

“Second Thoughts on Ministry”

a sermon by

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Text: “We are treated as imposters, and yet true ... ” (II Corinthians 6:8b)

Over the past several years there have been a number of significant publications that have raised some serious questions about the Christian faith that have come from unexpected places. Several years ago, Bart Ehrman, a popular and scholarly professor, who is the chair of the department of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill published a book he entitled *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. In this book Ehrman points out a number of inconsistencies in the New Testament: instances in which one gospel conflicts with another; passages such as John 8:1-11 (the woman taken in adultery) which are not present in our oldest manuscripts, and some passages in the Bible where the original manuscripts are so corrupt that it is virtually impossible to discern the real meaning of the text.

When I first read this book, I had two initial reactions. My first reaction was to wonder what the fuss was all about. These issues about the New Testament have been around for centuries. There is really nothing very new or startling in Ehrman’s findings. A second reaction was to observe that Ehrman’s book fits a common pattern that is dominant today, a strong distrust of historic Christianity.

A second series of works that have raised questions about the validity of historic Christianity are found in the writings of Elaine Pagels, a highly regarded Professor at Princeton University, who published a very popular book, entitled *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. Pagels is one of a group of scholars who have written extensively about a number of noncanonical gospels found in 1945 in Egypt, which depict a somewhat different view of the early Christian community than one finds in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Pagels, and other scholars including a Harvard scholar, Karen King, have put forward a number of ideas that were taken up in the wildly popular novel *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown that included the notions that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that they conceived sons who later became part of a royal ancestry in France. Brown also popularized the notion that the early church had written out the prominent role that Mary Magdalene and other women played in the early church.

As Christians, we are called to “give reason for the hope that is within us” and we should rejoice for those who help us to think about the faith and force us to seek to understand more clearly what we believe. Yet, at times I am somewhat perplexed at the multitude of voices that seek to cast a shadow of doubt on the veracity of the faith.

I.

There is a very remarkable passage in Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth that is preserved in II Corinthians 6:1-10. In this passage, Paul recalls his own ministry and in doing so offers us several strong insights into the nature of ministry itself.

To be sure, ministry for Paul was challenging in every respect. As he recalls in II Corinthians 11, Paul faced some very challenging circumstances: beatings, hardships, and calamities. He had been imprisoned, shipwrecked, and stoned. He had endured on little sleep and often no food. Moreover, Paul also faced betrayal on a personal level. Some of the churches that he established turned against him.

Yet, one of the remarkable aspects of Paul was this capacity to endure. In this passage Paul speaks autobiographically of what he had endured as a messenger of Jesus Christ: “treated as imposters, yet true; as unknown, yet well-known; as dying, yet alive; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.”

This fall marks a personal milestone for me, as I celebrate 40 years of ordained ministry. In the four decades I have served as a minister, I have witnessed a great deal of change. I have seen the changes brought by the Civil Rights Movement, the ordination of women, as well as the “culture wars” that have raged over issues of human sexuality. Much has changed, and no doubt, in the years ahead there will be more changes. But I am also keenly aware of the things that have not changed.

III.

The gospel of Jesus Christ has not changed. In Paul’s opening chapter to the church at Rome, he writes, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and then to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16)

The Christian gospel is a word of grace that speaks first of all of God’s forgiveness. It is found in the word of Jesus to the paralytic, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” (Mark 2:5) The Apostle Paul framed it somewhat more theologically, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

For some, forgiveness is a rather light matter. Often, when someone does something we don’t like, we shrug it off. “It doesn’t matter,” we say. But that is not real forgiveness. That is the condoning of sin, and that is a far different matter.

The Christian faith has always insisted that there are two elements to real forgiveness. The first is that authentic forgiveness can never take place without a cost being paid by the one who has been wronged. The second element is that forgiveness cannot occur apart from repentance on the part of the forgiven.

Almost five hundred years ago the great Martin Luther was tormented by the question of how a sinful person could stand in the presence of a righteous God. Luther was aware of his own unworthiness.

He tried every available method the medieval church offered to appease God. He joined a monastery. He fasted for weeks on end. He confessed his sins obsessively. But it was never enough. Luther could never find peace that he had done enough to earn God's love. It was only when Luther turned to Scripture – to Romans, Galatians, and to the Psalms that he discovered the wonderful news of the gospel – “the just shall live by faith.”

