

# “Does Christianity Make Sense?”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

May 21, 2006

**Text: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you.”(I Peter 3:15b).**

**This week marked the opening in theaters of the long awaited movie “The Da Vinci Code,” which stars Tom Hanks in the Dan Brown thriller. Over the last several years, since the book was published, I have been amazed at two very different reactions to the book. One is the reaction of those who bought the story “hook, line, and sinker.” They seemed to have forgotten the fundamental aspect of the book. It is a work of fiction, a novel. Dan Brown never pretended it was anything other than that.**

**The second reaction that has amazed me is the people who have seen the book as an attack on Christianity. There are sermons preached against the *Da Vinci Code*, classes that carefully expose all of the fallacies of the book, as if it were false doctrine that needed to be repudiated.**

That is why I was impressed with remarks made recently by N.T. Wright, Bishop of Durham, England, who pointed out that the fascination with the *Da Vinci Code* like *The Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* points to a deeper divide in our society that runs even deeper than the divide between the political left and the political right. It is a form of “neo-gnosticism” that invites people to look deep inside themselves and to devise their own religion and ethical system. As Wright points out, “In America today you can have any sort of spirituality you like, as long as it is not orthodox Christianity.”

## I.

The New Testament lesson this morning is taken from I Peter, one of the so-called “Catholic Epistles” in the New Testament. Tradition ascribes this letter to the disciple Peter, who was also one of the leaders of the early church. It is addressed to the churches of Asia Minor who were undergoing persecution from the Roman Empire and it serves as a note of encouragement to these churches. It reminds them of the redemptive nature of suffering and encourages them to hold fast in the midst of persecution. He reminds them that they are a “chosen race” and a “royal priesthood” (I Peter 1:9) and they are aliens in a strange land. Then in chapter three he challenges them to “give an account for the hope that is in you.” That is to say, I Peter understands that as Christians we are called to state the basis of the faith we proclaim and that is where I would like to focus this morning.

## II.

First, as Christians we believe that life has meaning, purpose, and direction. Our lives are not accidents, but are rooted in the purposes of God. The Gospel of John affirms that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” That is another way of saying that God has blessed human life, given it dignity, and calls us to respect our lives and the lives of those around us.

This past Monday several hundred people gathered in the sanctuary of this church to hear Dr. Timothy Tyson, a professor at Duke University, speak about his book *Blood Done Called My Name*. It is a story that begins in 1970 in Oxford, North Carolina, with the killing of a black man by a group of whites and details the trauma that resulted in that small town as the result of this senseless killing, as the town erupted in a volcano of violence as whites and blacks faced off against each other.

One of the insights of Tim Tyson’s book is the remarkable way that Christianity served both sides of this conflict. For one group their religion reinforced their notion of “white supremacy.” The other group found in Christianity the liberating hope that oppression was wrong, that liberation was in accord with the purposes of God, and that ultimately the racist structure of society must somehow be overturned.

The Christian witness is that the last word in every situation is the grace of God. That grace is not only God’s forgiveness but also as Reinhold Niebuhr once pointed out,

**“God’s providential working in history by which he makes the wrath of man to praise him and transmits good out of evil.”**

**The greatest challenge to Christianity today is not the *Da Vinci Code*, but the world in which we live, a world where there is genocide in the Sudan and in so many parts of the world and where often individuals find themselves face to face with illness, tragedy, and death. In his magnificent work *The City of God*, St. Augustine dealt with the question of why such terrible things often befall people. For Augustine the immediate question was the fall of city of Rome to the barbarians in the Fourth Century. He concluded that the difference between Christians and non-Christians was not what happens to them in life, but how they respond. For Augustine, Christians have the opportunity to respond to tragedy with “faith, hope, and love.”**

**The Christian witness is that there a grace, the living, active personal presence of God, available in all events and that this grace is the final word in every event that allows a person to use his or her life to achieve the purposes of God. That means there are no dead-end streets in life in which evil is the last word, no enclosures from which there is no exit.**

