

# “The Kind of Church We Want to Be”

a sermon by

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**Text: “...and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (Acts 11:26).**

One of the enduring characteristics of American life is the role that religion continues to play in defining our common life in this country. I was reminded of this during the past week in several different occasions. On Wednesday the Charlotte Observer reported that one of the Charlotte churches had been expelled from the North Carolina Association of Baptist churches, due to their policies of receiving active homosexuals as members and deacons of their church.

On Friday of this past week, a group of religious leaders from a variety of different faith traditions gathered in Uptown Charlotte to express concern about homelessness in our city and the plight of the poor in a city where there is a growing affluence.

Anyone who is a close observer of religion in our community understands that there is a tremendous diversity of religion in Charlotte today. Thirty years ago, Charlotte was primarily a Protestant community. At one point some years ago, every single member of the County Commission was a member of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church.

That is certainly no longer the case today. In Charlotte today there are over 650 houses of worship that include seven mosques in addition to churches and synagogues. Many of the religions of the world are now represented in Charlotte.

Several months ago I attended a luncheon with Elie Wiesel, whose visit was sponsored by the Echo Foundation. It was an interesting mix of people: Protestant and Roman Catholic ministers, Jewish rabbis, and several Islamic imams. The person sitting next to me was one of the imams. At one point in the conversation he asked me several questions about what our church believed about Jesus. Then he said, “I believe that Jesus was the messiah and I believe that he will come again.” Then, pointing his finger at me, he said, “But he is not the Son of God.”

In the midst of the enormous amount of religious diversity in our community, the question is raised in terms of what kind of church we want to be.

## I.

The question led me back to the New Testament and the Book of Acts, for there we find the rudiments of the early church. The image of the church in the New Testament is always a partial one. The gospels, letters and other writings of the New Testament such as the Book of Acts are not really manuals about church law and organization. Their interest is more to present Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ and to elicit discipleship from all with whom the writers come in contact. Nevertheless, there is present in the New Testament the dynamics of a group of people who grew from a small band of discouraged disciples to become one of the most important and powerful movements in human history.

In Acts, the eleventh chapter, we get a glimpse into the nature of that church. After the death of Stephen, the persecution of the church was more and more intensified. This resulted in a number of disciples moving out of Jerusalem and settling into other areas. Some went to Phoenicia and Cyprus. Others came to Antioch, a city on the Orontes River in Syria. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It was a great metropolis of Jews, Greeks, and Romans.

Something remarkable happened in Antioch. Whereas the message about Jesus was originally spoken only to Jews, the church in Antioch began to attract non-Jews as well. This created a crisis, so the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate the situation. Barnabas, rather than being disappointed at what was going on, was delighted. The church was growing and was experiencing a great vitalization. So Barnabas sent for Saul, who was later to be known as Paul. Together, for a whole year, Paul and Barnabas taught in the church. During this time, something dramatic happened. It was in Antioch of Syria that the disciples were, for the first time, called “Christians.”

There are four elements that are found in the New Testament church, and they are vital for us to understand the church for our own day as well.

## II.

The first is the proclamation of the gospel. In the New Testament the word is “kerugma.” It is the proclamation of the gospel in which the church engaged itself. When the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) speaks of ‘the great ends of the church’ the first is the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.

The early Reformers placed a great deal of emphasis on preaching. John Calvin argued that the marks of the true church include the “right preaching of the gospel” and the administration of the sacraments. The Second Helvetic Confession defines the Word of God as Jesus Christ, the Bible, and preaching.

Today, there is a great deal of emphasis on preaching as entertainment. In the consumer culture in which we live there are many people who view coming to church as the opportunity to experience comfort and entertainment.

Some years ago, I came across a little book by Frederick Buechner entitled *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. It was only after I had finished this book that I found out that it was actually a series of lectures on preaching that Buechner had given at the Yale Divinity School. In this book, Buechner speaks of the way the gospel addresses us not only as the tragedy that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” but Buechner also points out that the gospel of Jesus Christ has a comedic side as well. It is fundamentally good news.

Buechner puts it like this:

“People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home, without seeing until they stub their toes on it that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains, but not for a God who gives as much for an hour’s work as for a day. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian, but not for the marriage supper of the lamb.”

The primary task of the church is the worship of God and the proclamation of the good news of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ.

