

“Faith in the Midst of Chaos: 2) Faithful Unto Death”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

June 14, 2009

Text: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what is being said to the churches.” (Revelation 2:10b-11a)

Several years ago I had the opportunity to visit the Island of Patmos, a small island located off the coast of Western Turkey in the Aegean Sea. The island of Patmos is a beautiful island with pristine beaches and wonderful views of the Aegean. It attracts a number of celebrities who have built homes there. At the top of the island is a monastery, which was dedicated to the memory of John the Apostle. At the lower end of the island is a series of caves. One of these caves has been identified as the place where John wrote the Book of Revelation.

I.

Unlike John’s vision of the heavenly Christ in chapter 1, the setting of Chapters 2 and 3 is on earth. The two chapters present the messages that Christ delivers to each of the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, located on the western part of Asia Minor, which today is part of the country of Turkey.

The message of each of these seven letters discloses a certain common pattern. Each message is prefaced with an identification of the heavenly Christ. The first letter, to the church at Ephesus, is introduced by the statement, “These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand who walks among the seven golden lamp stands. (2:1) In each of these letters, Christ commends certain aspects of each church and condemns others.

The city of Ephesus, a cosmopolitan area of 250,000 inhabitants that was on the Aegean Sea. Ephesus was the gateway to Asia and was viewed by many as the most important city in the Roman Empire.

Ephesus also hosted one of the “seven wonders of the ancient world,” the temple to the goddess Artemis or “Diana” was also a magnificent edifice with a hundred marble columns. The temple attracted tourists and devotees from all over the world.

The Christian faith had been established at Ephesus in the decade of the 60s in the first century. Paul spent three years at this church during his third missionary journey (Acts 20:31). As Paul took leave of this church, he warned the elders of the church that false teachers would come.

That prediction came true. There were false teachers in Ephesus, including the Nicolaitans, who probably promoted a pagan religion. But Paul not only commends them for their rejection of false teachers, he also condemns the church at Ephesus because they have lost the love for one another that had first characterized their faith.

Anyone who is a part of a church knows how easily it is for churches to become divided among themselves. One of the aspects of First Presbyterian Church that has characterized our ministry has been the intense commitment and passion for ministry among our members. I have sometimes said that as minister of this church, I was not as much troubled with apathy but fanaticism, which occurs when one aspect of the church is promoted to the exclusion of others. Often, this is well-intended. People care deeply for some aspect of the church. It can be outreach, music, pastoral care—you name it. But part of the church’s role is to establish a sense of balance that recognizes that the church is the “Body of Christ” and for the church to be faithful to Christ , we must all realized that we have to work together and not against each other.

John’s message to the church at Smyrna (today, the modern city of Izmir) is the shortest of these seven messages, and like the letter to the church at Philadelphia, contains no condemnation, only commendation. They were a persecuted church, largely because of their refusal to take part in the emperor worship that was part of the Roman Empire.

John urges the Christians in Smyrna to be faithful to the end (2:10). They must be ready to die for the sake of Christ. John concludes his commendation to the Christians at Smyrna with this exhortation: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” (Revelation 2:11a)

And that is where I want to focus today.

II.

The first thing that I think the Spirit is saying to the churches is that the church in our time is called to stand against the culture in which we find ourselves. Some years ago H. Richard Niebuhr, in his book *Christ and Culture*, identified various forms of the ways churches relate to the culture around them. Some churches see themselves as being against the culture in which they find themselves. Others simply accommodate to the culture. Niebuhr points out that the Reformed or Presbyterian Church has always seen its role as a “transformer of culture.”

Now there are a number of ways in which this is evident. One is that many churches today are nothing more than simply an echo of the culture in which we live. There is more and

more pressure on the church to make its music ministry conform to the musical tastes of the culture. Sermons are often viewed as simply a form of entertain.

One of the struggles that the church faces today is the role of men in the church. Recently I came across a book whose title caught my attention. The name of the book is *Why Men Hate Going to Church* and it was written by a man named David Murrow. In this book, he points out in most churches today less than 40 percent of the adults present in worship are men and that in most churches 20 to 25 percent of married women who attend church do so without their husbands.

Now, let me hasten to say that First Presbyterian Church enjoys a strong participation of both women and men and values both as well. But the reality of our culture today is that many men see church as an activity for women and children and the church needs to take this challenge seriously.

III.

The second thing that the Spirit is saying to the churches in the Book of Revelation is that following Christ requires discipline and sacrifice. The church at Smyrna knew this. They were being persecuted by the Roman Empire. They were suffering poverty. Moreover, they were having lies spread around them by certain people who were accusing them of being agitators against the civil authorities (2:9).

One of the things that I find lacking in the contemporary church is the notion that church membership requires hard work and sacrifice. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, defined the Christian life as “denying oneself, bearing the cross, and following Jesus.” Too often in the church we have given the impression that being a member of the church is a matter of comfort. We seem to invite people to be members of the church but never with any real sense that this is a call to discipline, discipleship, and sacrifice.

When Nelson Mandela was released from prison after spending 27 years being held captive for his opposition to Apartheid in South Africa, he told the court that “Ending apartheid was a cause for which I would gladly give the rest of my life and a purpose for which I will gladly die.”

I wonder if any of us could say today that there was a cause for which we would die. If that is true of you, you are unstoppable.

Today, we are living in a time in which the charitable resources of our city are being stretched in ways heretofore unseen. The number of homeless people in the city of Charlotte is increasing. More and more people are being forced out of their homes because they can no longer afford the mortgages. The number of people being served at the Urban Ministry Center and Crisis Assistance Ministry is growing at an alarming rate.

But where are the churches? Where are the community leaders who understand that if we do not address the problems of homelessness and poverty, the fabric of our city is going to be more and more fragmented?

One of the things that has drawn me to the Book of Revelation is the fact that this is a book that is directed to a church in crisis. The churches that Paul names are being besieged from without and within. The call to the churches in Revelation is the call to the church today. It is a call to be faithful in a time of real chaos.

IV.

Then, too, if the church is willing to listen to what the Spirit is saying, it will also acknowledge what John says to the church at Smyrna, when he reminds them that there is a crown of life that awaits them (2:10).

The Greek word that John uses is the word “stephanos” which is usually the crown of garlands given to a victor of a race. The New Testament frequently uses the imagery of the race. The writer of Hebrews reminds his readers that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses and that we must run the race of life with perseverance.

When Tom Currie, the Dean of Union Seminary here in Charlotte spoke to a group of laymen and ministers several months ago, he spoke of the embarrassment that sometimes faces ministers about this particular profession. But he concluded his remarks by saying that the real embarrassment of ministry is an embarrassment of riches. All of us receive far more than we are called upon to give.

That, I think, is true of the writer of Revelation. He understands persecution and hardship. When I visited that cave on the Island of Patmos, it seemed to me a very difficult place to be—cooped up in a cave with little or no sunshine—surrounded by the sea on all sides which guaranteed no possible escape.

Yet, in those remarkable circumstances, the writer of the Book of Revelation was able to see visions that would have eluded so many people. He saw a “new heaven and a new earth,” a time when every tear would be wiped away and death would be no more (Revelation 21:1-6). In that cave he had a vision of a time when the kingdoms of this world would be the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. It was that vision that inspired the great composer Handel to write the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

Once when a young girl was asked to name the first and last books of the Bible, she responded by saying, “The Bible begins in Genesis and ends in revolution.”

Just imagine the revolution that would take place today, if we were to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Amen!