

# “Where Do We Go From Here?”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it on my own; but this one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 3:13-14)**

Over the past weeks I have found myself on a number of occasions reflecting on the future of the mainline Protestant denominations. For a number of years Protestant churches have been in the center of the debate on a number of political and social issues. Several weeks ago the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wrote a letter to the President of the United States expressing his support for health care reform in this country. Earlier this summer the Episcopal Church in America voted to continue to ordain active homosexuals as priests and bishops. And just two weeks ago, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted to support gay and lesbian ministers in its churches.

Over these weeks I have turned to two important essays that speak to this question. One is a book that was published under the auspices of the Eli Lilly Foundation entitled *The Mainstream Protestant Decline: The Presbyterian Pattern*. One of the essays in this book was written by Jerrold Brooks and was entitled “Reaching Out: A Study of Church Extension Activity in Mecklenburg Presbytery, North Carolina, 1920-1980.” In this essay Brooks noted that for most of its history Mecklenburg Presbytery (now Charlotte Presbytery) had focused on evangelism and new church development. In the period of 1945-1965 the Presbytery founded nineteen new churches (almost one a year). In the forty year period since 1965 we have added only five new churches, and closed three for a net gain of two.

Brooks points out that what happened in Charlotte is a microcosm for what has happened in Protestant churches throughout this country. As the churches became more and more concerned with social issues such as race, war, and economics, there was less emphasis on evangelism and new church development.

A second item that came across my desk was a letter written by a Lutheran theologian by the name of Carl E. Braaten to the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In his letter Braaten details the number of prominent Lutheran ministers, theologians,

and professors who have left the Lutheran church. Some of these scholars joined the Orthodox Church. A considerable number converted to Roman Catholicism.

Reading Braaten's letter as well as reflecting on my own experience in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) I certainly have the distinct impression that something in the mainline churches has gone profoundly wrong, and that unless these issues of decline are addressed in the quickly the future of the mainline Protestant Churches is very bleak. For when the church is nothing more than a reflection of the culture, it ceases to be a church. That is what allowed Karl Barth to call liberal Protestantism a "heresy."

## I.

The Scripture that has been chosen for today speaks to the whole issue of past and future. In this passage addressed to the church at Philippi the Apostle Paul recounts his life in Judaism and compares it to the new life he has found as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In this passage Paul recounts his experience in Judaism. Many people read this as Paul's attack on his former faith. The reverse is true. Paul was not ashamed of his Jewish heritage. He had no reason to be. In fact, he recounts his pedigree as a Jew. He was a "Hebrew of the Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the elite tribe of Benjamin." Moreover, he was also a Pharisee, a noted sect of Judaism renowned for its respect and obedience to the Jewish law. In terms of zeal, he was a persecutor of the Christian faith. As far as the Jewish law was concerned, he was blameless. He had kept it to the letter.

Paul goes on to say that he has found a higher righteousness than the Jewish law could afford him and that was the righteousness of Jesus Christ, a righteousness based not on human works but on the grace of a righteous God.

For that reason, Paul asserts, he is willing to forget all that was behind him and reach out to the future, namely, the prize of the heavenly call of Jesus Christ.

So, if we are to take our clue from Paul's words to the church at Philippi, what high calling awaits us as members of the First Presbyterian Church.

## II.

The first task before us is to reclaim the heritage that is ours as members of the Presbyterian (or Reformed) Church. The Presbyterian Church in this country has made a remarkable contribution to the history of our country. John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian Minister and President of Princeton University was the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence. Presbyterians in this country have not only established colleges and universities in this country; they have contributed to the political, economic, and cultural life of this country in ways that have far exceeded our numerical count. John Calvin, the influential leader of our church, has been called the "spiritual founder" of the United States of America with his emphasis on the work ethic, the possibilities of human history, and the importance of education.

Moreover, Reformed theology continues to have a great deal of value for people. The Presbyterian emphasis on the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the Sovereignty of God, the centrality of grace, and the importance of the Christian grace are themes that resonate with the experience of many people today.

