus Christ, affirming the freedom of the word of God, and rejoicing in the faithfulness of God? And yet, is there not something more going on here? Surely Timothy knew these basics of the Christian faith, even if he needed to be reminded of them. And the letter, though highly personal, does not seem at all private. It is as if it were written to be read by others, also. It is as if it were intended not only for Timothy but also for the church, not only for the

## Remember Jesus Christ!

pastor but also for the people, not only for the preacher but also for the congregation he served.

All are charged to remember Christ risen from the dead, all are urged to realize the freedom of the word of God, and all are exhorted to rejoice in—or to tremble before—the faithfulness of God Almighty. As John Calvin writes of these letters:

Here Paul advises his beloved Timothy with what kind of teaching he is to build up God’s Church, what vices and enemies he is to resist, and how many annoyances he must endure. He exhorts him not to yield in the face of any difficulty, to overcome all crises by his courage, to restrain by his authority the licentiousness of wicked men and not to bestow gifts out of a selfish desire for men’s favour. In short, in these two epistles we are shown a living picture of the true government of the Church.<sup>9</sup>

And so it is that this word of God has been preserved for the church throughout the centuries, for all of us to read over Timothy’s shoulder, as it were, for all of us to overhear, for all of us to receive and to obey, yet today.

So, how does this apply to our lives today? What does this word say to us, here at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church? First of all, we, too, are called to remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David. This last phrase emphasizes the humanity of Jesus Christ, which has been contested at different times in the church’s history, though it seems not to be so now. It is what we celebrate at Christmas. Without Christ’s humanity, there would be no gospel and no salvation. The first phrase, “risen from the dead,” goes to the heart of the matter, affirming the divinity of Jesus Christ. It is what we celebrate at Easter. Without this, we would not concern ourselves with “the offspring of David.” Without this, we would not even remember the name of Jesus today. Without this, we would not be gathered here to worship God today. Without this, we would have nothing. But with this, we have everything.

The resurrection of the crucified Christ is the chief article of the Christian faith. It is the main point of the proclamation of the gospel. Humanly speaking, there is no way to overemphasize the preaching of this good news for all the world to hear. Here is our only hope, here is our only comfort, here is our only courage with which to face life and to go out into the world. “In the resurrection of Jesus Christ we all have a sure pledge of our own. For he who confesses that Christ has risen, affirms also that we shall rise, for Christ has not risen for Himself but for us. The Head must not be separated from His members. Besides, in Christ’s resurrection there is contained the completion of our redemption and salvation.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas W. Torrance, vol. 10, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 10:182.

<sup>10</sup>Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 10:309.

“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David.” Of course we feed the hungry. Of course we house the homeless. Of course we clothe the naked and visit the sick. I do not know how well we go about visiting those in prison, but we are supposed to do that, too. And why do we do all these things? In the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ! Apart from him, we are nothing. Apart from him, what we do is nothing, in a world of incomprehensible neediness. And yet, if we remember him, and name his name, and speak a good word for him, we share with all the world a treasure more valuable than food, drink, or clothing. We share with all the world the knowledge and faith of its Lord and Savior, the one through whom all things were made, the one in whom all things hold together, the one toward whom all creation hurries as we near the end of time.

Second, we affirm and rejoice in the power and the freedom of the word of God. This has been one of the most important emphases of the Presbyterian Church. There used to be a time in the life of the Christian church when the bishops could tell the priests what to preach. There used to be a time in the life of the Christian church when the kings could tell the ministers what to preach. And there used to be a time in the life of the Christian church when the landowners could tell the preachers what to preach. So it was that our mothers and fathers in the faith fought and struggled and shed blood and some even died for the high privilege of the freedom of the pulpit in the Presbyterian Church. They did this so that by the freedom of the pulpit we could recognize the freedom of the word of God. They did this so that by the freedom of the pulpit we could provide for freedom in preaching and hearing the word of God in our congregations. The two go together.

Do you realize what this high and precious freedom means? No one can tell a Presbyterian minister what to preach: not the pope, not the president, not the generals, not the captains of industry, not the elders, not the deacons, and not the members. Of course, no one can make them listen, either! The freedom of the pulpit is met by the freedom of the pews. People go where they are fed, and that is as it should be. The important point here is that our mothers and fathers in the Presbyterian Church insisted that the content of the sermon be determined between God and the preacher alone. It is to be forged in the furnace of prayer, hammered on the anvil of hard study of the word, and tempered for the hearts of those who would hear it. This is our heritage which we cannot abandon. The true proclamation of the gospel, the telling of the glory of God, and the announcement of the good news of salvation all depend upon the freedom of the word which finds its highest expression in the freedom of the pulpit. This is the only reason ministers have to be brave, to try to present themselves as workers who have no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. To forfeit this freedom would be to cease to be who we are. To give away this responsibility would be to fall into that ungodliness that eats away at a church like gangrene.

Third, on the basis of our remembering Jesus Christ and affirming the freedom of God’s word, we also rejoice in the faithfulness of God. The church is not a celebration of human faithfulness, for then we would not have much to celebrate. The church is not a place to boast about human accomplishment or about the strength of the human heart, mind, or soul, for then we would not have much about which to boast. Instead, the church is the place where we proclaim, receive, rejoice in, and live by, all that God has done for us. It is God who made us, God who sustains us, God who judges us, and God who saves us. This is the faithfulness by which alone we live. It is God who has called us together,

**Remember Jesus Christ!**

you and me, church and pastor, and now church and associate pastor, and put us all together in this time and place to be his very own. It is God who has helped us in the past and who will continue to save us in the future. As we heard from the prophet, Isaiah:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

After all, “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.” And so I say to you again, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

## Times of Difficulty

Exodus 7:1-13, 2 Timothy 3:1-17 (ESV)

July 2, 2006

“Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty....All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” Here is the perennial situation of the church: “In the last days there will come times of difficulty.” Here is the only answer: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” The first verse of this chapter acknowledges the hard reality of our lives together. The last verses of this chapter acknowledge the stronger reality of the saving word of God. We would do well today to continue to acknowledge both and to learn how to move from one to the other. “There will come times of difficulty....All Scripture is breathed out by God.”

We must admit that Paul delivers a remarkable catalog of the ills of the church. “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” It is hardly necessary to comment on each of these. But it is noteworthy that several of them have to do with misdirected love:<sup>11</sup> “lovers of self, lovers of money...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”

The great truth underlying these distortions these misdirected loves, is that God created us to love him. If any lesser being did that, it would be inappropriate. But God actually deserves our love. We were created to love God. That is who we are. That is what we are about. And it is the great joy and privilege of the church to have been called and gathered together for the express purpose of having our love redirected toward God, its only proper goal. That is why Jesus Christ poured out the love of God upon us, so that we might again learn to love God. That is why we come and sing God’s praises, exulting in his love for us, trying both to cultivate and to express our love for him.

The sad reality of the church is that we do not always live up to this calling. Sometimes even we slip back into old ways, into inappropriate ways, into misdirected love: “lovers of self, lovers of money...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.” To love self rather than God is the original sin into which all of humanity has fallen. To love money rather than God is the root of all evil.<sup>12</sup> To love pleasure rather than God is to be distracted by the good things of creation as if they were the Creator.<sup>13</sup> But to love God is

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<sup>11</sup>Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 75.

<sup>12</sup>1 Timothy 6:10.

<sup>13</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*.

what we were created to do and what we have been saved to do. It is our highest joy and our greatest good. So how can we find our way home to our true love?

Paul offers several directives and assurances. First of all, in regard to those creating the times of difficulty in the church, Paul writes, “Avoid such people.” The reason for that is obvious. As he teaches us elsewhere, “Bad company ruins good morals.”<sup>14</sup> The first step toward avoiding and reducing difficulty in the church is to stay away from the people stirring it up. Strangely enough, people like that seem to be magnetic, gathering other people around them. But if we can be strong enough to avoid them, their influence will be reduced and negated.

Paul then writes, by way of assurance, “They will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all.” This is remarkable. Sometimes we give evil more credit than it is due. It certainly appears to be powerful. It can be frightening. It can be destructive. But evil is negative and parasitic. It cannot thrive forever. In fact, it has already been defeated on the cross. Its power has been undone. Its “doom is sure.”<sup>15</sup> So, “they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all.”

But the even greater reasons not to be overcome by the difficulties in the church are the positive ones. “You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me.” “You,” Timothy, “have followed my teaching.” There are nine things Paul names here. I do not mean to neglect the other eight by naming only the first. I mean only that his conduct, his faith, his love, and all the rest can be included in his teaching. Of course, his “teaching” refers first of all to his teaching of the content of the Christian faith, to the gospel, to the truth, to the doctrine which was so important for Timothy to impart to others. But Paul’s teaching included also all of this faith, life, and witness, what he did and how he dealt with what was done to him. Paul affirms that Timothy has already followed this, and so he encourages him to continue to do so. “As for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings.” It is with this original teaching of the faith that difficulties in the church are well met.

At this point, we have reached the foundation. “From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s apostleship was not based on his popularity. Timothy’s ministry was not based on good feelings. Christian faith, Christian ministry, and Christian life are based on the rock solid objectivity of the sacred writings, the Holy Scripture, the revealed and recorded word of God, the Bible. It is through the word of God that we receive grace. It is through the word of God that we receive faith. It is through the word of God that we receive salvation. This is the answer to all difficulties in the church.

To be as clear as possible about this, Paul makes an additional affirmation: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for

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<sup>14</sup>1 Corinthians 15:33.

<sup>15</sup>Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” stanza 3.

every good work.” When Paul was dead and gone, Timothy would still have the Scripture to which to turn. When Timothy was dead and gone, the ministers who came after him would still have the Scripture to which to turn. And yet today, after two-thousand years of ministers dead and gone we still have the Scripture to which to turn. They have not yet failed the church. They will not fail us now.

Three-hundred-sixty years ago, the authors of the “Westminster Confession of Faith” continued to appreciate the importance of the Scripture in terms they had learned from Paul, and they had this to say about them:

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.<sup>16</sup>

Now as we come up to our own day, think together with me about the nature and reality of the Christian church in terms of what we have learned from this passage about the word of God. Exactly who and what are we? First, the church is the body of Jesus Christ. This does not mean in any way that we are an extension of the incarnation of the Son of God. That would be dangerous thinking. But it does mean that the church is a living organism, given its identity by Jesus Christ. And it does mean that the church is not defined by buildings, pastors, officers, committees, bureaucracies, budgets, ethnicities, nationalities, or anything else besides Jesus Christ. Our identity as the body of Christ stands over against every other claim made upon us.

The significance of this is that, second, as the body of Jesus Christ, the church lives by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the word of God, recorded in the Scripture. Where there is no preaching of the gospel, there is no church. Where the gospel is preached and creates a hearing for itself, there the church exists. Thus, the church does not live by liturgy, program, emotion, self-will, or its own strength or fellowship, but only by the preaching of the gospel. Nor does the church depend upon the preacher of the gospel, but upon the gospel that is preached. This means that the single most important thing the church can do, and the highest duty of its officers, is to provide for the faithful, energetic, passionate, and winsome preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, every Sunday.

Third, as the body of Jesus Christ living by the preaching of the gospel, the church is a fellowship of people bound together by a shared faith in, and obedience to, God as made known in Jesus Christ. Actually, it is the Holy Spirit who does the binding together,

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<sup>16</sup>*The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2004), “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” 6.001, p. 121.

and the shared faith is a sign of the binding together, not the cause. This means that we are a people of prayer, night and day, with and for each other and for all who are in need. It also means that we are a people of constant study, ever seeking to learn more of the Bible and of the historic Christian faith. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

Fourth, as the body of Jesus Christ living by the preaching of the gospel, a fellowship bound together by a shared faith in God, the church is ever committed to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with others, bringing them into the church as the body of Jesus Christ, and thus enlarging the fellowship. This may have been Presbyterians’ weakest point during the last half-century. We cannot afford for it to be so any longer. As a body, the church fellowship is either growing or dying. It is a part of who we are as the body of Christ that we constantly strive to bring other people into the body.

Fifth, as the body of Jesus Christ living by the preaching of the gospel, a fellowship bound together by a shared faith in God and ever seeking to grow, the church is an agent of mission and compassion. Good works do not make us the Christian church. Good works flow from our already being the Christian church. Of course, we must not let “the good become the enemy of the best.”<sup>17</sup> That is, while we want to do all good works, we must not let them take away our prior focus upon, and proclamation of, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, the Son of God. But given that center, we strive to live obediently. This is who and what we are as the church of Jesus Christ.

“Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.... All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

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<sup>17</sup>To borrow a phrase from David Wright, Professor of Church History at the University of Edinburgh.

## Be Ready

Psalm 22:1-21a, 2 Timothy 4:1-22 (ESV)

July 9, 2006

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” Although this is an exhortation, an encouragement to do something, there is an underlying reality on which this charge is based. There is a word to preach. There is a gospel to proclaim. There is good news to share. This word to preach is the word of God. This gospel to proclaim is the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this good news to share is for you and for me.

What is this word of God, this gospel, this good news? There are many aspects of it. Part of it has to do with God creating the world, which he did with a word. Part of it has to do with God calling a people to be his own, which he did with a word. Part of it has to do with God caring for his people, which he did with a word. Part of it has to do with the end of time, when a word of judgment will be spoken. There are many aspects of the word of God. There are even many aspects of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Part of it has to do with his birth. Part of it has to do with his teachings and parables. Part of it has to do with his miracles and healings. But the heart of the word of God, the very gospel of Jesus Christ, can be usefully summarized in two words: the good news of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

Thus Paul preached Christ crucified. His life, his teachings, his healings, and his ministry were all concentrated into that moment of supreme obedience when Christ willingly gave his life for us, suffering false accusation without objection, suffering wrongful conviction without defense, suffering flogging without striking back, suffering crucifixion without cursing those who crucified him, suffering death without condemning those who killed him, without ceasing to believe in the goodness of God, without ceasing to love even those who hated him. It was on the cross of Jesus Christ that the powers of sin, death, and evil were broken. He who was without sin took on our sin, all of our sin, yet it did not make him sin. He who was without evil withstood the terrible onslaught of evil but frustrated and so undid it because he never responded in kind. He who was life itself willingly submitted himself to death and, strangely enough, so occasioned the death of death.

The crucifixion was not the end of Jesus Christ. If Jesus had only died as he died, it would have been a noble death, but it hardly would have been a saving death, it almost surely would not have been remembered, and it certainly would not have been proclaimed. But the crucifixion was not the end of Jesus Christ. And the crucifixion is not complete in and of itself. The crucifixion is the necessary, negative premise of the subsequent, glorious resurrection. God vindicated the willing self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ by raising him from the dead, restoring him to life, the same body and person, but forever beyond the reach of death. He raised him to life eternal. God did not raise just anyone to life eternal. God did not first raise to life eternal one who had lived a long life and died a peaceful death. Nor did God first raise to eternal life any one of the hundreds of others—perhaps

thousands?—who had been so cruelly crucified. He raised this one, his Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, who had willingly submitted to being so wrongly crucified.

So there are two parts of this, distinguishable but inseparable. The crucified one was resurrected. And the resurrected one is none other than the one who had been crucified. And these two parts of this one event standing at the center of the history of the world lead directly to the two aspects of the very gospel of Jesus Christ: the good news of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. On the cross of Jesus Christ, he effected a wonderful exchange with us. He took on our infirmities that we might be well. He took on our sin that we might be forgiven. He took on our misery that we might be joyful. He took on our death that we might live forever. He took on our gonewrongness that we might be set right. The horror of his death indicates that there was no other way to accomplish what he did. The glory of his resurrection indicates that what he did was perfectly in agreement with the will of God.

Of all the words in the word of God, these two words are most to be proclaimed: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of all the words in the word of God, these two words of death and resurrection form the foundation of the two words of the gospel: the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life. So these are not rootless or empty promises. The good news is anchored in the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And because of that reality, we can know, believe, receive, and rejoice in the reality of this gospel: your sins have been forgiven, and you have been promised eternal life. Thanks be to God!

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...preach the word.” Already Paul had told Timothy to keep and to guard the treasure with which he had been entrusted. And now he tells him to preach it, to proclaim it, to share it with all the world. This is why he was guarding it. It is necessary to keep and to guard the treasure. If that is not done, we have nothing. But it is not enough to keep and to guard the treasure. For if that alone is done, we still have nothing. It is of the nature of the gospel to be preached. It is the purpose of the gospel to be proclaimed. The reason for the gospel is to share it with others. And this is what Paul told Timothy to do. And in telling Timothy to preach, was he not also telling the church, all of us, to listen, to hear, to believe, to receive, to absorb, to digest, to obey, to live in, and to rejoice in this good news? There is nothing magic about the gospel. Preaching is not done to an empty room. Preaching is done for the sake of those whom it gathers, for all of us who are hungry for the word of God in our own lives.

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...be ready in season and out of season.” The ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be confined to eleven o’clock Sunday morning. Neither can the life of the church of Jesus Christ be confined to eleven o’clock Sunday morning. What we do here on Sunday morning—gathering to glorify God, reading, preaching, and hearing the word of God, and giving thanks to God—what we do here on Sunday morning is the heart of our life as the church, but it is not the whole of our life as the church. The minister of word and sacrament must be ready for Sunday morning but must also be ready for every other day of the week. And so must we all, as the church, continue to be the church as we go forth from here into work and play, school and home, indeed into all the world.

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” For all the importance of private reading,

learning, and even memorizing the word of God, there is a continuing importance of the public preaching and teaching of the word. We need both, and the latter in particular is not to be neglected. The minister is to preach and to teach, for that is the way that God has appointed for us to hear the gospel and to learn the faith. Given the opportunity, we might have arranged things differently, but no one asked us. So this is what we have been given.

