

“Betting On the Church”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good, and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

In his words of welcome to Dr. Iain Torrance, the new President of Princeton Seminary, Dr. Thomas Gillespie, the previous president of the Seminary, remembered a similar situation some years ago, when Dr. Gillespie was addressed by his predecessor Dr. James I. McCord. Dr. McCord observed that during the tumultuous period of the 1960s and 1970s the Seminary was being challenged by radical social and theological forces. Jim McCord’s observation of those difficult times was this: “During these times of great social and theological change the Seminary “bet on the church” and won.”

Today, there are many people who are very uncertain about the church. That is not surprising. I thought of this several weeks ago when I read in *The Charlotte Observer* an account of a large church in Charlotte that refused to give money to a group of relief agencies in our community that give assistance to the poor. The reason given for the church’s withdrawal of its

support for these worthwhile agencies was these agencies were associated with Roman Catholics and even Muslims.

These are difficult days for the church. The Roman Catholic Church in this country has been seriously damaged by scandals involving the sexual misconduct of a number of priests.

The Protestant Churches in this nation face their own struggles. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today is very divided over issues that include the church's response to the war in Iraq, the ongoing debates about abortion and the ordination of active homosexuals, as well as the church's position on divestment from certain companies that do business with Israel.

I.

There is a section in the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome that deals with the issue of what constitutes the Christian life and the Church's role in that. One of the characteristics of Paul's letters is that he typically begins his epistles with an explication of his theology or beliefs. Romans chapters 1-11 lay out Paul understands of the Christian gospel, the central notion of justification by grace through faith, and the question of the Jews (Romans 9-11). After Paul has dealt with questions of faith, he then typically deals with issues that address the Christian life. Romans 12-15 is one of those sections in which Paul describes the Christian life (12:1-2) and the nature of the church (12: 3-8).

Paul describes the Christian life in terms of a negative and a positive. The negative is that we are called "not to be conformed to the present world." The positive is that we are called "to be transformed by the renewing of the mind" in order that we might discern the will of God--what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

Richard Niebuhr in his classic study, *Christ and Culture*, observed that there are a number of different ways that churches respond to the culture around them. For some the church is identical to the culture. Others groups (including the monastic movement in the early church) wanted to separate themselves from a society that they viewed as corrupt and evil.

Niebuhr notes, however, that the Presbyterian (or Reformed Church) always viewed the mission of the church as a "transforming one." Presbyterians have always understood that the church has a role of challenging the culture in which it finds itself and conforming that culture to the mind of Christ. Thus, the Protestant Reformers of the Sixteenth Century often used the Latin phrase "Ecclesia Reformata sed Semper Reformanda"- "The Church reformed but always being reformed." For Calvin and others the church was always being reformed. But here is the caveat. This was never viewed as change for the sake of change. It was always qualified by the Word of God. The church is always called to be changed by the Word of God--in Scripture and in Jesus Christ.

So what does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ for today?

II.

In the first place it means that the church is defined by its central affirmation of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For the Apostle Paul the church is constituted by its conviction that in Jesus Christ we encounter the living God.

This past week when Dr. Iain Torrance was with us as our Willard Lecture, I had several occasions to speak with him about his relationship with the Royal family in Britain. Dr. Torrance is one of six individuals who serve as chaplain to Her Majesty the Queen. Because the Queen and her family have residences in Edinburgh and Balmoral, Dr. Torrance has had a number of occasions to visit the Royal family and to engage in conversation with them. I was curious about the relationship between the monarchy and the church today. Dr. Torrance reminded me that in England the Queen was head of the Church of England. When I asked him if this were also true in Scotland he replied: "In Scotland Jesus Christ is head of the Church." John Knox would have been proud.

Today, there is nothing more important for the church than for the church to proclaim boldly and without equivocation the uniqueness and centrality of our faith in Jesus Christ. In the dark days of World War II a group of Reformed and Lutheran Christians gathered in the small town of Barmen, Germany, in May of 1934. The crisis that the church faced on that day was the rise of National Socialism and the regime of Adolph Hitler. In what became known as the Barmen Declaration, the church proclaimed that the "One Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death is Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture."

