

# “Personal Responsibility”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

February 18, 2007

**Text: “Then Saul said, ‘Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her’” (I Samuel 28:7).**

The following is a multiple-choice quiz. Who is the person who said, “Everything that you have read about me in the paper is true?”

- a) Was it Senator Hilary Clinton of New York, explaining her position on the War in Iraq?
- b) Was it Jacques Chirac, the President of France, explaining his statement that it was probably all right for a nation like Iran to have one or two nuclear weapons?
- c) Was it Senator Joe Biden, attempting to explain his tendency toward self-inflicted implosions such as his statements about Senator Barak Obama?
- d) Was it the Mayor of San Francisco, who was discovered having a sexual affair with the wife of his campaign manager?

The answer to that quiz is “D.” It was the Mayor of San Francisco, who when confronted with a very serious charge, answered without hesitation, equivocation, or evasion, “Everything that you have read about me in the newspaper is true.”

It is hard to look around us today without concluding that we are a people who are facing some serious problems. One of the greatest threats to our national security is our dependency on imported oil. We are a gas guzzling society that even with the price of oil at \$60 a barrel continue to insist on driving our Humvees and SUVs.

We are a people who say that we believe in stable family systems. Yet, we are fascinated by the lives of celebrities who treat marriage as if it is a joke and who trot around the world adopting children from different countries, as if it were like shopping for souvenirs.

Or, to put it another way, we are a people who have a great deal of trouble accepting personal responsibility.

## I.

There is a fascinating text in the Old Testament that illumines our situation this morning. In I Samuel, chapter 28, we read the account of King Saul, who was facing one of the most difficult situations of his life. His kingship was in its last days. He was facing the rising threat of the Philistine army, as well as the popularity of a young shepherd boy named David, who would soon be king.

In verse 3 of this chapter in I Samuel we read, “Saul had put the mediums and the wizards out of the land.” The King obviously recognized witchcraft as a public evil and had issued an edict against it—all witches and wizards be gone! Then four verses later we read, “Saul said to his courtiers, ‘Find me a medium that I may go and consult her’” (I Samuel 28: 7).

That is one of the most human passages in all of the Bible—a man recognizing a public evil as evil, but when the pinch came, he himself became part of the problem. “All witches be gone!” But then four verses later, “Seek me a witch!”

We all behave like that at times. We decry racial segregation, yet how many of us are completely free from the racial antipathies and hidden stains of racism? We say we favor public education, but many of us choose to send our children to private schools.

In a deep sense we cannot help but be a part of this problem. “All we like sheep have gone astray,” says Isaiah. “We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God,” writes the Apostle Paul. Our modern world has belittled the notion of sin, but it is as real today, as it was 3,000 years ago. We long to be part of the solution in our world. But when we are honest, we have to admit that often we are part of the problem. We long to be part of the solution, but often we don’t know how to attain this. So, today, we seek God’s grace that we may be the people that God wills us to be. So, how does a person go about that?

## II.

First of all, we have to overcome the temptation to make exceptions of ourselves. That is what Saul did, and we do it as well. He knew that witchcraft and sorcery were public evils. And yet, when he was in a difficult situation where the avenues to God were closed to him, the first thing that he did was to say, “Find me a medium, that I may consult her.”

So often we find this in the church. We want the church to succeed, but often we are not willing to put ourselves in a position where there is any real sacrifice required of us. Today there are many discouraging aspects of the mainline churches, but let me point you to what I believe are signs of hope.

First, the Presbytery of Charlotte recently purchased property in the Weddington area at the corner of Providence and Rea Road for the building of a new church. The lead gifts for this purchase came from this church and from Sardis Presbyterian Church. We believe that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has something to offer people today and that we need to begin to insure that our church will grow and not decline.

Second, our church continues to support young people for ministry. The church cannot succeed without leadership and nothing is more critical for leadership than the church's ability to produce outstanding ministers.