Given this apostolic exhortation and the gospel undergirding it, why must we be ready both to preach and to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ? “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” Does this not sound like the times in which we live? We human beings suffer from a lust for novelty. We labor under the misconception that whatever is newest is best. This often results in the rejection of the ancient wisdom of the church surrounding the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have learned recently of efforts within the larger church to rename the Trinity in ways intended to be more expressive of God’s overflowing love. Some of the more striking suggestions are “Rainbow, Ark, and Dove,” “Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River,” “Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-giving Womb,” “Sun, Light, and Burning Ray,” and “Fire that Consumes, Sword that Divides, and Storm that Melts Mountains.” Such efforts are not new. And for some years now, the Trinitarian personal language of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” has, in some parts of the church, been replaced by threefold functional language such as “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.” But are not these novelties indicative of itching ears?

What most if not all of these proposals share is the abhorrence of all things male and the determination never to allow a single male noun or pronoun to cross one’s lips. But that creates a problem for the Christian faith. Few if any people dispute that Jesus Christ was male. The Bible and all the historic creeds understand Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus frequently addressed God as “Father.” He instructed his disciples to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” To avoid such realities runs the risk of separating the faith from its historical truths and wandering away into myths. “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” are not merely replaceable images of God but are the very names of God. We are not at liberty to change those or to depart from them.

The danger of the new proposals is, of course, that the distinctives of the Christian faith will be lost. The already commonplace expression, “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,” may seem more benign than other suggestions but for that very reason may be more insidious. People of various theistic faiths might be able to refer to God as “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,” but only Christians believe that God the Father is eternally the Father of the Son and that God the Son is eternally the Son of the Father. This is distinctive Christian language, and as such it is necessary and irreplaceable Christian language. So faithful, historic, and traditional Christian worship will continue to address God as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” It is no accident that we have four explicitly Trinitarian doxologies in the service every Sunday morning. I am grateful for this and other expressions of this church’s commitment to sound teaching of the Christian faith.

Given the apostolic exhortation the gospel undergirding it, and the context within which we find ourselves, what are the implications of the gospel for the ministry and for the church? “As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an

## Be Ready

evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” These words are no less true for Mr. Thomas or for me today than they were for Timothy nearly 2,000 years ago. We commit ourselves to these. We want to be right thinking pastors, to endure suffering with and for you, to work with and beside you as evangelists, preaching the gospel and building up the church, and so to fulfill our ministry here. And we invite and urge you to be both a congregation formed by such ministry and also a congregation fostering such ministry. The two go hand in hand.

To conclude today’s sermon, we can do no better than to hear Paul’s farewell, itself a wonderful proclamation of the gospel: “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

# For the Sake of the Faith

Isaiah 55:6-13, Titus 1:1-4 (ESV)

February 19, 2006

The Apostle Paul, whatever his faults, whatever his flaws, whatever his shortcomings, never lacked for confidence in the reality of his calling to be an apostle and never lacked for confidence in the reality of the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And for this we are grateful, considering that, humanly speaking, Paul more than any other was responsible for preaching the gospel beyond Jerusalem, around the Mediterranean Sea, and across the Roman Empire, so that it has reached even us today, and that, as a part of his pastoral ministry, Paul wrote the several letters we have which make up a great deal of the New Testament, recording the gospel of Jesus Christ so that it has reached even us today.

Again, whatever his faults, whatever his flaws, whatever his shortcomings, and I would have to suppose they were many, the Apostle Paul never lacked for confidence in the reality of his calling to be an apostle or in the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when he was attacked on either count, either his calling or the gospel, as he often was, he was never hesitant to insist upon both the reality of his calling and the content of the gospel. For the two go together, you see. The two necessarily go together. It is only because Paul was truly called that he was able to preach the gospel at all. And it was precisely in order to preach that he was called and made an apostle. That is to say, not only was an attack upon the gospel he preached an attack upon his calling and ministry, which may not seem so important to us, especially at this distance, and we tend to think that nobody is above reproach, so that maybe he should get over it, but also, the other way around, any attack upon his calling and his authority was necessarily an attack upon his preaching, and therefore an attack upon the content of the gospel, and therefore a rejection of the good news of Jesus Christ.

This is the piece of the equation that was so extraordinarily important to Paul then and, by extension, continues to be so important to us yet today. We have received the faith today in great part because he defended it so vigorously then. It was not simply the case that Paul was arrogant or self-important. Many people have misunderstood this. It was instead the case that God had called Paul to tell the world about Jesus Christ. And no one could take that away from Paul. There were other preachers. There were other teachers. There were other apostles. But to deny the content of the gospel would be to say that Paul's calling was false, and also, the other way around, perhaps even more importantly, and certainly more insidiously, to say that Paul's calling was false was also to deny the gospel of Jesus Christ. The two necessarily go together.

I have emphasized this, and perhaps overemphasized it, in order to help us all to appreciate Paul's extraordinary self-identification included in the opening of this letter, to appreciate it as the very proclamation of the gospel even to us yet today, and not simply to dismiss it as some overinflated expression of his own importance. Presumably, he could have begun the letter simply, "Paul, to Titus: Hello!" That should have been sufficient. As long as the letter carrier knew where the island of Crete was, and as long as he could find a minister there named Titus, and considering that there were not too many people named

Paul who would have been writing Titus, that should have been sufficient. “Paul, to Titus: Hello!” That is more of a greeting than I receive on some letters today.

The fact that Paul used a longer self-identification means that he did not regard the shorter form as sufficient. Then we have to ask why it was not sufficient. And given that Titus would have known all of this about Paul, it seems that this additional material is important not only to identify Paul but also to establish his authority and to confirm the gospel and therefore to assist Titus in the struggle against those disturbing the government of the church and attacking the doctrine of the Christian faith. Maybe that can be of help to us. Paul sets forth, in these few words, the foundation upon which the whole rest of the letter is based. Instead of waiting until the body of the letter proper, he makes his main point right from the beginning, so we do well not to hurry past it:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.

There is so much here! Let us begin at the beginning and go to the end, to the goal of eternal life. First, “God promised...before the ages began.” God promised what is now the content of the gospel. God promised salvation. God promised eternal life. God decreed it before time. God promised it to Abraham centuries before Christ: “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). The basis of the gospel, the basis of our faith, the basis of salvation, the basis of our very lives is the sheer promise of God, the word of God, the will of God, the commitment of God, the very determination of God. The gospel is not based on our wishfulness. The gospel is not based on our neediness. The gospel is not based on our wants and desires. The gospel is not based on our imagination. The gospel is not based on our goodness, on our intelligence, on our wits, or on our deservingness. Instead, the gospel is based on the promise of God. Thanks be to God! There is no possible better foundation.

Second, the God who “promised...before the ages began” is also the God who “never lies.” God never lies. God is the God of truth. We will come back to that in a moment. Lying is against his nature. God never lies. What this means for us yet today is that what he says is dependable. We can count upon what he promises. Let me say that again: We can count upon what he promises. That is the basis of all that is good in human life. Preaching, at its best, is the announcement of the promises of God. His promises are good news. His promises are gospel. It is by his promises that we live. It is by his promises that we breathe. It is by his promises that we believe. It is by his promises that we are healed. It is by his promises that we are forgiven. It is by his promises that we are made whole. God does not speak in vain. And he never lies.

Third, the God who “promised...before the ages began,” the God who “never lies,” also “at the proper time manifested” his promise “in his word.” “At the proper time” Jesus Christ came into the world. “At the proper time” he was born in Bethlehem. “At the proper time” he lived and taught, he ministered and healed, he preached and performed

miracles. “At the proper time” he “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell.” “At the proper time” on “the third day he rose again from the dead.” “At the proper time” “he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” That has all been accomplished. And “at the proper time” “from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” In the goodness and wisdom and providence of God, it has all happened “at the proper time,” in the fullness of time, in God’s good time. Thanks be to God!

Fourth, the God who “promised...before the ages began,” who “never lies,” and who “at the proper time manifested” his promise “in his word,” did so “through the preaching with which I [Paul] have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.” It is not only the case that Jesus Christ came and went and will come again. It is also the case that in the meantime the church has been given the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is no mean gift. Why is preaching important to us? Preaching is important to us because the church lives by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Where there is no preaching of the gospel, there is no church. Where the gospel is preached and creates a hearing for itself, there the church exists. Where the gospel is preached and heard, there the church is built up. Thus, the church does not live by liturgy, program, emotion, self-will, or its own strength or fellowship, but only, only, only by the preaching of the gospel. Nor does the church depend upon the preacher of the gospel, as such, but upon the gospel that is preached. This means that the single most important thing the church can do is to provide for the faithful, energetic, passionate, and winsome preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, every Sunday.