### **III.**

**Then, too, Christianity makes sense in that it provides a way of understanding our lives, but also in that it offers us a way to overcome the power of sin and death. The Christian faith has always insisted that salvation or transformation is something that we cannot do for ourselves, but something that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. One of the most powerful books on prayer is a book entitled *The Meaning of Prayer* by Harry Emerson Fosdick, who for many years was the minister of the Riverside Church in New York City. It was written out of a wrenching experience in his life. As a young seminary student in New York, he suffered from terrible bouts of depression. One night, in the midst of such a depression, he took a razor blade, slit his wrists, and ended up in a hospital for a period of months. During that terrible experience Fosdick came to a life-changing insight. He prayed to God to help him. He understood that either there was a greater power than himself that could deliver him from this terrible illness or else, he knew he was lost. It was this experience that gave Fosdick the insight to write about the meaning of prayer.**

**That is how Christians have understood the grace of God. It is not only forgiveness; it is reinforcement and the gift of a second chance. Sometimes that transformation comes very suddenly, as it did with the Prodigal son, lost in a foreign country. At other times it comes like the long road John Wesley traveled before he saw the light in a Moravian meetinghouse.**

**Shortly before his death several years ago Dr. John Leith wrote that “the greatest question that each person must answer if they are to grow to human maturity, is ‘Why am I here?’” Dr. Leith went on to say that the most serious issue in our society is not economic or social or political, but the question of death and the end of history. Does human life have meaning, or is it simply a senseless, meaningless episode in the history of the universe that**

will end in ruin without purpose or meaning? The second most important question is the question of guilt and salvation. Is there some power in the world that enables each of us as humans to overcome the dominance of instinct and impulse and the corruption of instinct and impulse by our own self-interests?

That is salvation--forgiveness, a second chance, the power to say with the Apostle Paul, "I can do anything in him who strengthens me."

#### IV.

Then, too, Christianity makes sense in that it insists that God's grace offers us the power of a new life. Recently, I came across a new biography of Adolph Eichmann that was reviewed in the *New York Times*. Adolph Eichmann was arrested in 1960 by Israeli agents for his role in Hitler's Third Reich, and particularly his role in the extermination of six million Jews. One of the things that I remember most about Eichmann in that courtroom in Jerusalem was that he seemed so ordinary. During the trial he showed no real emotion. Most of the time he sat in the glass booth that surrounded him, polishing his glasses. He seemed so ordinary, incapable of such a horrible crime.

Eichmann's defense was that he was not one of the masterminds of the "final solution." In fact, his job was just to insure that the trains taking the Jews to Auschwitz, Treblinka, and the other death camps ran on time. That was his defense. He was just doing his job. Hannah Arendt described Eichmann in terms of the "banality of evil."

So often, it seems to me, most of us live pretty ordinary lives. We do our jobs. We do not plot evil, we just go to work, raise our families, go on vacation.

But sometimes we wonder if there is not more. One of the things that faith does for us is to challenge us to make our lives count, to stand for things that can change the world and make it a better place.

The Apostle Paul said, "I must also see Rome." Why would he say that? No one made him take on that adventure, which ended with his death. David Livingston, the Scottish missionary, said, "I must see Africa." Why must he? No one made him leave his home in Scotland to go to the center of the African continent where he would live and die.

There is nothing more needed today than women and men who are able to sense a deeper calling to make a difference in the world in which we live. Two weeks ago we celebrated the commissioning service of a member of our church, Elizabeth Little, who left her job in Charlotte to run a work camp in Mississippi to help in the recovery of the Gulf Coast after the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. Now, not all of us will be called to leave our jobs and to engage in mission work. But every one of us can make a difference in the City of Charlotte and that is what God calls us to do.

**Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” So often, we are tempted to believe that we know another way, another truth, another life other than the one he gives to us.**

**But our faith reminds us that he is the way, the truth and the life, and apart from him we are nothing.**