

# “Aliens and Exiles: 1) On Telling the Truth”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul” (I Peter 2:11).**

In October of 2006 author James Frey found himself in a very difficult situation. He had published a book entitled *A Million Little Pieces*, which was allegedly about his own life as an alcoholic, drug addict and criminal. The book was so riveting that Oprah Winfrey placed it as a key selection on her Book Club. The book immediately became a best seller on the New York Times list, selling almost 2 million copies.

A closer examination of the book revealed that the book should have been entitled “A Million Little Lies”. Most of the material that Frey reported as true was in fact fabricated or wildly exaggerated including details of his jail terms, criminal career, and being an outlaw wanted in three different states. Although Oprah Winfrey tried to defend the book as having what she called certain “truthiness” to it, in fact it was a grand deception.

Frey’s predicament is hardly an isolated event. In recent years, politicians, pundits, professors, and even Pulitzer Prize winners have been caught dealing in deceit. One of the nation’s most prominent historians, Stephen Ambrose, acknowledge that he had plagiarized portions of his work, as did Doris Kearns Goodwin.

Charlotte has not escaped this epidemic of misusing the truth. Several years ago a prominent young politician wrecked a promising career when it came to light that he had been guilty of padding his resume with things that were not true. In another instance, a prominent businessman lost his job after it was revealed that he not only claimed a college degree he had

not earned, but that he had also misrepresented himself as an Olympic athlete when he fact he had not even participated in the Olympics.

But the phenomenon of misrepresenting the truth is not confined to plagiarism. A retired Professor from Princeton University, Harry Frankfurt, has recently written a book in which he decries the common practice of our society of “deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of someone’s own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes.”

## I.

Over the next several weeks the sermons will focus on an important but brief book in the New Testament, I Peter. The First Letter of Peter presents itself as a pastoral letter written by the Apostle Peter. In more recent years New Testament scholars have questioned whether the book came in fact from this disciple that had known Jesus or whether it comes from Silas or another person in the early church. The language of the letter, its style, and content certainly point to a time that is later than Peter’s own life.

But the content of the letter is critical. Martin Luther, the Great Reformer of the Sixteenth Century, viewed I Peter, along with Paul’s letter to the church at Rome and the Gospel of John, as one of the foremost witnesses to the gospel that God had brought about through Christ. Luther was attracted to the letter, not only because of its similarity to the writings of St. Paul, but because he found in it a triumphant conviction of faith that permeates it and challenges its reads to be in, but not of the world, and to endure unjust sufferings in faith, hope, and love.

In this letter the author speaks of the Christian community in Asia Minor as “exiles and aliens.” As such, the letter points out the fact that as Christians, we are sometimes called to stand over and against the culture in which we live.

That is certainly true in our calling to tell the truth.

## II.

That is certainly true of Jesus. One of the characteristics of Jesus’ ministry was his insistence on the truth. It is a hallmark of the gospels. When Jesus was arrested by the Roman soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was asked by his captors if he were Jesus of Galilee. Jesus replied, “I am he.”

This insistence on the truth is found throughout the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his disciples to let their “Yes” be “Yes” and their “No” be “No”( Matthew 5:37). The ethics of Jesus goes far beyond the literal. Jesus had an annoying habit of pushing people beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law. Jesus not only forbids adultery, but lust as well; not only killing, but anger as well.

As Christians, we are called to stand for the truth. The ninth commandment is stated like this: “You shall not bear false witness.” That is what lying is about. It is bearing false witness. It is saying what is not true. It is also the failure to object to what is false.

### III.

There is another dimension of telling the truth and it is the insistence that simplicity and sincerity means the identifying characteristics in our dealing with others and particularly in the church. Simplicity is a recurring theme in all of the writings of John Calvin. He was the enemy of the ostentatious, the pompous, the contrived and the needlessly complicated. Calvin was particularly offended by the ornateness of the medieval church with its emphasis on relics, statues, veneration of the saints, and lavish decorations. The churches that came unto Calvin's influence were stripped of this kind of excess and returned to a more simple form.