In the particulars of today’s reading, God “manifested” his promise “in his word through the preaching with which I [Paul] have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.” That is to say, there is a direct link from the promise of God to Paul’s preaching of the gospel, and this direct link has been established not by Paul’s birth or standing or education or hard work but directly by the sheer command of God. It is because God says so. It is because God says it is. Again, the significance of this is that to reject the preaching and teaching of Paul is to reject nothing less than the promise of God. That would be a terrible thing. And yet, I have heard people in our own day say that they know better than Paul. I have heard people in our own day belittle Paul as dated, ignorant, and worse. I have heard people in our own day dismiss Paul as misogynist and homophobic. I have heard people in our own day fail to appreciate the direct, God-established link between the preaching of Paul and the promises of God so that they have thought they could reject Paul with impunity. I suspect that is a bad strategy. Paul was accustomed to such detractors in his own day. What he wrote to warn them continues to stand as a vital warning to us yet today.

Fifth, the God who “promised...before the ages began,” who “never lies,” who “at the proper time manifested” his promise “in his word through the preaching with which I [Paul] have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior” also by that command determined that Paul would be “a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Paul would be both “a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ.” John Calvin writes of this passage that the role of servant here indicated for Paul is not the general servanthood to which all Christians are called but is a high and holy office, a special and particular calling, a specific ministry. Paul here immediately names that ministry, of course, “an

apostle of Jesus Christ.” There are many preachers, but there were few apostles. An apostle was one chosen by God and entrusted with authority in preaching the gospel and teaching the faith. Paul reminds his readers that he is an apostle not because he wants to lord it over them. He did not ask to be an apostle! Paul reminds his readers that he is an apostle because he has been entrusted with the gospel of salvation so that for them to reject him and the gospel would be for them to forfeit their salvation. This has nothing to do with Paul’s pride. This has to do with eternity. It did then. And it still does now.

Sixth, the God who “promised...before the ages began,” who “never lies,” who “at the proper time manifested” his promise “in his word through the preaching with which I [Paul] have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior,” and who determined that Paul would be “a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ,” did so “for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth.” For the sake of the faith! This is what it is all about! For the sake of the faith! Again, it was not for Paul. It was for the sake of the faith of God’s elect, then and now and for all time, for them and so even for us. All of this was “for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth.” John Calvin, again, writing of this passage, interprets “the faith of God’s elect” and “their knowledge of the truth” to be the same thing. That is to say, faith is knowledge of the promises and benevolence of God. And knowledge of the promises and benevolence of God as made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is Christian faith. So, faith is not believing what we do not know. That is not Christian faith. Christian faith is believing what we do know in Jesus Christ, that God has made us for himself, that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, that God has provided for our salvation. We know that. We know that, and so we believe it.

Conversely, where there is no knowledge of the truth, there is no Christian faith. I was in a small group meeting recently, not here, where we were discussing the speakers’ presentations, and I made a statement of the Christian faith. Someone responded, “That’s your truth.” “That’s your truth.” I almost came out of my chair. If truth is divided between you and me, then there is no truth. And if there is no truth, there is no Christian faith. If there is no truth, there is no gospel. If there is no truth, there is no God. God is the God of truth. I told you we would come back to that. God never lies. God is always true. To deny truth is to deny God. And to diminish truth as merely subjective is certainly to deny the existence of truth at all. Nothing could be more pernicious or insidious. And yet, nothing is more common in our day.

Seventh, Paul was “a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness.” That is to say, Christian faith and knowledge are to be expressed in a life of holiness. A lack of godliness betrays a lack of faith and knowledge. It has never been the case that the purpose of the gospel was simply to condone what we were already doing and to encourage us to continue in our old ways. Instead, the very purpose of the gospel has been to lead us to faith and knowledge in order to lead us into a life of godliness and of the right worship of God.

Eighth and finally, Paul was “a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life.” There is the goal! There is the purpose of it all! There is the content of the promise of salvation! The hope of eternal life! Life here is hard. Disease,

decay, decline, and death are our enemies. But they shall not have the last word about us! We do not belong to them! They shall not claim the victory! We belong to God! Our God has promised us eternal life. He has provided for that in Jesus Christ. He extends it to us even today in the preaching of the gospel. Is eternal life of interest to you? I will close with the words of the prophet Isaiah

Seek the Lord while he may be found;  
    call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake his way,  
    and the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,  
    and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

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

## Hold Firm to the Word!

Exodus 18:13-23, Titus 1:5-16 (ESV)

February 26, 2006

“He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” These are the words of the Apostle Paul to his associate Titus about the duties of a teaching elder. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” These apostolic words set an authoritative standard for the office of Christian pastor still today, and therefore they tell us a great deal about the nature and reality of the Christian congregations which such pastors continue to serve. There is gospel in the assumptions here, the foundation of this standard, and there is gospel in the implications here, the consequences of this standard for the life you and I share together.

“He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” The starting point of the gospel here is not only that the word is trustworthy or even that there is a word at all but also that this word is from God and so is the word of God. That is the only reason that any of this is good, useful, or important. The trustworthy word is from God and so is the word of God. That is to say, the first, grace filled affirmation of good news here is that God is. God is! God exists. God lives. God reigns. God rules. God overrules. God abides in perfect majesty and dominion. With this we have everything. Without it we would have nothing. First then, God is.

Second, God speaks. In that the trustworthy word is from God and so is the word of God, God who is also speaks. That is to say, God communicates. God says something from the silence of the heavens into the silences of our lives. This means that we to whom he speaks—we to whom he speaks—we exist at his good pleasure, we exist as his creatures, we exist by his good grace, we exist by his providence, we exist by his care, we exist because he says so. He speaks. He created us by his word. We have no good apart from him. He who created us also communicates to us by his word. All our good is to be found in that word. Thanks be to God!

Third, God who is and who speaks also reveals himself to us in his word. Apart from this, we would not and could not know anything about him. We do not have the strength or the intelligence or the perceptivity to be able to penetrate the hiddenness of God and to find him out by ourselves. You will remember that the fourth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is, “What is God?” And the answer is, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” We do not have the power to see the invisible, to comprehend the infinite, to perceive the eternal, or to grasp the unchangeable. We cannot do that. That is to say, we cannot discover or know God on our own. That is not possible. And that is why it is so good and wonderful that God reveals himself to us, opens himself to us, makes himself known to us, and so reclaims us as his own.

Fourth, God who is, who speaks, and who reveals himself to us in his word, does so preeminently in and through Jesus Christ. Of all the words that could be said, of all the

words that are said, this one in particular is the word of God from God and to us in which God most fully and completely and perfectly reveals himself to us. What God wants to say to us and does say to us he says most clearly in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is where we hear the self-revealing word of God spoken to us. Jesus Christ is where we see what we see of God. Jesus Christ is where we learn of God. Jesus Christ is where we receive God. Apart from Jesus Christ we would have nothing. We would have only silence and darkness and emptiness. We would know nothing. But with Jesus Christ we have everything. For with Jesus Christ we have God's self-revelation. With Jesus Christ we know everything about God that we need to know.

Fifth, God who is, who speaks, who reveals himself to us in his word, and who does so preeminently in and through Jesus Christ, also speaks that same word in and throughout the world in the gospel of and about Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and has ascended into heaven. But that has not limited his influence. It is not the case that only those who met him in the flesh can benefit from the self-revelation of God which he brought to us. Instead, the content of that self-revelation has been contained within the good news of the birth, life, ministry, teachings, healings, miracles, trials, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus Christ. It is all there! What God has to tell us about himself, about his heart, about his purpose, about his reason, about his love, about his beauty, about his depth, about his plan, about his accomplishment, is all there in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sixth, God who is, who speaks, who reveals himself to us in his word, who does so preeminently in and through Jesus Christ, and who speaks that same word in the gospel of and about Jesus Christ, also preserves that good word for us in the scriptures of the Holy Bible. It is not only an ancient word. It certainly is not a vague or unspecific word. It is a very particular word, spoken and lived at a particular time and place, and preserved for us in the very particular words of the scriptures of the Holy Bible. These words are given to us. We have received them. They are what they are. We did not write them. We did not make them up. Nor do we have the authority to rewrite them to suit our fancy, to fit our predilections, to serve our ideologies, to advance our causes, or to support our prejudices. Yes, the word is spoken for us. But in order for it to be spoken for us, it has first been spoken to us. It is over us, not the other way around. And in order to help keep that priority right, the word has not been entrusted to our memories but has been written down and preserved in the scriptures of the Holy Bible.

Everything said so far in this sermon after the first five sentences has been said in explication of the one word "word." It carries a tremendous amount of meaning. It occurs to me that we should hear that word again in the context of the whole sentence in which it appears before we press on. "He [the teaching elder or pastor] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it." So, seventh, this preserved word of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the spoken self-revelation of God who is, is also trustworthy. It is true. It is reliable. It is dependable. We can count on it. This, too, is good news about the good news. It is trustworthy. In a world of falsehood, contempt, and hatred, in a world that denies the reality of truth and even the possibility of truth, in a world of spin and constant ideological taint, it is good to know and to be reassured again that there is a sure and trustworthy word of God.