Today, we are living in a highly pluralistic and secular culture which views Jesus nothing more than one religious leader among others. People respect Jesus as a great figure of history, a great teacher, and a great example. The witness of the church for our time is the witness that in Jesus Christ we have encountered the "light of the world" and in his presence every other light is a "lesser light."

III.

But the church, if it is to be what Christ intends for it, is a community that must transmit the faith from generation to generation. That is why the educational ministry of the church is so critical for today. Richard Hayes in his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, notes that the Christian life can be summed up in the notion that we are called not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. That is why the Apostle Paul sees an intimate but necessary link between the Christian life and the church.

Paul notes that the church is "one" but that each member has a unique "charisma" or gift. He names seven of these gifts: 1) prophecy, 2) ministry or service, 3) teaching,

4) exhortation, 5) contributing to charity, 6) leadership, 7) works of mercy. Each person has a different gift. Each person must use that gift for the good of the body.

One of the characteristics of the age in which we live is that there is a distinct disconnect between our culture and the faith we proclaim. This was brought home to me recently in an interview that Dan Rather conducted with Jack Welch on CBS last week. For twenty years Jack Welch served as one of the most successful CEOs in the world. During the time he served as the leader of General Electric the company experienced great growth and extraordinary profits.

I remember meeting Jack Welch briefly, when he was in Charlotte several years ago for the Annual Corporate Meeting of General Electric. He was there with his second wife, Jane. General Electric has a long-standing tradition that a minister opens each annual meeting with a prayer. On this occasion I was the designated “pray-er.”

As I watched a few minutes of the interview on television, two things caught my attention. The first was the way that Mr. Welch described his recent marriage to his third wife, Suzy, who is a good bit younger than he. For him it was rather simple. She was the editor of the *Harvard Business Review* and in the course of the interview he fell in love with her. There was no mentioning of the fact that he was actually married to another person. It seemed more like a matter of fate over which he had no control. He simply fell in love with another woman and that seemed to be the only explanation he could provide.

The other thing that caught my attention was when Dan Rather asked Mr. Welch to name the hardest question he had ever been asked. Without hesitating, Jack Welch said that the hardest question he had ever been asked was whether he thought he would go to heaven when he died. Although I cannot remember his exact words, he said something to the effect that if getting to heaven were a matter of “being a good friend, working hard, trying to make a difference, and trying to do some good in the world;” then he thought he had a pretty decent chance. There was no mentioning of God, of Jesus Christ, of the grace of God – it was the simple notion that salvation was something that a person earned.

Part of the mission of the church in our time is the transmission of the faith from generation to generation.

IV.

But the church today, if it is to be the church God intends it to be, has another role. It must be a “moral community” that demonstrates to the world that we are willing to live as a people who are not conformed by the world but who have been transformed by the renewing of our minds.

This past week over three million people gathered in Rome for the funeral of Pope John II. Many of those who came were from the Pope’s native country of Poland. In Friday’s *Wall Street Journal* Matthew Kaminski wrote of the enduring legacy of this particular Pope. As Bishop of Krakow, he stood in solidarity with his people against the oppression of communism.

When he became Pope, John Paul II never preached against communism. Rather, he told his people not to be afraid. “Suddenly,” writes Kaminski, “the rulers of Poland seemed small and weak.”

Today, our community faces a series of very great challenges. We live in a city where there is still significant racial unrest and economic disparity. Through the years First Presbyterian Church has always identified its mission in terms of the problems that faced the City of Charlotte. Throughout the dark days of segregation in Charlotte, the challenge of busing in the public schools, as well as the most recent challenges surrounded the growth of homelessness and a permanent “underclass” in the city, this church has consistently striven to be a “light in the darkness.” Today this task is no less daunting as we seek once more to be “transformed by the renewal of our minds.”

In Tom Stoppard’s play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, there is a scene in which these two friends of Hamlet are on their way from Denmark to England. Unknown to them they have in their possession a letter to the King that seals their death as traitors to the Danish realm. Somewhere along the way these two young university students begin to sense that their mission has now become their destiny. Says Guildenstern to his friend, “There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said “No,” but somehow we missed it.

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour!

Amen!