

# “The Indispensable Christ”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

December 9, 2007

**Text: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).**

Someone shared with me this week an article by Charles Colson entitled “Rethinking Church” in which he referred to a comprehensive study conducted by the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago. Willow Creek is one of the largest and most active churches in this country. It is a church that prides itself on drawing people to it that were not comfortable in ordinary churches. The church featured massive auditoriums with food courts on the outside, fitness facilities for its members, and a whole host of programs helping people deal with life crises such as divorce, addiction, and other therapeutic ministries. In a nutshell, the survey showed that heavy involvement in the church programs and activities of Willow Creek did not necessarily translate into spiritual growth and maturity. The findings of the survey led the minister of that church, Bill Hybels, to stand up and admit, “We made a mistake.”

## I.

Over the weeks of Advent, we are looking at four of the famous “I am” sayings of the Gospel of John. Over the past several years I have developed a special affection for the Gospel of John. It presents Jesus in a cosmic context; and in the Prologue to the Gospel (John 1:1-18) it presents Jesus as the one who brings “light and life.”

As I pointed out this past week, the Gospel of John exhibits certain features that are not present in the so-called Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). One of these features is presence of the seven “I am” sayings where Jesus proclaims himself ‘the bread of life, the light of the world, the resurrection and the life, the good shepherd, the gate, the way, the truth, and the life,” as well as “the true vine.”

A second intriguing feature of this gospel is John’s use of “signs” or miracles. Again, there are seven of these around which John organizes his gospel. These include the turning of water into wine (John 20), the healing of the official’s son (John 4), the feeding of the five

thousand (John 6), the restoration of sight to a blind man (John 9), the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11), and finally the miraculous catch of fish (John 21).

A third intriguing feature of this gospel is the so-called “discourses” that are present within John’s framework of the life of Jesus. Again, these are extended conversations between Jesus and those around him. This past week, we noted that after a long discourse between Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus resorted to an action to vindicate his claim as the “light of the world.” He brought sight to a man born blind.

## II.

In the passage that I have read this morning Jesus makes another claim that defines his identity: “I am the vine,” he says, “You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5).

The image of the vine was certainly familiar to his hearers. The people of Israel were often referred to as the vineyard of God (Isaiah 5). The owner of the vineyard prunes the vines so that they may be more productive and unproductive vines are removed and thrown into the fire.

But just as the saying about Jesus being the “light of the world” is related to a miracle of healing, so this saying about the “true vineyard” is also related to one of the signs. In this case, it is a reference to the wedding in Cana of Galilee where Jesus turned the water into wine (John 2). That was the first of the signs that Jesus did. In this case, Jesus attended a wedding with his mother Mary. When the host ran out of wine, Jesus commanded that stone jars filled with water be brought to him. Then Jesus turned the water into wine.

## III.

Now, I suspect it goes without saying that this story of Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee has caused a lot of problems for the church, particularly for those people who use the Bible as a means to argue against the use of alcohol. Moreover, the relationship in this miracle story between Jesus and his mother has never been clear to me. In addition, the amount of wine that Jesus produced has always bothered some people. After all, a hundred and eighty gallons of wine does seem excessive, even in light of the amount of alcohol consumed at a typical college or university party in this country today.

But, all of this misses the point that the Gospel of John is trying to make. The coming of Jesus into the world brought something never before witnessed. He is the “true vine.” He brings new life, new love, and new joy.

Certainly, this is a central affirmation of the Advent Season. The coming of Christ means the coming into the world of a power of light and life that the world had never before witnessed.