Today, there are very few people who worry about heaven and hell. But many of us are aware that there is something missing in our lives – some void we cannot fill. Perhaps we feel we are inadequate husbands or wives. Perhaps we worry whether we are good parents or not. Often, we feel we have not achieved in our personal or professional life the goals we have sought.

The power of the Christian gospel is that it addresses itself to one of the most important questions any of us can ask: “Is there a grace which forgives our sin, which gives us courage before an unknown future, and which enables us to live with poise and dignity in the presence of the many tragic aspects of life?”

III.

A second thing that has not changed in these past four decades is the importance of the church. Again, we have witnessed some seismic changes in the Church in this country. The mainline Protestant denominations that helped to shape this nation have all undergone massive loss of members and influence.

Several weeks ago the *New York Times* published an op-ed piece on the front page of the newspaper entitled “The Triumphant Decline of the WASP” (White, Anglo, Saxon, Protestant). The article noted that until fairly recent times the Supreme Court of the United States was composed entirely of Protestant white men. Today the Supreme Court consists of six Roman Catholics and three Jews. There is not a single Protestant on the highest court of the land. In this article the author notes that white Protestants have for the most part given up their socioeconomic power by hewing voluntarily to the values of merit and inclusion, values now shared broadly by Americans of different backgrounds. According to the article in the Times, the decline of the Protestant elite is actually its greatest triumph.

Yet, having read the article, I was left troubled by the question of who or what would fill the void left by the abdication of the Protestant faith and ethos in this country?

The Presbyterians who helped to found this country brought with them a strong conviction about human life that was rooted in a belief in God, a commitment to the work ethic, and an understanding of the importance of education. They also brought with them a profound distrust of government – particularly government that was intrusive and bureaucratic.

One wonders today where that influence will come from, if the Protestant ethos is lost in this country.

There are those who see the Church in this country in decline and certainly there is a great deal of evidence to support that. And yet, looking on the horizon, it is clear that there is great deal of hope for the Church. We are living in a time that many have described as “postmodern, post-Christendom, and post-denominational.” Denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, and the Episcopal Church in the United States are in a period of “free fall.” The structures will undoubtedly change.

And yet, in spite of this decline, there are a number of churches that are carrying on remarkable ministries. The single most dynamic characteristic of these churches is that they are rooted to the fundamental functions of the church: worship, Christian education, pastoral care, outreach to the community and a sense of world mission. For that reason there is much to be optimistic about with regard to the future of the church.

IV.

A third thing that has not changed in these past decades is the critical role that the church plays in the life of a city. Several weeks ago Taylor Batten quoted Hugh McColl, Jr., the former CEO of Bank of America, who said that he did not believe you could have a great bank without a great city. That is true of the church is well. I know of no great church in this country that is not somehow connected with the city in which it ministers.

Throughout its history, the First Presbyterian Church has played a critical role in the history of the city of Charlotte – from the earliest days when it was the first church established in the town of Charlotte, through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the collapse of the center city in the 1950's and 1960's, along with the emergence of the rebirth of the center city. Throughout that history this church has been a beacon of light shining in what has often been a very great darkness.

Today, our city faces some critical challenges: unemployment, the collapse of much of the financial industry, the struggle in public schools – just to mention a few. Many of us are aware that there are two cities within the one city we call Charlotte – one characterized by shining new buildings, football stadiums and arenas, a Performing Arts Center, a new Mint Museum, and striking condominiums. But within that city lies another city – neighborhoods that look like they belong in Beirut or Kabul rather than Charlotte – neighborhoods filled with poverty, at-risk children, high unemployment – neighborhoods without hope.

Several months ago our church welcomed Dr. Ron Carter, the new President of Johnson C. Smith University. In his address Dr. Carter spoke of his experience in South Africa from 1985-2000. He was in Johannesburg when Nelson Mandel was released from prison in 1990 and he told of the terrible violence that was taking place as whites killed blacks and blacks killed whites.

The killings were so bad that finally both blacks and whites realized that unless they found a way to work together, their nation was going to be destroyed. And so they began to sit down together – black and white. And they also began to be honest with one another – whites confessing to killing blacks and blacks confessing to killing whites. It was then and only then that they found they could work together.

Dr. Carter concluded by saying that if it can happen in South Africa, it can happen in Charlotte.

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen!