

“No Uncertain Sound”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

February 26, 2006

Text: “...And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?” (I Corinthians 14:8).

In recent years the Christian Church has gone through tumultuous times. Sexual scandals in the Roman Catholic Church (especially pedophilia) have dealt a severe blow to these churches. Those of us in the so-called mainline Protestant Churches, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Methodist Church, Episcopal Church in America, and the Lutheran Church of America) have dealt with massive membership losses, protracted arguments over human sexuality, and a host of other divisive issues. This past week the Mission Support Services Office of the General Assembly of our Church projected that the membership loss for our denomination in 2005 would be 65,000, surpassing by almost 20,000 people the record-breaking losses that occurred in 2003. Furthermore, the Mission Support estimated that the membership losses in 2006 would grow to 85,000. For a denomination of 2.5 million members these losses are massive.

In addition, when the General Assembly of our church meets in June in Birmingham, Alabama, it will once again consider a number of controversial issues, including the ordination of active gays and lesbians as officers in the church, the disinvestments of companies doing business with Israel, and a host of other potentially divisive issues.

I.

Amidst a host of disturbing factors in the church, the question is often asked, “What can we do to prevent this erosion of membership and influence in the Presbyterian Church?” This question leads me to Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. Chapter 14 of I Corinthians is in some ways a “thorn between two roses.” In Chapter 13 Paul speaks of the greatest spiritual gift that we possess, the gift of “love.” In Chapter 15 Paul speaks to the importance of the resurrection and proclaims the glorious news that God has raised Christ from the dead.

In Chapter 14 Paul deals with a specific, divisive issue in the early church, the gift of speaking in tongues. Now, Paul clearly sees this as a gift. It was common in the early church for individuals to speak in language that was highly emotional and for the most part impossible to understand. Paul himself had experienced this gift of glossalalia, the capacity to speak in an unknown language or utterance. Again and again, however, Paul warns that it is far better to speak in a “known tongue” than an “unknown tongue.” He advocates the need for prophesy, revelation, and teaching. He warns his audience of the difficulty provided in worship by someone speaking in an ‘unknown tongue’.

In the midst of this discussion of the value of “an unknown tongue,” the Apostle Paul uses an illustration that has relevance for us today. “If lifeless instruments such as the flute or harp,” Paul argues, “do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?” Then, using a metaphor from battle, Paul raises the question that “if the trumpet or bugle gives an uncertain sound, who will be ready for battle?” (Vs. 8).

If the church in our time is to survive as a vital, dynamic institution that can shape the hearts and minds of our people, then surely there can be no uncertain sound. So what is essential for the church today to be the authentic church of Jesus Christ?

II.

The first essential is the uniqueness and centrality of Jesus Christ. The Christian faith lives or dies on this affirmation. John Hick in his book *The Myth of God Incarnate*, denies the incarnation, namely that God was incarnate in Jesus Christ. For Hick the doctrine of the divinity of Christ is a divisive notion in a world that already is divided by religion. Hick promotes a widely held view today that Jesus is simply one revelation of God among many other revelations.

In a remarkable fashion the relationship between Jesus and God was one of the first questions with which the early church was forced to deal. Early on there were those in the church who viewed Jesus as created by God, one revelation among many. The situation in the church became so tense that the Roman Emperor Constantine called a council at the city of

Nicaea and ordered the theologians to resolve this issue. The central figure in this debate was a theologian by the name of Athanasius. He understood that if Jesus Christ is simply “like God and not God” then we are left with the question, “How much like God?” If Jesus Christ is like God, then someone else may come along who is more like God. The legacy of the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D) is what we call today the Nicene Creed. In that Creed we declare that Jesus Christ is not “like God” he is God. The creed uses phrases like “begotten, not made,” “being of the same substance as the father,” “very God of very God.” All of these are ways of saying that Jesus Christ is not one religious figure among others. He is unique. He is the “Son of God” and insofar as any of us can know God, we know God in Jesus Christ.

