

# “Recovering a Tradition”

a sermon by

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Text: “One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts”  
(Psalm 145:1).

At the far western end of the axis that traverses Paris from the Louvre down the Champs Elysees and through the Arc de Triomphe, crossing the Seine at the Pont de Neuilly is La Grande Arche de la Defense, one of the grand projects of the late French President Francois Mitterand. The Grand Arch is a colossal open cube: almost forty stories high, 358 feet wide, faced in glass and 2.47 acres of white Carrara marble.

President Mitterand built this gigantic cube as a human rights monument, something suitably grand to mark the bicentenary of the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. As all the guidebooks point out, the Great Arch is so large that the entire Cathedral of Notre Dame, towers and spire included, would fit comfortably within it.

In his book *The Cube and the Cathedral* a Roman Catholic scholar by the name of George Weigel addresses the power of these two symbols. The cube is a tribute to the human. It is stunning, rational, angular, and geometrically precise. The Cathedral of Notre Dame bears witness to the transcendent with its vaults and bosses, its gargoyles and flying buttresses, as well as its play on light and darkness. One of the questions that Weigel raises in his book is the question of which culture is more likely to protect the moral foundations of democracy? Is the culture of the cathedral or the culture of the cube?

## I.

One of the most pressing issues that we face as a nation and as a church has to do with the increasing secularization of our society today. Almost all of the so-called mainline Protestant churches of this country today, which did so much to shape the character of this nation, find themselves facing major decline. This is true of the Episcopal Church in America, the United Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). All of these churches have suffered enormous membership losses. All of them have witnessed erosion among colleges, universities, and other institutions as these institutions have become more and more secular, including Harvard University, Yale University, and Princeton University. All of these great universities were founded by Protestant churches primarily for the training of ministers. Today, all are secular universities with no relation to the churches that founded them.

The Psalm that I have read from this morning is one of the great Hymns of Praise in the Psalter. It affirms both God's goodness and his greatness. It extols the wonder of God's creation as well as his might in human history. In verse 8 the Psalmist says, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, and abounding in steadfast love." John Calvin described that verse "as a clear and satisfactory description of the nature of God as can anywhere be found."

The Psalm also speaks as well of the importance of the passing of faith from generation to generation. As such, it is a reminder to us of the important of tradition that is the active transmission of the faith from one generation to the next. In a culture many celebrate as pluralistic, secular, postmodern, post denominational, and post Christendom, I want to propose to that the future of the church in this country is directly dependent on its power to recover the tradition that has shaped us today. There are, I am convinced, three important facets of that tradition.

## II.

The first is the historic emphasis on the majesty of God. The Presbyterian Church has often been associated with an inordinate emphasis on the sovereignty of God and specifically with the notion of Predestination. This popular estimate has good basis in fact. In fact, one can make the case that the one theme that holds our system of beliefs together is the conviction that every human being has every moment to do with the living God.

The God whom we worship is a majestic God who maintains all things in their being and who governs them by his will. God is energy, force, and life. He is purpose, intention, and will. He is the Lord God whom “comes with might,” “who has measured out the heavens and the earth in the hollow of his hand,” “before whom the nations of the earth are as nothing.” This is the creator God who works mightily in human history to accomplish his purpose. This is not a God who is small or with whom anyone would trifle. This is the God who made the heavens and the earth and all that is therein.

In Presbyterian or Reformed theology there has always been an emphasis on the distinction between the Creator and the creature. This distinction was encompassed in the Latin expression “Finitum non est capax infiniti,” which translated loosely, means “the finite cannot contain the infinite.” (Those of you in officer training might want to make a note of this, since it is on your examination.)

In recent months there has been an intense debate in our country between those who advocate the theory of evolution and those who advocate what is sometimes called the theory of intelligent design. The Presbyterian Church has historically held that the theory of evolution and the notion of a Creator God were not in conflict with each other.

Recently, I came upon a remarkable article in the *Christian Century* by John Polkinghorne, an Anglican priest and distinguished physicist. The article is entitled “Beyond Darwin.” Polkinghorne points out that the Darwinian emphasis on selectivity and survival that is present in all living species does not account for scientific discovery, aesthetic delight or moral insight. For example, humans quickly began to understand the force of gravity. Humans learned quickly that if you stepped or fell off a cliff, you could be killed or injured. Yet, when Isaac Newton recognized that the same force that makes a high cliff dangerous is also the force that holds the moon in its orbit around the earth and the earth in its orbit around the sun, thereby discovering universal gravity, something happened that went far beyond anything needed for survival. The same is true of our aesthetic sense. The appreciation of a painting by Rembrandt or of the music of W. A. Mozart are not necessary for the survival of the race. But they are a part of the way that we share in the Creator’s joy in creation, in the same fashion that the discovery of the cosmic order by science is truly a reflection of the mind of God.

This confidence in the majesty of God is not, however, simply a matter of intellectual assent. It is fundamental to our ability to live with confidence and hope in the face of great natural disasters (hurricanes and tsunamis), historical evils (Darfur and the Sudan), confident that our lives are not accidental, but that God holds the whole world in his hand.

### III.

The second essential element of that tradition is the emphasis on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In the final analysis, this is the most fundamental issue the church faces. Several years ago a Presbyterian minister by the name of Dick Ficca preached a sermon at the Peacemaking Conference that he entitled “What’s the Big Deal About Jesus?” In that sermon he said what a lot

of people in our society are saying. To be sure, Jesus is important. But so are the other great religious leaders of the world: Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, Confucius, and others as well.

Several years ago I participated in a seminar at Princeton Seminary. The subject of the seminar was “Preaching Jesus Christ Today.” One of the texts for the seminar was a section from Karl Barth’s massive work, *Church Dogmatics* where Barth deals with Jesus Christ as “The Light of Life.” In that section Barth says something that is worth pondering as he writes, “Jesus Christ is the light of life. To underline the ‘the’ is to say that He is the one and only light of life. Positively, this means the He is the light of life in all its fullness, in perfect adequacy, and negatively it means that there is no other light of life outside or alongside His, outside or alongside the light He is.”

Barth goes on to say that the difficulty in this statement about Christ could be resolved by a very simple grammatical change. It all hinges on whether we use the definite or indefinite article. Do we say that Jesus is “the” light of the world or simply “a” light?

I believe that many people would assent to the latter. Many would be content to say that Jesus is “a light”—a great light for that matter. After all, that is how other religions view Jesus. Modern Judaism embraces him as a great prophet, as does the Koran.

And yet, difficult as it may be, the claim of Jesus as the “light of life” is central to the Christian faith and apart from this claim, our faith loses vitality and strength.

In his book, *The Reformed Imperative*, Dr. John Leith observed that the difference today in the United States between the churches that are growing, vital, and alive and those that are in great decline is found in terms of the way these churches respond to the question that Jesus raised to his disciples: “Who do men say that I am?” Those churches that have vitality and life are those who say with Peter, “You are the Christ, the son of God.”

#### IV.

Then, finally, the third essential today is that human life has meaning because we have been created by God, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and because this is true, we are called to lead lives that make a difference.

Several years ago Bill Hybels, the minister of the Willow Creek Church, spoke to a gathering of Presbyterians in Orlando, Florida. The Willow Creek Church is a church of 6,500 people that attracts 17,000 worshippers each week. He told the group that had gathered in Orlando that “the local church is really the hope of the world. Who other than the local church is going to help millions of people? Who other than the local church can reach out to the unemployed and the disillusioned? Who other than the local church has the guts to tell a trembling world that there is a sovereign God who is still on the throne?”

In his speech Hybels spoke of a little known person of the New Testament named Joseph of Arimathea. He was a “secret follower” of Jesus. After all, Joseph had a lot to lose. He had

money, status, and a good life. But something happened after the crucifixion that changed Joseph. He threw caution to the wind. He demanded the body of Jesus to give it a proper burial. Suddenly he became something more than a secret follower. He became a disciple.

Hybels wondered what it was that changed Joseph of Arimathea. He finally concluded that something happened to Joseph, as he watched Christ die on the cross. He saw a man with all the power in the world set that power aside in order to atone for your sins and for mine. Hybels said, "I think when Joseph saw Jesus die, something finally stirred within him and he gritted his teeth and said, 'I will never waver again when God asks me to make a hard decision.'"

I wonder if there is not someone here today who needs a bell rung. Most of us, if the truth were told, are still mostly talk. We have watched the world deteriorate around us--the scandals on Wall Street, the corruption in corporate America, the unanswered suffering in so many parts of the world.

Maybe the answer to all of this has to do with whether we choose to ally ourselves with the cube or the cathedral, whether we see our lives as sufficient within themselves or whether we see our lives in terms of a transcendent God who calls us to lives of courage, compassion, and integrity.