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Eighth, this trustworthy word of God is also taught and therefore is teachable. It is not only written down and preserved in the scriptures of the Holy Bible, but it is also embedded in our creeds, catechisms, and confessions of faith, it is also read and preached from the pulpits of our churches, it is also heard and believed in the sanctuaries of our churches, and it is also read and taught in our Sunday School classes, and in our Wednesday Night Supper programs, and in our Presbyterian Women Bible Study Circles, and in our Vacation Bible Schools, and in our homes, and on and on and on. The word of God is taught. To all who have ears to hear, the word of God is taught. Anyone who does not learn it is without excuse. And it is especially incumbent upon the teaching elders, the pastors, the preachers of the church, to learn the trustworthy word of God exactly as it is taught. Apart from the trustworthy word of God, we would have nothing worthwhile to say. Nothing at all. But with the trustworthy word of God, we have the very gospel of Jesus Christ and of God his Father who sent him.

Ninth, and pulling all of this together, the teaching elder must, for the sake of the church—and we will get to that in just a moment—the teaching elder “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.” The teaching elder “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.” That is his duty. That is his honor. That is his privilege. That is his ministry. That is what he is to do. That is why he is called a minister of the word. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.” It is not up to the minister to wander away from the word. That would be a punishable dereliction of duty, and if the church does not discipline such ministers, there is a higher court. It is not up to the minister to go easy on the word, to carry it lightly into the church, to belittle or to ignore it. It is not up to the minister to teach conventional wisdom or even common sense instead of the word of God. It is the duty of the minister, for the sake of the church, to “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.” So help me God! No one said it was easy. But if it must be done, then it can be done. To require it is at the very least to indicate that it is possible. And since Paul commands it with his apostolic authority, he speaks on behalf of God, and it is up to us to obey it.

Why is all of this so important? Why is this highest requirement of a minister, the last in Paul’s list of requirements, so very important for the church? Paul gives us two reasons, cutting both directions like the two edges of a sword. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able [1] to give instruction in sound doctrine and also [2] to rebuke those who contradict it.” The expression, the very purpose, of holding firm to the word is “[1] to give instruction in sound doctrine and also [2] to rebuke those who contradict it.” That is what ministers are supposed to do, in and for the church, for the good of the church, for the faithfulness of the church, for the life and well-being of the church, for the building up of the church, for the integrity of the church, for the peace, unity, and purity of the church, and so for the church to be the church. That is what ministers of the word, as teaching elders, are supposed to do. There are a lot of other things that the ruling elders do. There are a lot of other things that the deacons do. There are a lot of other things that the staff does. There are a lot of other things that the members do. But this is what ministers are supposed to do: “[1] to give instruction in sound doctrine and also [2] to rebuke those who contradict it.” Every distraction from this works to the detriment of the church.

First, the teaching elder is “to give instruction in sound doctrine.” He is to preach the gospel. He is to teach the Bible. He is to give instruction in the faith. He is to catechize the young. He is to comfort the distraught. He is to counsel the strong. And in all of this he is “to give instruction in sound doctrine.” Notice, of course, that if there is sound doctrine there is also unsound doctrine. Otherwise the adjective would be superfluous. That is to say, while there is good and faithful doctrine and there is also doctrine that is less than good or faithful. It may even be bad and faithless doctrine. So not all doctrine is good. Not all doctrine is sound. Not all doctrine is faithful. Not all doctrine is equal. And it is incumbent upon us to deal in sound doctrine. Not personal opinion. Sound doctrine.

We here in America tend to believe that we are free to believe whatever we want to believe. And at some level that is true. But it does not insure that various freely held opinions are equally good. So it is not true for Christians that we are free to believe whatever we want to believe. It is not true for members of the church of Jesus Christ that we are free to believe whatever we want to believe. We are not free to believe whatever nonsense we want to believe if we want to continue to be members of his church. We are not free to believe whatever evil distortions of the faith we want to believe if we want to continue to be his disciples. We are not free to believe whatever personal version of the gospel we choose if we want to be under his lordship. We are not free to believe whatever personal truth we think we know as if we knew better than Jesus Christ. We are not even free to follow our consciences over and against the content of the Bible as if we knew better than God. We simply are not free to do any of those things if we want to be Christians and if we want to be members of the church of Jesus Christ. Instead, we are called to believe the sound doctrine based on the trustworthy word of God as taught in the church throughout the centuries. That is who we are. And that is why teaching sound doctrine is so vitally important and even necessary.

Second, the teaching elder who gives instruction in sound doctrine is “also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Oddly enough, it appears that such pastoral rebuking takes place within the church. It is neither here nor there whether those outside the church contradict sound doctrine. So it must be within the church. But this rebuking has nothing to do with personal enemies. This has instead to do with enemies of the gospel, enemies of the faith, and therefore enemies of the church. We live in an age of much touted tolerance, inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism. In some ways, and to some extent, these can be good things. But there is no room in the Christian church for tolerating unsound doctrine. That would not be kind. That would be stupid. And there is no room in the Christian church for including that which is anti-Christian in the teachings of the church. That would not be generous. That would be suicidal. There is no room in the Christian church for a diversity of belief beyond the Christian faith and beyond the boundaries of scripture. That would not be open. That would be faithless. And there is no room in the Christian church for a pluralism of alien faiths and unfaiths as if the content of faith did not matter. That would not be wise and urbane. That would be only a letting go and a casting away of the one trustworthy word of God. God, help us! It is a part of the duty of the pastors, and therefore a part of the duty of the church acting through the pastors, not only to give instruction in sound doctrine but “also to rebuke those who contradict it.” We are to identify, to name, to counter, and even to rebuke the enemies of the faith and therefore the

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enemies of the church whosoever they may be, wherever they may be, however far they run, no matter how well they hide. The well-being of the church depends upon it.

Remember, God who is, who speaks, who reveals himself to us in his word, who does so preeminently in and through Jesus Christ, and who speaks that same word in the gospel of and about Jesus Christ, also preserves that good word for us in the scriptures of the Holy Bible. And from that Bible come these words of the Apostle Paul to his associate Titus about the duties of a teaching elder. "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it." These apostolic words set an authoritative standard for the office of Christian pastor still today, and therefore they tell us a great deal about the nature and reality of the Christian congregations which such pastors serve. May God help us in all these matters.

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

# Declare These Things!

Exodus 19:1-6, Titus 2:1-15 (ESV)

March 5, 2006

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” This is the good news for which we have yearned in need of which we all stand, and in which alone we now place our good hope. “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” Thanks be to God!

Let us begin at the beginning. “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” What Paul is talking about, of course, is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is not talking about Adam. He is not talking about Abraham. He is not talking about Moses. He is not talking about Joshua. He is not talking about Isaiah. He is not talking about himself. He is certainly not talking about Mohammed who did not even show up until 600 years later. What Paul is talking about is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, and buried, and raised on the third day. That is where “the grace of God has appeared.” Indeed, Jesus Christ is the appearance of, that is to say the very presence of, the saving grace of God, with us and for us.

What this means, for starters, is that God is a God of grace. God is a God of redemption. God is a God of salvation. God is a God who is committed to the reflection of his own glory in the restoration of his good universe. For God’s grace to have appeared means that God is a God of grace. And grace does not mean simply forgiveness. Redemption involves far more than that. Grace means forgiveness and renewal. Grace means justification and sanctification. Grace means a turning away from our godless past and a turning toward God in the present and future. Grace is not a legal fiction, a matter of saying something is alright when it is not. Grace is a powerful, creative, re-creative, redeeming force, leaving nothing in its path unaffected. God is a God of grace.

Moreover, the grace of God is not an internal or hidden characteristic of God. The grace of God wells up within him and pours out upon us, grace upon grace (John 1:16), making us live, setting us free, turning us around, and giving us good hope. This is the grace of God that has appeared. This is the grace of God that has appeared to us. This is the grace of God that has appeared to us in Jesus Christ. Once for all, in the center of all time, born in a barn, laid in a feed trough, nailed to a cross, buried in someone else’s tomb, raised on Easter, the very grace of God himself appeared to us in Jesus Christ. This is who Jesus is. He is not just a carpenter. He is not just a rabbi. He is not just a faith healer. He is not just a moral exemplar. He is the very grace of God Almighty, in the flesh, with us and for us. We neglect him to our own detriment.

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” This does not have to mean every individual, but it does mean all the various people of the world. The

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grace of God is not only for the people of Israel. The grace of God is not only for the people of Rome. The grace of God reaches even to the people of the island of Crete, where Paul was writing to Titus. The grace of God reaches even to the Goths of northern Europe, who first built Gothic sanctuaries. The grace of God reaches even to the highlands of Scotland, where Presbyterianism was first formulated. The grace of God reaches even to the depths of Africa, even to the ancient people of China, even to the peninsula of Korea, even to the Solomon Islands, even to Central and South America, even, even, even to us, broken people though we are. The very grace of God Almighty has appeared once and for all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and this is our salvation, this is our greatest good, this is our highest joy, this is our very life and breath, indeed, our food and drink, our nourishment and sustenance.

Now, this grace of God which has appeared to us and for us has implications for us, also. We have read what the LORD expected of the people of Israel after he rescued them from the land of Egypt in the Exodus: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The intent and the expectations are even higher with the coming of Jesus Christ: “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” Notice how this training, this reforming, this redeeming has two components, both necessary, neither sufficient by itself. The first is “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions.” By the very grace of God, and by the grace of God alone, we are set free from all that opposes God, from all that lures us away from God-centeredness, from all that draws us toward self-centeredness and self-servingness. This is the first step.

The second is to “live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” Now. Today. In the present age, not just in some far away heaven. We are to “live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” Now we have arrived at the burden of this chapter. This is what Paul was writing about. Based on the foundation of the gospel, these are the instructions which Paul gave to Titus in order for him to give them to the people of Crete. Based on the foundation of the gospel, these are the instructions which have been preserved in the scriptures through the centuries even for us today.

So we are to “live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” In case that is not precise enough information, Paul specifies that our godly lives are to be centered upon Jesus Christ. It is not a matter of being good, as such. It is not a matter of being spiritual. It is a matter of being centered upon Jesus Christ, “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” This is not unlike what we have read from Exodus. We are to live not only in memory of the earthly life of Jesus Christ and the sacrifice by which he both saves and purifies us but also and especially in the lively expectation of his glorious and victorious return. That is our great hope. That is what keeps us going. We look back to what he has already given us, even as set before us on

the communion table today, and also we look ahead to what he is yet to give us, the great and heavenly banquet in the kingdom yet to come.

It is for these in between times that Paul gives Titus and the Cretans instruction in the Christian life. These continue to be instructive for us in that we continue to live in these in between times. These instructions are not exhaustive lists of everything it means to be Christian. Instead, they are suggestive lists, starting points, probably not telling Titus anything he did not know but giving him some authority with which to promote such teachings among those members of the church who apparently did not know them. “Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine.” Who could object to that? The mature members of the Christian community are to be the leaders in Christian life and behavior and to set the example for everyone else. This is as it should be. Some of this is just general good behavior, such as being dignified and not drunk. And some of it has to do with specifically Christian characteristics: sound in faith, sound in love, sound in steadfastness, and reverent in behavior. And all of it has to do with what builds up the community. Similarly, the young women are “to love their husbands and children,” and the young men are “to be self-controlled.” Who could object to that? What a different world we would live in today if women loved their babies instead of aborting them and if young men were self-controlled instead of murdering each other and destroying our inner cities! Can there be any serious objection to what Paul is teaching here? Perhaps even submissiveness would not appear so foreign to us if men were sober, dignified, and self-controlled.

The lion’s share of the exhortations are aimed directly at Titus. Of course, they are not for his individual good but for the good of the church he served. “As for you [Titus], teach what accords with sound doctrine.... Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.” Again, the purpose of it all is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and thereby the building up of the church of Jesus Christ. The two go together. You cannot have either one without the other. Even today, the reason we as the church have seminaries, the reason we have candidacy for the ministry, the reason we have ordination examinations, and on and on, is to continue to try to obey and fulfill these ancient exhortations and so yet today build up the church. We can do no other.

Finally, Paul writes to Titus, “Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.” Declare the gospel that the grace of God has appeared in Jesus Christ for the salvation of all people. Preach the good news. Exhort and rebuke people to gospel living, to lives appropriate to, and consonant with, the gospel, in all the authority not only of the Apostle Paul but also of the very gospel itself. These are among the duties of the ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And they are to be performed for the sake of the Christian church. Therefore, “Let no one disregard you.” Therefore, make your voice heard. Therefore, proclaim the gospel boldly. Not because Titus was anyone special. Not even because of Paul. But because, and only because, as we said at the very beginning, “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people....our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us

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from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

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

## Insist on These Things!

Isaiah 49:1-7, Titus 3:1-15 (ESV)

March 12, 2006

“When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” and you know when that was, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” in and through Jesus Christ, of course, “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly”—When and where did he do that?—“through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” This is the gospel of our Lord. This is the good news for which we have waited. This is the good hope by which alone we live. “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us.” Thanks be to God!

Now, we need to be ever so slightly more precise here. When Paul writes, “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” he does not mean by that simply the physical appearing of Jesus Christ, as such. That physical appearing is, of course, the necessary foundation for everything else being said here, but it is not by itself everything that is being said here. That is to say, this is not simply a Christmas story. Instead, when Paul writes, “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” what he means by that is the reappearance of Jesus Christ precisely in and as the content of the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Do you see the difference? Paul did not become a Christian when Jesus Christ was born or at any other time during the earthly life of Christ. Paul became a Christian only when he heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when he heard the gospel, he fell to the ground. He was struck blind. He fasted for three days. And, most importantly, he was saved. He became a believer. His life was turned around. Instead of persecuting Christians, he became an apostle, the missionary to the Gentiles.

That is what happens when Jesus Christ appears in the preaching of the gospel. So what Paul is writing about here is not only something that happened 2,000 years ago for him and for all the Christians on the island of Crete to whom he was writing, through Titus. Instead, what Paul is writing about here is also something that happens again, every Sunday, even today, even for us, when Jesus Christ reappears in the very preaching of the gospel. “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us.” Paul is reminding his first readers of, and so telling us about, the transforming power of the gospel proclaimed. This, of course, raises several questions. What are we saved from? How are we saved? For what purpose are we saved? And, What are we saved to? Let us take these up in order.

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<sup>18</sup>John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 10: *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 10:380.

What are we saved from? Paul is very clear about that. “We ourselves”—not only the Cretans to whom he was writing, but also even Paul himself, as well as Titus—“We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” It is not a pretty picture. Unbelievers are foolish in their rejection of God our Creator and Redeemer, disobedient in their unfaithfulness, and led astray from him who is the one true Way.<sup>19</sup> The results of such unbelief include slavery to base motivations, ill will toward others, and mutual hatred. It is not only an ancient problem. It is something with which we are all too familiar in our own hearts, in our own lives, and in the world around us. Look in the newspapers. Surely we should want to be saved and delivered from this.

How are we saved? As we have already said, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.” We are saved, not because we deserve it—if we were good enough to deserve to be saved, we would not need to be saved—we are saved, not because we earn it—if we were good enough to earn it, we would not need to be saved—we are saved, not because we deserve it and not because we earn it but instead because of the sheer grace and goodness of God Almighty. It is nothing to brag about. It is nothing we have done. “We bring nothing to God.”<sup>20</sup> We are instead recipients of a tremendous largess, beneficiaries of an incomprehensible generosity, open handed beggars upon whom the bounty of heaven has rained and poured beyond all counting. Thanks be to God!

Moreover, God did this to us “by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” It is not the power of the water of baptism as such but the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us to move us from unbelief to belief, from folly to faith, from atheism or paganism to Christianity, from greater sinfulness to lesser sinfulness, from disobedience to obedience, from lostness to salvation, from mutual hatred to mutual love. And this regenerating and renewing power of the Holy Spirit is released upon us and poured out upon us precisely in and through Jesus Christ, precisely in and through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why we are here today. That is why we are here every Sunday. That is what we come to receive.

For what purpose are we saved? “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy...so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Life has a goal. Life has a purpose. Life has a direction and a meaning. And the goal, purpose, direction, and meaning of life are so large that they cannot be contained in this life. This life points beyond itself. This life cannot explain itself. This life cannot account for itself. This life cannot satisfy itself. This life points beyond itself. And so it is the case that the salvation which we have received is not simply about this life. It is about this life, and we shall get

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<sup>19</sup>Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 10:379.

<sup>20</sup>Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 10:381.

to that in just a moment. But it is not simply about this life, or not about this life only. The salvation which we have received is about the life which is to come, the life beyond this life, even life eternal, life in the very presence of God, life reconciled to our Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. Do we not all yearn for this?

What are we saved to? Or, after what we have just said, maybe I should ask, What are we saved to here? “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.” This is the shape, form, and content of the Christian life here and now. Not only are we to worship God, and not only are we to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also, and as a result of those, we are to devote ourselves to good works. This is who we are. This is what our lives are about. This is what we are saved to here. To be sure that we get this, Paul writes it three times: once in the opening exhortation, again in this statement of purpose, and again in his closing exhortation. “Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.”

God has been good to us, so we are to be good to others. God has loved us freely, so we are to love others. God has poured out his grace upon us, so we are to be not only grateful, as we are here, giving thanks to God after we hear the word of God, but also and especially we are to be gracious, out there in the rest of the world, all the rest of the week. We are to devote ourselves to good works. This is who we are. This is what our lives are about. This is what we are saved to here. Do I need to spell these out? We are to feed the hungry. We are to give drink to the thirsty. We are to clothe the naked. We are to house the homeless. We are to visit the sick, the lonely, the friendless, and those in prison. This is who we are.

