

# “Finding a New Outlook on Life”

a sermon by

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**Text: “So with us: when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe” (Galatians 4:3).**

One of the news stories that captured my attention this week was a meeting of the International Astronomical Union that took place in Prague. There were 2,400 scientist registered for this event and while I am sure that they must have many important subjects to consider, the most controversial decision to emerge from that meeting of scientists was to demote one of the planets, Pluto, to the status of a “dwarf planet.” Now I, for one, found certain sadness in the news. I had always assumed that the “nine planets” were a fixed certainty in our world, and it is disquieting to realize now that something that seemed so certain isn’t certain at all. Under the new rules, a planet must meet three criteria: it must orbit the sun, it must be big enough for gravity to squash it into a round ball, and it must have cleared out other things in its orbit. Apparently, Pluto qualified on the first two criteria and did not on the third. In the final analysis, Pluto is really not much more than a large icy asteroid, not even as large as the United States.

One of the scientists who spoke on the subject of planets affirmed that a critical aspect of science is being willing to look at information in light of new knowledge. What was thought to be an intriguing aspect of our universe fifty years ago now appears to be something not so important at all.

## I.

There are many ways that Christianity can be described--in terms of its organizations, its theologies, its ethical principals--but it can also be described as a way of looking at things. This is certainly at the heart of Paul writing to the churches in Galatia, when he observes, “that we were once slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe.” This passage is one that is often used in the Advent Season. It contrasts the world before the coming of Jesus to the world after the

advent of the Christ. Paul uses a particular image here to describe the new life that Christ brings. He compares it to a child who has lost a loved one and who will one day inherit a sizable fortune. For now the child is under the custodianship of a guardian. The child is not much more than a slave, but one day the child will be an adult and will inherit all that was intended for him.

So it is with us. Paul says that once we lived under the power of the “elemental spirits”-- those powers and principalities that seem to overwhelm our lives. But now, he argues, we have a new way of seeing things. Christianity involves a changed point of view, a new outlook, and an unaccustomed way of seeing things. The importance of this rests on a very basic principle. All life consists of two elements: first the facts; second, our way of looking at them.

This summer I had the opportunity to read David McCullough’s wonderful book *1776* in which he describes that pivotal year in the life of this nation. Most of us look on the Revolutionary War in a very sentimental way. We admire those stalwart patriots: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. Their lives seem so heroic, so grand. The picture that McCullough paints is very different. Those were difficult times. George Washington was facing an overwhelming British Army. Washington had a few poorly trained troops, scant supplies, and little support from the Continental Congress. The Battle at Boston, New York, and finally the crossing of the Delaware on the fateful Christmas night may be the stuff of legends, but for Washington it was a very discouraging year.

And yet, it is hard to understand the events of that momentous year without some appreciation for the remarkable vision that these men and women shared. They were convinced that something new was about to be born. Amidst constant discouragement, desertion, defeat, and adversity, they were convinced that a nation “of the people, for the people, and by the people” was about to emerge.

You see, they had the ability to see things not as they were, but as they might become.

## II.

That is true in the life of our church. Recently, Gregg Green shared with me an article that appeared in *The Charlotte Observer* concerning the growth of Uptown Charlotte. There are now fourteen Condominium Tower Sites that have been announced, started, or proposed over the past three years, all of which are within walking distance of our church. Today the population of Uptown Charlotte is 11,000. Within the next four years that population will soar to 21,000.