Thirdly, the church is recovering a sense of its Global nature. This was certainly evident in Louis and Susan Sutton's visit with us two weeks ago. It is also evident in the ministry of Elizabeth Little in the mission work of the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

In each of these cases the church is moving forward because people are willing to involve themselves, to take risks, to apply the gospel to their own lives. One Sunday the poet Longfellow went to church. When he returned, he wrote in his diary, "John Ware, of Cambridge, preached a good sermon." And then he added these five unusual words: "I applied it to myself." So may God this this morning.

### III.

There is another dimension to this business of personal responsibility and it is the capacity of the church to point to individuals who demonstrate for us lives that are led in light of God's intention for us.

Is this not one of the central meanings of Jesus to the world? Born in a manger, died on a cross, no wealth, no prestige, nothing to count on except those intangibles of character that cynics belittle, and yet towering across the centuries still, is the life that more and more believe is the answer. Where his spirit comes, that is the solution.

Several years ago Tom Wolfe published his most recent novel, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, the story of a young, innocent girl from North Carolina who ends up at Dupont University among the "lost souls of a university." Sex, as Charlotte Simmons learns, is mostly recreational, but she discovers that it is also about power, the power to define other beings and their worth.

Will Willimon, in his review of this book in the *Christian Century*, concludes that although Wolfe would have never meant it that way, the novel is an eloquent plea for campus ministry on our college and university campuses. In a world in which liberation, purpose, vision and truth have become problematic, Dupont University is a fertile field for anyone attempting to rescue a few souls for the one who is the way, truth, and life.

Willimon relates in his article an occasion when Tom Wolfe visited the Duke Campus, where his daughter was a student. As he exited the magnificent chapel at the center of the university, Wolfe observed a number of statues above the front door of the university. On one side are some of the great figures of Southern history: Robert E. Lee, Thomas Jefferson, and

Sydney Lanier. On the other side, Willimon pointed out, were some of the great preachers and religious leaders of the past. "That explains St. Francis of Assisi," said Wolfe, pointing to one of the figures. "No," said Willimon, "that's Savonarola." "What?" said Wolfe in astonishment. "You know," said Willimon, "the great friar of Florence, the fire filled preacher who most art historians despise and who was finally burned at the stake." "Only the church would pull off a stunt like that," muttered Wolfe as he walked away.

It was only later that evening, Willimon said, that he finally understood what Wolfe meant. Only the church would place at the entrance to a chapel the statue of the crazy prophet of Florence, Italy, who urged the citizens of Florence to cast their priceless books and works of art into what Savonarola called "the bonfire of vanities." Only the church would be foolish enough to place a replica of this fiery monk to welcome freshmen of a university with these words: "Young men and women, don't let investment banking lead you to hell. Don't sell out to the Democrats or the Republicans! We are going to have a party after the service today. Bring in all those I-Pods, designer clothes and all that other stuff and we will build a "bonfire of the vanities."

#### IV.

There is nothing more needed in our time than the witness of personal integrity in our lives that matches our deeds with our words.

That is certainly true in the church. Over the past few years I have noticed how churches have become more and more oriented to our consumer culture. This is certainly true in Charlotte where churches offer entertaining worship, uplifting music, plenteous parking, and child care. Churches now offer to come to neighborhood theaters so that worshippers will not have to drive far.

But where is the commitment? Where is the notion that following Jesus is a matter of sacrifice, of giving of ourselves? John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* described the Christian life in terms of "denying oneself, taking up the cross, and following Jesus." What if we advertised ourselves in that way, as teaching people not only how to live but how to die?

As many of you know, last Saturday I conducted the memorial service for my mother, who died on Tuesday of that week in Tennessee. Several years ago some of the women who were in the church school class that she taught collected a group of her prayers. One of the prayers that she prayed went like this:

"Grant, O Lord that what we say with our lips  
We may believe in our hearts  
And what we believe in our hearts  
We may practice in our lives."  
Surely these are words to live by as we seek to serve God with all our hearts.

Amen!