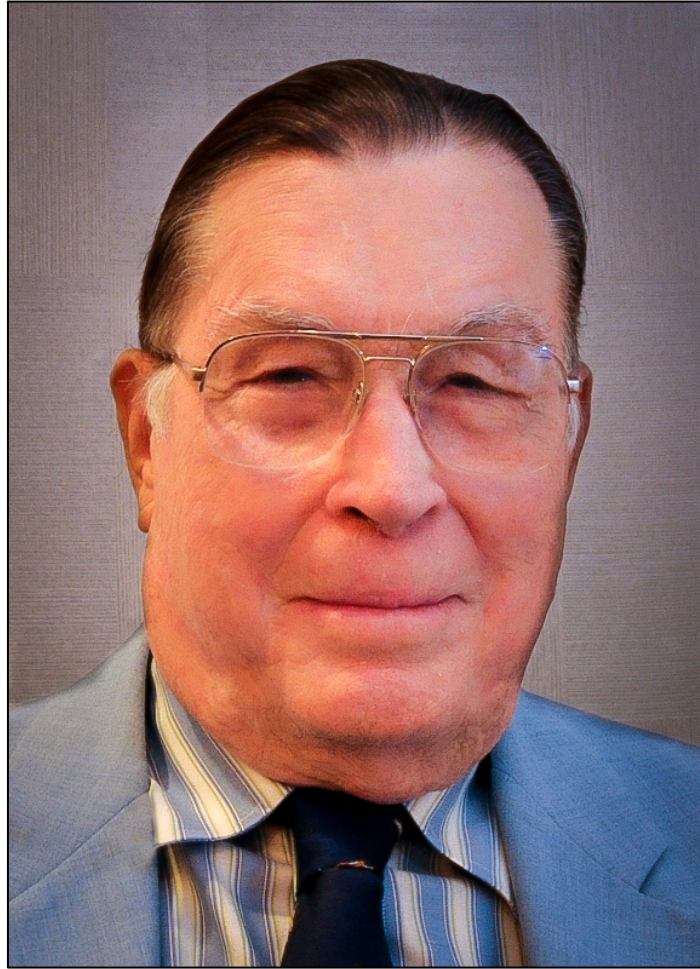


# **Selected Sermons**



**Rev. Julian Alexander**

2016

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## **A Brief Biography of Julian**

Joyce Waterbury and Ron Connors

Julian Alexander (Jr.) was born on January 2, 1917. His parents, Julian Alexander and Virginia Hill Alexander, were multi-generational residents of Philadelphia. Two of his ancestors on his mother's side came over on the Mayflower.

Early on Julian showed interest and ability in science and mathematics, and at the University of Pennsylvania, which was within walking distance of his home, he attained his bachelor's degree in physics.

After graduation, Julian accepted a job with the Houdry Process Corporation in Marcus Hook, PA, a research subsidiary of the Sun Oil Company. As a petroleum scientist, Julian worked on upgrading aviation gasoline and searching for ways to make synthetic rubber, both efforts critical to winning the Second World War.

In 1938 Julian's sister Louisa introduced him to Betty Hoffman, a student at Bryn Mawr College. After a several-year courtship they married in 1941 – and never regretted it!



In 1948 Julian and Betty moved to New York City where he worked for two years on the staff of the American Petroleum Institute. But after two years of New York City life, and stimulated by two close friends who were preparing for the Christian ministry, he decided to pursue a new career, one in which he could make a difference. He enrolled in Princeton Theological Seminary, receiving his M.Div. degree in 1953. Betty fully supported his career change, confiding to friends her delight that she could finally understand what he was doing.

After graduation Julian became the founding pastor of the Willow Grove Presbyterian Church in Scotch Plains, NJ, where he continued to serve as pastor for thirty years. During the baby-boom years Willow Grove Presbyterian grew from its initial 28 members to more than 500 adults and 400 children and youth. Despite the demands of his large congregation, Julian found time to remain active in the UPUSA at all levels. He was a member of the General Assembly Task Force on the Nature of Biblical Authority in the 1980s.

Julian preached regularly at Willow Grove. He tells how he, a night owl, especially in his early ministry, composed his sermons late at night, finishing at 2 am on Sunday morning, after which Betty, an early riser, typed them at 6 am to ensure they were ready when he awoke. Over the years Julian has reviewed his sermons, using them as devotional guides. In the process he selected fifty-eight sermons from the mid-1960s that he considers particularly relevant to today's culture. These are the sermons included in this booklet. The text does not contain all of the words that Julian spoke during his delivery. Rather, each sermon is presented as a "narrative outline," stressing the key parts of the message clearly and succinctly.

Julian and Betty retired in 1982, and subsequently lived with and cared for Betty's mother in her home until she in 1992, at the age of 102, was forced to enter a health care facility, near one of her sons. (She died at the age of 106). Julian and Betty then "fled to Florida," moving first to Vero Beach, and then in 1998 to Sarasota. Betty died in 2006. But Julian continues to attend Siesta Key Chapel, where he periodically serves as liturgist. He is a respected teacher, and his adult education classes are always popular and well attended.

Julian and Betty have one son, Samuel Alexander, also a Presbyterian minister, who lives and works in Marin County, California. Samuel contributed the preface that follows.

During the last 60 years Julian's hobby has been carving soft stone figures, each of them different and special in its own way. The picture below shows a carving he made of his wife Betty. Pictures of some of his favorite carvings are scattered throughout this compilation.

As Julian approaches his 100th birthday, we gratefully acknowledge all that he has given us. His legacy is a blessing for us all.