### III.

Another dimension to what happened in Antioch was the teaching ministry in which Paul and Barnabas engaged. For a year we read, they taught in the church and the church prospered. Christian Education in the church is not just an option. It is a necessary ingredient for any church that wants to be faithful to the gospel. By teaching, nurturing and education the faith, the faith is passed from one generation to another.

In this book *From Generation to Generation*, Dr. John Leith points out the critical nature of teaching for the church. He notes the critical role teaching has for children, youth, and adults. Teaching includes understanding the Bible, the teachings of the church, and the nature of the Christian life.

Traditionally Presbyterians have emphasized teaching through catechismal instruction, the church school, and midweek opportunities for Bible Study and for other educational opportunities. Through the years Presbyterians organized colleges and universities to insure that the faith of the church would be passed on. In the Charlotte region alone, Presbyterians organized colleges such as Davidson, Queens, Johnson C. Smith and Barber Scotia.

Most of us understand the great influence that teachers can have on students. Recently, when I was talking to my daughter Lucy about her teaching experience in Alexandria, Virginia, she noted that she was teaching a semester on Shakespeare’s Hamlet. When I commented to her that I thought that seemed a long time to spend on one play, she responded by saying that

teenagers understood Hamlet. He was angry at his mother, hated his stepfather, and struggled over issues of whether life was really worth living or not.

The teaching ministry of the church is certainly an essential element of the church's mission.

#### IV.

A third essential element in the life of the church is pastoral care, or the care of its membership. The Presbyterian Church has always emphasized the importance of pastoral care. Today our church has a very strong system of providing support for its members which includes a parish nurse, Stephen ministry, health care council, and senior adult council. All of these are ways that the church seeks to nurture its membership.

Our understanding of pastoral care is rooted in our understanding that every human being is created in the image of God, and as such has unique worth and merit.

One of the great controversies of the early church was the so called Pelagian controversy of the Fifth Century. It pitted two strong individuals against each other. One was St. Augustine of Hippo. The other was a British monk by the name of Pelagius. Pelagius was concerned about the terrible corruption of the Roman Empire. He thought the church should be set apart from such a pagan culture. For Pelagius, the church was a group of morally perfect people who lived without spot or wrinkle.

Augustine viewed the church not as a group of perfect people, but as a group of sinners who lived by the mercy and grace of God. For Augustine, the church was more like a hospital or what he called an "inn for convalescence." For Augustine, the defining aspect of the church was not human perfection but God's grace. He understood correctly that the church is composed of sinners and lives by the forgiveness of sin. Augustine had great confidence in human history, but he also understood the deep complexities of human life.

#### V.

A fourth mark of the early church was its compassion and concern for others. One of the incidents that the Book of Acts reports was the famine in Jerusalem. When the Christians in Antioch heard of this, we read that they took up an offering to alleviate the suffering that was taking place in Jerusalem.

As a downtown church, First Presbyterian Church has a long and distinguished record of service to the community. As you have heard this morning, the Child Development Center in this church was one of the first in the state of North Carolina.

In recent years our church has participated in a host of outreach ministries, including the building of the Lakewood Preschool, the tutorial program at Westerly Hills, and the Freedom School ministry in which we have engaged in during the past two summers.

Someone recently sent me a remarkable speech that was given by Senator John F. Kennedy, when he was running for President in 1960. John Kennedy was the first Roman

Catholic to be elected to the Presidency. During that campaign the issue of Kennedy's religion became a focal point of the Presidential race. At one point Kennedy addressed the Ministerial Association of Houston, Texas about the role of religion in American political life. In that speech he said that the real question was not whether he was a good Catholic, but whether he was a good American. He went on to say that the real issues facing American were not religion, but poverty, the struggle of children finding adequate housing and education, and the struggle of elderly people striving to live with the high cost of health care.

As a center city church First Presbyterian Church has the opportunity to make a critical difference in the life of this city. We are living in a time in which many children do not have access to good education or health care, where the gap between rich and poor grows yearly, and where homelessness and poverty continue to haunt us.

The Book of Acts tells us that the people in Antioch saw something unique about this group of people who gathered around Paul and Barnabas. They called them "Christianoi" or "Christians."

What will they say of us in Charlotte, North Carolina?

Amen.