This is who we are. We devote ourselves to good works, “so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.” But this is not all of who we are. We are also ambassadors of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We do not do these deeds anonymously. We do these deeds in the name of, and for the sake of, Jesus Christ. We do these deeds not only so that people may be fed, clothed, housed, and visited, but also and especially so that they also may hear the gospel, receive the Holy Spirit, come to faith, and name the name of Jesus Christ.

It is this evangelistic purpose which seems to be the main point for Paul. That is where this chapter begins. “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.” This way of Christian living seems to be promoted not only as a good in and of itself but also and especially as a form of witness to everyone else. Unlike the otherwise unruly, insubordinate, disobedient, self-centered, slanderous, quarreling, rough, and discourteous populace of Crete (not, perhaps, unlike the people in the world in which we live), unlike them, the Christians were “to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.” The Christians would stand out as ideal citizens. They were not to blend in to the world but to distinguish themselves from the world. They were not to be like everyone else but precisely to be different from everyone else.

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How very strange! How very strange except that, could it not be the case again and also that precisely in such Christian living “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior” might appear to all those about us? This is where Paul goes with his understanding of the Christian life which we are called to live.<sup>21</sup> That is, could it not be the case that precisely in such Christian living we proclaim and share the gospel with all those about us? Could it not be the case that precisely in such Christian living God will make us as a light for the nations, that his salvation may reach to the end of the earth? Could it not be the case again and also that precisely in such Christian living “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior” might appear to all those about us? We are not talking about etiquette. We are not talking about self-righteousness or affected piety. Instead, we are talking about the high and holy calling of being a Christian people in our own time and in our own place. The Christians would stand out not only as ideal citizens but also and especially as emissaries of the kingdom of God yet to come. God, help us!

No wonder Paul urged Titus to “insist upon these things”! These are not extras. These are not add ons. These are not options. These go to the core of the Christian faith and life. Hear the gospel where Christ our Savior appears. Believe the good news. Receive the Holy Spirit. Live the new life. Devote ourselves to good works. Be the occasion of the reappearing yet again of Christ our Savior. Yes, “insist on these things.” Indeed, let us all encourage each other to “insist on these things,” all these things.

This rigorous Christian life also requires some focus and discipline. “Avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.” There is simply not enough time for all of that. We have more important things to do. Life is too short. “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” Interestingly, there are limits to how far efforts should go to keep disruptive people within the church.<sup>22</sup> The larger church today seems entirely unaware of this wisdom, indeed, this directive. The larger church today is hell bent upon elevating the alien values of tolerance, inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism, all of which are ways of saying that anything goes. Anything at all. Anything, that is, except historic and orthodox Christian faith, life, and discipline.

But that is not the way that Paul looked at the church. Paul writes in his letter to Titus that we are to try twice to straighten out disruptive people and then we are to let them go. The people who are always stirring up the church are simply trying to destroy the church and certainly are to have no place within the church. Those who have no intention of repenting from the evil of their ways have set themselves beyond the bounds of the church. They become a distraction from our calling to be devoted to good works. Is that not obvious? Does that not make sense? Is not good discipline a sign of institutional health and well-being? We need to learn not to be naive or foolish about persons disrupting the church. After all, we have more important things to be doing.

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<sup>21</sup>Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Pastor Letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 162.

<sup>22</sup>Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 10:388.

And with that word, let us hear again the core gospel which Paul shared with Titus and its implications which reach still to us:

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

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

# Refresh My Heart in Christ

Genesis 45:1-11, Philemon 1-25 (ESV)

March 19, 2006

“Philemon...the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you....Refresh my heart in Christ.” What a wonderful Christian letter! Paul commends Philemon greatly, and then he asks great things of him in Jesus Christ. This is as it should be.

“Philemon...the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” This is where the letter begins. “Philemon...Refresh my heart in Christ.” This is where the letter ends. How do we get from one to the other? What does it say to us yet today?

To begin with, Paul identifies Philemon as “our beloved fellow worker,” perhaps a fellow pastor in whose very home the church at Colossae met. And from Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving, he apparently had great appreciation for Philemon’s ministry: “I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” Love and faith are good qualities for all Christians. The sharing of faith and the fullness of knowledge are especially good attributes for a teaching elder or minister. It gave Paul great joy and encouragement to realize how much Philemon had shared the gospel with those entrusted to his care and how much that ministry had meant to them.

“Philemon...the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” This is high praise. But there is more here than Philemon’s ministry. Or rather, the important thing is not that the ministry is his but the important thing is, instead, the content of his ministry, the good news he proclaimed, the gospel he preached, the mercy which he shared, the Savior whom he served. The foundation of this letter, the necessary presupposition upon which it rests, is none other than the gospel of Jesus Christ, largely unstated here, but which Paul and Philemon shared, and which Onesimus shared, and without which this letter would make no sense whatsoever. The urging and pleading made here for forgiveness and reconciliation would stand alone as so much noise in the air apart from the prior work of Jesus Christ to accomplish precisely forgiveness and reconciliation.

So hear with me again that good news before we try to hear what Paul is asking and then to learn what that means for us. The good news is that Jesus Christ has provided for the forgiveness of our sin and for our reconciliation to God. There is a lot built into this. For starters, we belong to God. We belong to God because he created us. Before he created us, he thought of us each by name, and he called us his very own. We were made by God. We were made for God. We belong to God. This is who we are. This is what our lives are about. This was our original goodness.

It was from this position of created goodness that humanity fell into the condition in which we have found ourselves since. Having been created to be centered upon God, we have each become self-centered and focused upon ourselves. Having been created to sing God’s praises, we busy ourselves with singing our own praises. Having been created to worship God, we have become veritable factories for idols which we then worship.

Having been given ears to hear the word of God, we seek any other voice but his. And once we went down that road, there is no turning back on our own. The self-centeredness we have described we know as sin, and the result of that sin has been a brokenness of our relationship with God. Even if we wanted to set things right—and the sad reality is that we do not want to do that—even if we wanted to set things right, it is not within our power or ability to turn back to God, for even our desire to do that would be self-interested, and that is the very affliction which we need to escape. Our original goodness has slipped away into sin, sin that involves every one of us, sin that taints all our thoughts, words, and actions. This is why we need a Savior.

The Savior we have, the Savior about whom the gospel is, is none other than Jesus Christ, the very Son of God. He was sent to us, and he came to us, to accomplish the very thing we needed most: the forgiveness of our sin and therefore our reconciliation to God. Not only is this the foundation for everything in this letter, but also this is the model for everything in this letter, and nothing in this letter can be understood apart from it. So, what I am saying is not superfluous. It is necessary. And, I pray, it is edifying. As Paul wrote elsewhere, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:23). That is to say, Jesus Christ willingly suffered death on the cross in order to bear the punishment we deserved for our sin and so in order to win for us the forgiveness of our sin. He was punished so that we do not need to be punished. He purchased for us with his own life, and he bought for us with his own blood, the forgiveness of our sin. This is not to say that God is bloodthirsty. It is to say, instead, that sin, death, and evil are enemies of such a nature that they can be defeated only by such self-sacrifice. And since all of us had become self-centered, none of us was capable of such self-sacrifice. If we had been capable of it, we would not have needed it. Since we were not capable of it, we needed help from outside and beyond ourselves, and this help came in Jesus Christ.

Now, the effect of that self-sacrifice on the cross and the forgiveness of sin it purchased was to reconcile us to God, to restore us to right relationship with God, to recenter us upon God as we were supposed to be, to refocus us upon God, to return us to the joy of being with God, to reopen our lips to sing God’s praises again. That is to say, forgiveness is not an end in itself. Forgiveness is not the purpose of the gospel. Forgiveness is the means of the gospel to carry us home into right relationship with God. That is the purpose of the gospel. That is the end or goal toward which human life is directed. That is the reason for the cross. That is the prize for which Christ strived. The great joy of our lives, the gift beyond all our deserving, the blessing beyond all our imagining, the mercy beyond all measure, the goodness beyond all comprehension is that we, miserable creatures though we are, have been reconciled to God Almighty, Creator of the universe, the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

And this is not temporary. This is forever. That is what eternal life is all about. Jesus Christ does not do short term work. What he does is forever. And when he reconciles us to God, we are reconciled to God from now on, world without end. Amen and Amen. That is to say, eternal life is not so much a gift in and of itself as it is a necessary condition of our fulfilling that great purpose of our lives, glorifying God and enjoying him forever. The gift is the high privilege of eternally enjoying God. This, my friends, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what is implied and included when Paul writes, “Philemon...the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” The hearts

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of the saints were refreshed through the preaching of this gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what refreshes the heart. This is what brings forgiveness and reconciliation. This is what brings faith and hope. This is what brings new life. This is what makes the hearers into saints. How wonderful is the refreshing of our hearts! Thanks be to God!

