

# “Essential Christianity”

a sermon by

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Text: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me “(Galatians 2:19b-20).

On Wednesday of this past week I returned to Charlotte from a two-week mission trip to Russia along with 17 other members of our church. Because I had never been to Russia, it was not only a memorable experience but also an experience that forced me to examine my own faith and life in ways that I had not previously done.

One of the striking aspects of the trip for me was the great contrasts of Russia. It is a massive country--more than three times the size of the United States. Moreover, it was until 1989, one of the two great superpowers of the world. As part of the U.S.S.R., Russia was the great enemy of America during the period of the Cold War, which lasted for almost fifty years.

When communism collapsed in the late 1980s Russia was plunged into a state of chaos and poverty that I could not have imagined.

The great contrasts of Russia were brought home to me in two very distinct ways. One was the great culture represented in the cities on Moscow and St. Petersburg. One evening members of our group attended a ballet performance of the “The Daughter of Pharaoh” at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. The setting, costumes, staging and performance were, I am sure, the finest in the world. The same level of culture was also present in St. Petersburg. On Tuesday morning our group toured the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, which is one of the great art museums in the world. There is a large section of the paintings of Rembrandt, including “The Return of the Prodigal.” In addition, there was a magnificent sculpture of Michelangelo and a number of paintings by Leonardo Da Vinci, as well as other European and Asian masters.

The contrast to that great culture for me was the great poverty that constitutes so much of Russia today. As we left Moscow to go to the city of Ryazan, it was like entering a totally different world. Our group stayed in Ryazan for a week where we worked with members of the Hope Baptist Church in Ryazan. During that seven-day stay we participated in worship on Sunday and in a Wednesday evening Prayer service. We also helped sponsor a children’s camp for children of the church and neighborhood, did repairs to the church facility, and distributed food and other supplies to needy families. The visit that stands out most in my mind was the visit that Dianne Giannola, our parish nurse, and I made to a family that lived not too far from the church where we worked. Most of families we visited lived in small apartments or flats. Most, I suspect, were not larger than eight hundred square feet. Often we would find a husband and wife with several children living in two or three rooms. Frequently, there were grandparents living in the apartment as well. In this particular flat we found a husband and wife living with nine children in an apartment that was about twelve feet long and eight feet wide. There was no kitchen or bathroom. It was as heartbreaking a situation as I have ever encountered and I was overcome with the hopelessness of this mother and father struggling to keep their family alive.

Visiting a world of such deep contrasts forced me to ask myself what it is that defines us as Christians and what it is that could bind a group of people from Charlotte with a group of people from Ryazan. The answer to that question, I am convinced, is that in spite of the many differences that divide us, there is one thing that we share in common: a commitment to Jesus Christ and to the Church.

## I.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Galatia, he was acutely aware of the great contrasts that characterized that church. The church was divided in a number of critical ways. Some were Jews, others were Greek. Some were slaves while others were free. There were men and women, rich and poor. There were those who believed that to be a Christian a person had first to subscribe to all of the Jewish ritual and law.

But Paul saw something quite different. He believed that what God had done in Jesus Christ transcended all of the things that divide people.

Paul understood his life in terms of a “before” and an “after.” The “before” was his life in Judaism. He was a persecutor of the church and a zealot for the Jesus law. The “after” for Paul was the appearance of Christ on the road to Damascus.

This is how he understood it. “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2: 19b-20).

For Paul there was an “essential Christianity” that transcended all of the human divisions that separate us from each other. So this morning I want to speak to the four elements of our faith that remain constant even in an ever-changing world.

## II.

The first is a great need. No one achieves a vital, personal Christian experience without a profound sense of need. Karl Marx once called religion the “opiate of the people,” but there is far more to the religious impulse than Marx understood.

To different people this need comes in different ways. For some it is the sense of inadequacy to meet the demands of life. While our Russian mission group was in Ryazan, a group of us visited the woman’s prison there, where the Hope Baptist Church engaged in a weekly mission. There were 350 young women in that prison. Most of them were between the ages of 14 and 18. The prison for the most part was clean and the staff and warden seemed genuinely interested in the welfare of these young people. Our group met with these prisoners one morning at a morning assembly. As I brought greetings to this group of young women, they did not seem to me to look much different from a group of American teenagers. They did not look hardened or calloused. And yet 56 of these young women were in prison for murder--one young girl had murdered her own baby when her mother and father forced her and her child out of the home and on the streets where she knew she and her child would die. Another young woman was there because she had murdered a man who had raped her, when her father sold her to this man for a bottle of vodka.