Recently, I read a small book edited by Dr. John H. Leith on John Calvin's understanding of the Christian life. Part of the success of Calvin's ministry was his remarkable capacity to subvert his own self interest to the work of the church. When Calvin died in 1564, the reigning Pope, Pius IV, commented that Calvin's strength lay in the fact that he was never corrupted by money. Those who knew him knew that there was a congruency in the faith he preached and the life he lived.

### III.

The second task before us is reclaiming the role of evangelism in the life of the church. Historically, the Presbyterian Church has grown by incorporating new members into the church and by starting new churches. For John Calvin evangelism was the act of incorporating people into the church where the Word of God was preached and the sacraments celebrated. Evangelism is finally the work of the Holy Spirit, and as such, it cannot be programmed or manipulated. It is also the incorporation of people into a community where the bonds between humans are strengthened through mutual support and common concern. The Apostle Paul speaks of the church as a community that "rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep."

Some years ago, Dr. Frank Harrington, who was for many years the minister of the Peachtree Presbyterian Church, delivered an address he titled "Do We Want to Get Well?" In that address Dr. Harrington spoke about the nature of evangelism. Two of the basic aspects of evangelism are intention and invitation.

Intention has to do with the question of whether churches want to grow and increase their ministries. Most people, when asked, will say that they want their church to grow. But growth inevitably brings change and change in the church is often not welcome. One thing is sure. A church that does not want to grow will not grow.

On one occasion when he was in Charlotte, Frank Harrington told me a story about a church he had visited in Atlanta. The minister was concerned that the church was not growing. The first question that Dr. Harrington asked the minister was, "How often do you take in new members?" The minister replied, "Oh, we take in new members on the second Sunday of every other month." "Well," said Dr. Harrington with a touch of humor, "it's working." After all, how many people can arrange their schedules to join on a particular Sunday?

Another aspect of evangelism is invitation. Many people worry about evangelism because they do not believe they know enough about the Bible or the Christian faith. But that really isn't necessary for evangelism. Most of the people who have joined this church over the past years, when asked the reason they joined, replied by saying that they joined because someone invited them to come – a neighbor, a fellow worker, a friend.

On a very simple and practical level evangelism is nothing more than sharing the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. In classical Reformed theology, evangelism is not a distinct or even identifiable activity of the church. It is the total life of the church. Evangelism takes place as people join in worship, education, pastoral care and outreach. Moreover, the renewal of the church, humanly speaking, and by the same token the renewal of evangelism, depend upon the theological competence and dedication of its ministers more than it does on any single factor. Historically, the study of Scripture, the memorization of the catechisms, and serious theological study has done more to strengthen the church than just seeking new theologies and techniques of evangelism.

#### IV.

The third task before us is the renewal of the Christian life. For John Calvin the goal of the Christian life was not simply the forgiveness of sins, but living a life that reflected our relationship with Jesus Christ. For Reinhold Niebuhr, God's grace is not only forgiveness. It is power.

As an Uptown church, First Presbyterian Church has always had a unique ministry to those in our community whom Jesus called "the least of these." Through the years our church has established the Community School of the Arts, the Child Development Center, A Child's Place, and Room in the Inn. In more recent years our ministry has reached out to neighborhoods in our community, including Lakewood and Westerly Hills.

Most of us are pretty far removed from some of the troubled inner city areas of our city, but there are many neighborhoods in Charlotte that more closely resemble "third world" countries than they do part of an affluent and modern South.

This was brought home to me recently at our staff retreat this past week at the Orchard Inn in Saluda, North Carolina. Jessica Patchett Anderson, who co-ordinates our Children and Adult Outreach ministries, shared with us the fact that many children in our community have little or no access food during the weekend. Most of these children are fed at the schools they attend, but weekends pose a special hardship. We have identified a number of children at Westerly Hills that need this kind of special help so we are providing special packets of food to be given to these children for the weekend. Right now we need 30 people who are willing to provide 7 to 8 dollars a week for one of these packets. But why just 30? Why not 300? Are there not 300 people in our congregation that could give up one lunch a week to make sure that a child does not go hungry for an entire weekend?

Let us be clear on one thing. The Apostle Paul did not regret the life that he lived in Judaism and he had every reason to be proud of his heritage. But he found something else. He called it the "goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ."

Surely God expects nothing less from each of us.

Amen.