For Calvin, the gospel of Jesus Christ was a very simple matter and should be communicated to people in a simple and straightforward way. In the worship, polity, and style of the church Calvin insisted on simplicity.

Somewhere along the way we have lost our sense of direction. Someone has pointed out recently that one of the consequences of a postmodern world is that we no longer believe in Truth with a capital "T", but rather in a series of truths. We have moved beyond the common sense notion that people's descriptions of reality vary to the notion that there is no independent reality and thus no basis for making judgments about truth and falsehoods. For example, when it turned out that a black teenager by the name of Tawana Brawley was not attacked by a group of whites, as she had claimed, the Nation Magazine reported that it didn't matter whether the charge was true or not, because it symbolized what happens to many people today.

Telling the truth, then, has become an endangered virtue in our society. In fact, there are many who regard it as irrelevant. Several years ago Notre Dame hired a new football coach, George O'Leary. The next day O'Leary resigned when it was revealed that he had falsified his resume with inaccuracies about his education and college football career. There was, however, a great deal of objection to his firing. Some angry fans argued that the University was being "self-righteous" in its attitude. One angry fan argued that Coach O'Leary should not be judged on the basis of his integrity, but on how many games he won and lost.

That is the perfect postmodern answer to lying: it is perfectly all right for a person to reinvent himself, for after all, what we are is less important than what we appear to be to others.

### IV.

Nothing is more critical today, not only for the church, but also as a democratic society, than a love of and respect for the truth. One of the most respected presidents of this nation was Harry Truman. In many ways he was unpopular. He ascended to the presidency after the death of Franklin Roosevelt and was narrowly elected in 1948. But Truman stood for truth and responsibility. He had a sign on his desk that said "The Buck stops here." He understood accountability. He was not afraid to take unpopular stands, such as his firing of General Douglas McArthur. He was not afraid to make hard decisions, such as his decision to drop the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Truman was a person of integrity, and that kind of integrity is desperately needed today in our public life.

But it is true in the church as well. Several years before his death Dr. John Leith published a remarkable book entitled *Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education*. It is a book that should be read by all trustees and faculty of our Presbyterian Seminaries. In that book he pointed out to the intimate relationship between the churches and the seminaries. If the seminaries teach the faith, the churches will prosper. If the seminaries fail to do this, the church will suffer decline. The great decline in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a critical insight into the result of what happens when seminaries become schools of religious studies and not schools that have as their primary focus the training of ministers who can actually build up churches.

## V.

There is another kind of truth with which the church needs to be concerned, and it is the proclamation of the truth that we find in Jesus Christ. On one occasion in the New Testament we read that Jesus asked his disciples the question, “But who do you say that I am” (Matthew 16:5). Peter responded by saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The answer to this question today is as important today as it was in the New Testament. In a Postmodern society there is a great temptation to say about Jesus that he was a stoic wise man, a prophet, or even a great teacher. In the kind of pluralistic society in which we live there is the great temptation to say that if he is the Word of God made flesh, he is only one of many words.

There is no more important question that the church faces than this. As John Leith pointed out in another book some years ago, the answer to that question determines the life or death of a particular church. The churches that can answer the question “Who do you say that I am” with an unequivocal, passionate, and truthful reply by saying that “You are the Christ, the son of the living God” are churches that are thriving and growing. Those who cannot answer this question are those that have lost the reason for existence and are empty tombs.

The church lives by the passionate conviction that Jesus Christ is the embodiment and wisdom and power of God and that in and through him God has wrought our salvation, that he was crucified and raised from the dead.

As Christians, we believe that God’s grace is experienced not only as forgiveness, but power as well. Therefore, it is imperative not only that we tell the truth, but also stand for the truth. In a postmodern society where so many people deny that truth exists, our mission is to point people to the Author of truth, the one who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Amen.