In his book *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner describes a defining incident in his life. He had graduated from Princeton University, taught school for a while at Lawrenceville, and now was living in New York where he was trying to learn to be a writer. Almost by chance he

found himself visiting a church in the neighborhood. In this case it was the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in the center of midtown Manhattan. The preacher was a man by the name of George Buttrick. During a sermon by Dr. Buttrick, Buechner experienced a transforming experience. Buechner describes his experience like this:

“Something in me recoils from using such language, but there at the end I am left with no other way of saying it then, that what I found finally was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seems to matter which. There are other words for describing what happened to me—psychological words, historical words, poetic words—but in honesty as well as in faith—I am reduced to the word that is his name, because no other seems to account for the experience so fully.”

#### IV.

There is something else for our Advent consideration about this saying of Jesus as the “true vine,” and it is the power of Jesus for the transformation of the church.

I mentioned a few minutes ago Bill Hybels at the Willow Creek Church and his comment that when the church simply caters to the culture around it and plays into the hands of a consumer mentality, the church ceases to be a church.

Recently I came upon a remarkable treatise by the great Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, entitled “The Necessity of Reforming the Church.” The thing that caught my attention about the essay was that it had a kind of relevance I had not expected. It was written out of a crisis in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. In this instance there was a lot of bickering and dissent in the church. Things finally got so bad that the emperor Charles V decided that something had to be done. So he did what we always do in the church. He appointed a committee to work out the peace, unity, and purity in the church.

Not being a person to let things lie around unattended, Calvin dashed off this treatise to the Emperor. In it, he pointed out that there were two ways to reform the church. One was to peer more deeply into the traditional doctrines of the church and discover their meaning for the day. The other approach was to put into effect some of the more progressive ideas from the recent scholastic debates and move forward. Calvin chose the latter course. For him, the Reformation of the church depended on the church understanding its own tradition.

One of the most troubling things to me today in the church is the amnesia that we are suffering around Scripture. There are two attitudes that concern me deeply. The first is the level of ignorance around the Bible. At one time, the Bible was taught in the public schools. It was taught in the home. It was taught in church-related colleges. It was taught in the church school. Today there is a terrible disconnect between the Bible and the church.

Several years ago, I conducted an interesting experiment. I was teaching a class on a Wednesday evening and I decided to give the class a small test on the Bible. I listed 10 names from the Old and New Testament and asked the people present to place them in chronological order. Here they are, if you would like to try this: Lydia, Cain, Barnabas, Noah, Matthew, David, Amos, Paul, Jezebel, and Bartholomew. Believe me, I found Noah in some strange places. We don't know the Bible.

The other attitude I find troubling is a disdain for Scripture. There are a number of people in the church who have a negative view of Scripture—particularly people who grew up in parts of the South where the Bible was often used as a kind of club to make people feel guilty, inadequate, and worthless.

Now, to be sure, the Bible has often been misused. It has on occasion been used to promote racial hatred. It has often been used to stop the progress of science and to promote superstition. But at its best, it can inspire, inform, encourage, and create a more just society.

As Presbyterians, we affirm the authority of Scripture. It teaches us “what we are to believe and how we are to live.” Whereas the Reformer Martin Luther attempted to address the abuses in the medieval church, John Calvin took the reformation a step further. He sought to reform the church in light of the Word of God. Everything that we do in the Presbyterian Church grows out of our understanding of Scripture: our worship, our polity, our pastoral care, our outreach ministry is deeply related to how we understand the work of God in the Old and New Testament.

Several months ago I had lunch with the General Presbyter of the Presbytery of Charlotte. In the course of the conversation he shared with me that out of the 138 churches in our Presbytery, he believes that almost 100 of them were either about to close or else in very bad shape.

Will Willimon, the United Methodist Bishop of North Alabama, when asked what the greatest challenge of the local church for the next fifty years would be, replied by saying that he thought the greatest challenge of the next fifty years for the church would be the same as it has for the last fifty years (or two thousand years): to enable our congregations to be half as interesting as Jesus.

Jesus said, “I am the vine.” In doing so, he holds before us the great challenge of Advent: to greet the coming of the Christ as the coming of the one with the power to bring new life—not only to individuals—but to the church as well.

For that we wait and hope.

Amen!