III.

The second essential is our belief in the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some years ago Carl Braaten, an outstanding Lutheran scholar, wrote of what he called “The Resurrection Debate.” Braaten points out that many people in the church today do not believe that God raised Christ from the dead. For these individuals the resurrection is not an “historical event.” It is a myth created by the church.

N.T. Wright, in a article called “Grave Matters,” asserts that the “bodily resurrection of Jesus isn’t a take-it-or leave-it thing, as though some Christians are welcome to believe it and others are welcome not to believe it. Take it away, and the whole picture is totally different. Take it away, and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring the problems of the material world. Take it away, and Sigmund Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is a wish-fulfillment religion. Take it away, and Nietzsche was right in saying that Christianity is a religion for the weak. Put it back, and you have a faith that can take on the postmodern world that looks to Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche as it prophets; you can beat them at their own game with the Easter news that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and that the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

Anyone who serves as a pastor of a church generally has a pretty keen understanding of the great difficulties that individuals and families go through: terrible illnesses, the death of loved ones, separation and divorce, the loss of jobs, and a host of other very difficult challenges. In the end, we are all undone unless there are resources of divine power and mercy that enable us to put the broken pieces of our lives back together again

For a number of decades the Christian church in America has been torn asunder by two very different groups. On the one hand, there are those who believe that the Christian gospel is exhausted in giving comfort to people and assuring them of God’s love. On the other hand, there is a group who believe that the Christian gospel exists to change society. Surely only those who are very comfortable and who have been very well treated can believe that the gospel is exhausted in the comforts of heaven. And only the very young and very naïve can imagine that the gospel exists only to change society. For one does not have to live very long to understand that there are some things in life that are not going to be changed.

There is much that can be achieved in human history and in human life. But let us not forget that human life apart from God is a very uphill battle, and that in the end we all lose unless there is the power of God to raise Christ from the dead.

IV.

Then, too, if we are to ensure that our trumpet does not give forth an uncertain sound, we must affirm with conviction those central affirmations of the Reformed faith that helped to shape the Presbyterian Church into one of the great expressions of Christendom.

One of these is our emphasis on the Lordship of God. John Leith in his book Introduction to the Reformed Tradition points out that Presbyterians have always held a high doctrine of God. God is not simply or friend or “pal.” God is the Creator of heaven and earth and maintains all things in their being and governs them by his will. God is energy, force, and life. God is purpose, intention, and will. He is the Lord God who “comes with might,” “who has measured the waters in the hollows of his hand” and “marked off the heavens with a span.” He is the one before whom the “nations are as nothing.” Leith refers to our faith as “theocentric.” At the center of our existence is not humankind with all its possibilities, not even Jesus Christ, but God the creator and who was uniquely present in Jesus Christ.

This theocentric character of the Reformed faith sets it over against every ethic of self-realization and against inordinate concern with the salvation of one’s own soul. In a culture of self-centeredness it reminds each of us that it is not about us, it is about God. I was reminded of this several years after a worship service when someone came up to me and said, “I didn’t like that last hymn.” All I could say was, “We didn’t sing it to you.” In worship, in our common life, in our individual lives the center is God--not ourselves.

A second emphasis in the Reformed faith that is vital for today is a concern for the society in which we live. One of the “great ends of the church” is the “promotion of social righteousness.” John Calvin, the great Reformer of the Sixteenth Century, did not see his work in the city of Geneva as simply for the salvation of souls but for the reformation of the city by the Word of God.

Today we live in a city of rapid change. The city of Charlotte has grown into one of the major financial centers of the United States. But today there are major challenges that face us: the growing gap between rich and poor, the hopelessness that pervades so many people that are trapped in urban poverty and violence. That is why the mission of this church is not only to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the center city, but its mission is to “build a city” that is safe for all its children.

May God grant us his grace that we may sound forth that certain sound that will bring forth light and life.

Amen!