In the face of overwhelming human tragedy it is hard to imagine how any of us could sustain life without the elements of divine grace that allow life to continue in spite of some of the situations in which people find themselves.

Sometimes we experience need in the moral realm of life. Often sin is a Trojan horse. We welcome it through a breach in the walls as the ancient city did, but it has inside of it many hostile forces that we had never suspected. Take habit, for example. Sometimes we are free to start something and find we are not free to stop. Or guilt. Sometimes what begins with a great anticipation of pleasure suddenly turns into guilt that haunts us like a ghost. Over the years as a minister, I have counseled a number of married men and women who found themselves involved in an illicit sexual relationship. All of a sudden something that started with a great sense of

anticipation and happiness came crashing down on them. Suddenly they realized that what they were doing did not just involve them. It brought hurt and heartache to others as well. So age after age, people facing moral failure and its tragic aftermath have sought a personal experience of Christ, his forgiveness and power because they know they needed him.

### III.

The second element in essential Christianity is a great salvation. To be sure, the word “salvation” is a word that troubles many of us. It has certainly been misused. And yet, it is at the heart of our faith. If anyone has every lost a job and wondered how he or she was going to sustain a family and then found work again, that person knows what it means to be saved. If any person has struggled through family crises only to discover a redeeming spirit, that person understands what it means to be saved. If there is any person who found himself at the end of his rope, struggling with life’s strains, its temptations, and difficulties and experienced the power of victory that comes through Jesus, than that individual certainly understands the meaning of salvation.

The experience of salvation comes to most of us in two general ways. For some it is the opportunity for a second chance. They have failed, messed up their lives to the point where there seems to be little left. Then they experience God’s love and grace in a way that offers them a second chance. St. Augustine, one of the greatest saints the church has ever produced, struggled with this. As a young man, he ran away from home and lived for a while with his mistress even after he had felt the call of Christ. “The worst that I knew so well,” he wrote, had more power over me than the better that I knew not.” Who here today has not had the experience of making a failure out of some situation, standing there with the remnants of that situation, and then finding that forgiveness that offers us a new chance?

Along with the factor of forgiveness comes the strength to make something of the second chance. Reinhold Niebuhr once spoke of God’s grace not only as forgiveness but power as well. Sometimes when we have experienced failure, we wonder if we can ever succeed again. Failure hypnotizes us, and casts on us a horrible spell that says to us, “You cannot succeed.” Over and against that, however, is the word of grace that says, “You can.” The Apostle Paul put it like this: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

That is salvation--forgiveness, a second chance, the voice that says you can. Through the ages this is what Christ has meant to so many people--a great need met by a great salvation.

### IV.

A third element of Essential Christianity is the element of an adequate response. Part of that response is a sense of gratitude for what God has done for us. John Calvin once defined the Christian life as gratitude to God. Calvin believed that every good deed, every good thought, every good action was rooted in our gratitude to God. That is one of the reasons that the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper plays such an important role in the life of the church. It is often

referred to as the “Eucharist,” which is the Greek word for “thank you.” The Lord’s Supper reminds us what Christ has done for us. It elicits our most profound gratitude.

The ethical implications of this are immense. Gratitude, someone has observed, is the mother of all virtues. Some people expect life to treat them well, and when it does not, they become bitter. Others feel that life has given them so much that they cannot help but want to respond.

One of the most powerful responses for me to our visit to Russia was a sense of gratitude, gratitude for the country in which we live, gratitude for the other people who were willing to give their time and energy to be a part of a mission trip, gratitude for all the opportunities that have been given to me.

Another element in this response is the element of compulsion. By that I mean that once we have experienced a great need, a great salvation, a great gratitude, then we realize that we are being called to something greater than ourselves. Something has taken hold of us. We are not our own.

Now compulsion is part of every life. One way or another life coerces us and no one of us can escape the word “must.” One of the young men on the trip with me talked about his desire to go back to Ryazan and to continue the work with the children of that city. I could sense it wasn’t an option for him. He was “hooked.” He had to finish the work that was begun.

That is what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, “I must see Rome.” Why did he have to do that? No one was forcing him to see Rome. It was something that he knew he had to do.

There is nothing more important today than the recovery of this kind of Christianity. We can certainly get by with no more skyscrapers or technological gadgets in our lives. But we cannot get by without more Christian character. A great need, a great salvation, a great gratitude, and a great response. If you lack it, seek it. If you have it, deepen it.