Now, let us get back to Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Paul had preached the gospel to Philemon. Philemon had preached the gospel to others, though apparently Onesimus could not hear it from him. And Paul had preached the gospel to Onesimus. All of that is assumed here. All of that is necessary. But that is not all that is going on here. It is also the case that Paul takes up the cross here. On the strength of what Jesus Christ had done for him and for us, in the faith that he had learned at the foot of the cross, in the pattern that Christ had set for us all, Paul took up the cross. Paul inserted himself into the brokenness of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. He stepped into the breach. On the one hand, he represented Philemon to Onesimus. How in the world he ever talked Onesimus into carrying this letter back to his master, whom he had wronged, is beyond me, except for the grace of God. He had to assure Onesimus that Philemon would not think of, or treat, Onesimus any differently than Paul himself did. He represented Philemon to Onesimus.

And on the other hand, Paul also represented Onesimus to Philemon. This is included in the letter. “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart....So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it.” The situation is very dire here. “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything,” points to his running away and his thievery. These were capital offenses. Philemon could have executed Onesimus. In fact, if he did not execute him what would all the other slaves do? What would the other slave owners think? What would happen to society and to the world? But here is the gospel heart and power of this letter: “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.” “Charge that to my account.” “Charge that to my account. I, Paul...will repay it.” Is that not exactly what Jesus Christ already did for us, on the cross? And is not Paul doing it all over again? Was it not as if Jesus said on the cross, “Father, if they have wronged you at all, or owe you anything, charge that to my account. I, Jesus, will repay it.” Yes, that is what Jesus did on the cross! That is the gospel which Paul proclaimed and which I have already preached today. And, what is all the more remarkable, that is the gospel which Paul embodied and lived in this letter. No wonder it is so powerful. “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul...will repay it.”

Now and only now have we reached the point of being able to hear what Paul asked Philemon to do. On the basis of this gospel of Jesus Christ, this gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation, and on the basis of Paul embodying the paying of the price for forgiveness—there is no cheap grace here—Paul asks Philemon for him and Onesimus to be reconciled, not as master and slave, but as Christian brothers! “For love’s sake...I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment....I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart....For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would

receive me.” “Receive him as you would receive me.” “Receive him as you would receive me.” “No longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother.” Do you hear that? Paul not only preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. He actually believed it so much that he dared to ask a slave owner to welcome back a runaway, thieving slave no longer as a slave but as a free and equal brother in Christ. That is faith! That is gospel! That is the power of God!

“This perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother.” Here we are with the “forever” again. Slavery was temporary, but Christian brotherhood is forever, starting now in this life, and extending beyond here into eternal life. And even as Joseph had realized that God had used the evil actions of Joseph’s brothers to work for God’s good purposes, so does Paul dare to realize the God used the evil done by Onesimus, his running away and his stealing, to work for the greater good of his conversion, in that he brought him to Paul to hear the gospel, to work for the greater good of his reconciliation to Philemon, and, through the gospel embodied in this letter, to work for the greater good of the eventual demise of slavery. Thanks be to God! Yes, I said that right here on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy, 2,000 years after Paul. Some of us have been slow learners. Paul dares to realize that God used the evil done by Onesimus, his running away and his stealing, to work for the greater good of the eventual demise of slavery, in the name of Jesus Christ, and through the gospel of Jesus Christ, particularly as articulated and embodied in this letter.

And that is how we move from the beginning of the letter to the end of the letter. That is how we move from “Philemon...the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you,” to “Philemon...Refresh my heart in Christ.” That is how arrive at, “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.” And this is how we move from Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon all the way to us today. There is still much work to be done. We have to start with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. There is no other foundation. Only then can we move to the imperatives, to the implications of the gospel, to the commandments and the directives, to the shared life that flows out of the gospel. Where are the breaches in our world? Where are the broken relationships that need the gospel of Jesus Christ? Are they in our families? Are they in our church? Are they in our community? Are they in our nation? Are they between people of different races? Are they between people of different classes? Are they between people of different nations? Are they between people of different faiths?

Having identified those broken situations, in which ones are we, like Philemon, to swallow our pride? In which ones has someone wronged us, maybe in a small way, or maybe truly wronged us in a great way, yet even then surely not so much as we have wronged God and his Christ? In which situations are we to learn new lessons of new and great implications and applications of the gospel, heretofore unthought of reconciliations? That will take some grace and vision.

Having identified those broken situations, in which ones are we, like Onesimus, to go, letter in hand, asking for forgiveness? Why should we assume that we are always the injured party? Maybe we are the ones who have wronged another, in as small way or even

## Refresh My Heart in Christ

a great way. To whom should we admit our wrong? That will take some courage. To whom are we to be reconciled?

Having identified those broken situations, in which other ones are we, like Paul to Onesimus, to share the good news of the gospel with those who have never heard it? With whom are we share the word of forgiveness? With whom are we to share the grace of God? Who is there in our lives who has never heard the gospel from anyone else and who needs to hear it from us if he or she is ever going to hear it at all? This is at least part of what Martin Luther meant by his much misunderstood doctrine of the priesthood of all believers: we are to be Christ to our neighbors, for if they do not see Christ in us, where will they see Christ? So, with whom are we, like Paul to Onesimus, to share explicitly and verbally the gospel of Jesus Christ? That will take faith, wisdom, and understanding. Yes, there is much work to be done.

And finally, having identified those broken situations in our own lives, in our own families, in the church, in our communities, and in the world, in which other ones are we, like Paul to Philemon, to share the implications of the gospel, to share the directives of the gospel, even as Paul shares them so nicely in the form of an invitation, in the form of an encouragement? In which of those broken relationships are we to take the cross-shaped risk of reaching out to each side? Where are we to take up our cross and follow Jesus? where are we to bear the human cost of forgiveness? That is to say, where are we at least to risk being crucified and perhaps actually to be crucified? Where are we to take on the risk of representing each to the other? Where are we to identify the next ancient barrier scheduled for demolition by the gospel of Jesus Christ? Where are we to name the name of Jesus Christ? Where are we to “stand up, stand up for Jesus”? Where are we to embody the gospel in our very lives? Where are we next to walk our talk? Where are we next to live what we say we believe? To whom are we to dare to say with the Apostle Paul: “If you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account....I will repay it...Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ”?

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

## Appendix: Texts, Psalms, and Hymns

The sermons above are based on the readings from 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. 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 Timothy 1:1-20, “No Different Doctrine!”

1 Samuel 3:1-21

“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”

“Be Still My Soul”

“God Is Our Refuge and Our Strength”

1 Timothy 2:1-15, “Knowledge of the Truth”

Isaiah 49:1-6

“I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art”

“Of the Father’s Love Begotten”

“Come, Christians, Join to Sing”

1 Timothy 3:1-16, “Above Reproach”

Exodus 18:13-23

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

“How Firm a Foundation”

“God of Our Fathers, Whose Almighty Hand”

1 Timothy 4:1-16, “Some Will Depart”

Genesis 1:26-31

“I Sing the Mighty Power of God”

“Jesus, Thy Boundless Love for Me”

“My Country, ’Tis of Thee”

1 Timothy 5:1-25, “Keep Yourselves Pure”

Deuteronomy 19:15-21

“Come, Thou Almighty King”

“Alleluia! Sing to Jesus!”

“Come, O Spirit, Dwell Among Us”

1 Timothy 6:1-21, “Fight the Good Fight!”

Psalms 49:1-20

“O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright”

“Fight the Good Fight”

“Onward, Christian Soldiers”

2 Timothy 1:1-18, “Do Not Be Ashamed”

Psalm 10:1-18

“The Strife Is O’er”

“I’m Not Ashamed to Own My Lord”

“God of Our Life”

2 Timothy 2:1-26, “Remember Jesus Christ!”

Isaiah 43:1-7

“Holy God, We Praise Your Name”

“Nearer, My God, to Thee”

“Whate’er My God Ordains Is Right”

2 Timothy 3:1-17, “Times of Difficulty”

Exodus 7:1-13

“Earth and All Stars”

“O Word of God Incarnate”

“O Beautiful for Spacious Skies”

2 Timothy 4:1-22, “Be Ready”

Psalm 22:1-21a

“Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty”

“Lord of All Good”

“Lead On, O King Eternal”

Titus 1:1-4, “For the Sake of the Faith”

Isaiah 55:6-13

“Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty”

“Ask Ye What Great Thing I Know”

“O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go”

Titus 1:5-16, “Hold Firm to the Word”

Exodus 18:13-27

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

“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”

“God of Our Fathers, Whose Almighty Hand”

Titus 2:1-15, “Declare These Things!”

Exodus 19:1-6

“I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art”

“Here, O My Lord, I See Thee Face to Face”

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

Titus 3:1-15, “Insist on These Things!”

Isaiah 49:1-7

“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”

“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”

“O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright”

Philemon 1-25, “Refresh My Heart in Christ”

Genesis 45:1-11

“O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing”

“Blest Be the Tie that Binds”

“What Wondrous Love Is This”

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