One of the most important questions facing our church has to do with how we view the future. To be sure, we have a distinguished past. We are also proud of the present growth and activity of the church. But the most exciting thing about this church is not its past or its present, but its future. In light of this tremendous challenge of the future, our church will have the opportunity to decide whether we want to shape the future that is before us or simply react to what is happening around us. Some of the questions we will deal with over the next several years include these:

- 1) Are there ways that our church can develop the use of our Parking Lot (the Poplar Pine Street Property) to strengthen and enhance the ministry of this church?
- 2) How will we respond to the growth that has occurred in our church? Today there are 100 four-year-old children on the Church School roll of our church. There are presently 200 middle school and senior high school young people in our youth program. That number will move to 300 in the next five years as the “bubble” of young children moves through the system.
- 3) What will our response be to this unprecedented growth in Charlotte’s Center City? Do we want to welcome these newcomers into our church, and how will we provide the space for them?
- 4) How will we, as a Center City Church, respond to the great crisis that is taking place in Urban America and in many of our own neighborhoods as well: rising crime, children without adequate parenting, the lack of good schools, a growing gap between rich and poor, and the stigma of racism still a driving force?

Harry Emerson Fosdick once told of driving by a church one day that had a sign in front of it on which were written these words: “We practice First Century Christianity.” Fosdick observed that he did not think we ought to practice First Century Christianity. Our challenge is to practice Twenty-first Century Christianity.

There is another challenge that faces our church today. For a number of years our denomination, like so many of the other mainline Protestant denominations has faced some very difficult times. There have been large membership losses. We have had to cut the number of missionaries our church sends out due to lack of funds. We have also found ourselves divided over a number of other issues including the ordination of active homosexuals, stem cell research, the crisis in the Middle East, just to name a few. I am convinced that First Presbyterian Church has a unique calling to seek to renew the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Throughout the years the Presbyterian or Reformed Church has always held dear to it a core of beliefs that include:

- A strong conviction of the Sovereignty of God in human lives and in the life of all creation;
- The centrality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ;
- A belief in the authority of Scripture as a rule of faith and a guide to our lives
- A confidence in God’s grace, not only as the forgiveness, but also the power to offer us new opportunities of life and growth; and
- The belief that the Christian life is a life that calls us not only to love God but to love our neighbors, particularly those whom Jesus called “the least of these”- the homeless, the poor, those who are mentally ill--the “outsiders” of our community.

I am convinced that these convictions have the power to shape our lives and our community. This is a church that by God’s grace has the power and the ability to transform the city of Charlotte and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as well.

#### IV.

It is also true in our individual lives as well. Christianity is a way of seeing life, and no other approach to our faith reveals more quickly its searching and penetrating quality. Christianity stands or falls on its ability to transform human lives. That Transformation or “conversion” comes in a number of ways. Sometimes it comes very quickly, as it did with the Prodigal Son, lost in a foreign country, who in the midst of his misery and suffering said, “I will rise and return to my father’s house.” Sometimes it is very gradual like the life of John Wesley who traveled a long road before he saw the light in a Moravian Meeting House. But, every conversion, every transformation, always results in a new way of seeing things.

In viewing our faith in this manner we come very directly to the person of Christ and his way of dealing with people. In those first days, when a disciple came within range of Jesus, he was not initially asked to join a church--there was no church; he was not asked to subscribe to a formal creed--there was as yet no creed. Rather, that person was asked to get a new way of seeing things--a new way of looking at the Sabbath, at the Samaritans, at sinners, at children, at God and human kind. The word that the New Testament uses for conversion is “metanoia”--it means a change of mind. It means a reorientation from one thing to the other.

This morning begins a new year in the life of our church, as young people return to school and families move from summer to fall. There will be new schedules, new challenges, and new opportunities.

This morning I am asking each one of us to ask God to give us a new perspective--a new way of looking at things that puts not ourselves in the center but Christ. I am asking families to place a priority on regular worship and the Christian education of their children. I am asking individuals to seek to understand God’s intention for their lives through worship, prayer, the study of scripture, and to God through service to our neighbors. I am also asking that this church be a “transforming presence” in the heart of Charlotte.

A recent visitor to our church told me recently that he had never witnessed a church with a greater opportunity to witness for Christ than the opportunity this church has today.

“If not Charlotte, then where?  
If not First Presbyterian, then who?  
If not now, then when?”

Amen!