## **Preface**

Samuel Alexander

There are 58 sermons in this little collection of my father's work in the pulpit. He preached a total of 1183. I am a preacher now myself and so I find it fascinating to look through a significant set of sermons to try and get a sense of the overall force and impact of his preaching at the Willow Grove Presbyterian Church. I teach preaching at San Francisco Theological Seminary. Often a student is concerned about whether or not he or she is judged a "good preacher." The focus of that question is generally about whether or not their individual sermons are enlightening, or faithful, or even entertaining. But I can't give them an answer because my perspective takes in a broader swath of the preacher's work than just individual sermons. Preaching is a conversation between Spirit, congregation and preacher. Guided by Spirit the preacher is about the work of forming the theological mind and heart of a congregation. Show me what a congregation is like after 10 or 20 years, only then can we begin to know if someone is or is not a "good preacher." Willow Grove was the most biblically literate congregation I've ever encountered. Reading these sermons you can get a sense of how the theological mind and heart of that congregation had been formed. By gleaning several themes in the work, let me tell you how I think it worked.

One thing is clear, the "meta-message" of these sermons is that God's creative pulse is to be found in the Scriptures of what Dad would call the Old and New Testaments. (I prefer to call them the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures.) Week in and week out for 1183 sermons Dad plumbed the depth and breadth of the scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation, that's right, including Revelation, (and at least one reference to Song of Songs), the text was called upon to shed light on an era when God seemed to be tilling the soil of culture. It was the sixties; a fresh word was needed.

Second, Dad is guided by the principle that what you find in the Scriptures is Christ. But who is Christ? The answer I sift from these many forays into the text is that Christ is first and foremost the one who loves us and saves us so that we are no longer burdened by guilt. Christ also calls us to ethical living. But perhaps even more than that, Christ calls us to reflect upon our life, our attitudes, our culture, our theology, to consider the length and breadth of the human experience and consider our error. Time and time again Dad challenged the status quo – gently as is his way - but challenge it he did. He

did so on race (All of One Blood being my vote for the best sermon in this book), on sexuality, on pleasure generally, on care for the poor, on how the Bible is to be interpreted, on how we are to understand the interrelationship of science and religion. He was always pushing, carefully pushing, at the boundaries of the evangelical church.

I asked Dad if he got blow back from his sermon on race and he said he didn't think so. Interesting, I would have thought it would get some. But he had a way of doing it. Each of those sermons, the ones that challenge the status quo, seemed to have a similar form, or outline. He'd open the topic by suggesting it had been part of the news, then he would offer Biblical reflection on the subject, often from several texts in different parts of the Bible. Finally he would stake out a position in four or five well reasoned and numbered points – a position supported by the text. It seemed always to leave the congregation with a question, “Where will I stand now?” After 30 years of his preaching, I believe it was a congregation full of folk who were prepared to look at life fresh and let Spirit's Word disrupt the status quo. I'd say that's very good work.

I seem to have inherited my father's attachment to the scriptures for which I'm grateful. I hope too that I am as willing as he to examine my beliefs and assumptions in the light of scripture, for in the end, it is likely that we are all wrong . . . at least some of the time. As a result we do well to walk humbly in this terrain for it seems that it is always and forever being tilled such that the seed of hope will germinate and new life will emerge. Thanks Dad.

Grace and peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sam Alexander". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid, with a large, sweeping 'S' at the beginning.



# Sermons



We are told in the Book of Genesis that before the Fall, Adam and Eve walked with the Lord God in the garden in the cool of the evening. What an experience – lost to us through our sin. But for the next few minutes, let us indulge ourselves. Let us imagine that we are celestial visitors and that the Lord God is taking us for a walk in His garden – the created universe.

“Come,” says the Lord God. “Go with me into my garden, for there is something strange and wonderful that I would show you.”

He points, and as we peer into the void of space, we see a group of fuzzy spots. “What are these, O Lord God,” we ask. “They are the galaxies into which I have collected the stars that I have made. There are many of them. But we must enter the garden to see what I have to show you.””

“See this one – this galaxy. It is called the Milky Way. Perhaps you see no difference between this one and its twin galaxy Andromeda, but it is different to me. For it contains one little star – not that one – the one over there – that is even fainter, that is precious to me. It has no value in itself, but it warms and lights them. It is so important to them that many times they have worshipped it, mistaking it for Me.

“Who do I mean by ‘them?’ You will see. But first we must come closer. The little star which we have been looking at is of little consequence, but around it swings a tiny ball. Can you see it? Blue and green and brown and white? That’s it – a small planet called the Earth. It is still warm inside. It is warmed on the outside and its climate is controlled by water and air to protect them and give them life.

“Who are they? Let us get closer to this tiny ball, closer, closer, even closer. Now at last you can see them. I made them and they are my crowning work. I have opened my hand and poured myself out to them. I have them in my image. There are billions of them now and I know each one by name. I have given to them the opportunity to multiply, to create, to produce. I have permitted one to discover the secret of the atom, another the secret of the body, another the secret of a work of art and beauty. Moreover, I have given to them the ultimate secret of being, how to be able to reflect my nature, my loving self-giving nature. I have tried to communicate to them that it is more blessed to give than to receive, that those who lose their

life in self-forgetfulness will find it. I have made them for a life of partnership with me.

“But you know,” says the Lord God, “incredible as it may seem, those little beings have lost their faith in Me. They shrink from me. Pathetically, they clutch their belongings, the little things which they have acquired with my help. They are afraid to let them go, afraid I will hurt them. This would be humorous if it were not so tragic. It would be tragic if it were not so humorous.

“Of course, I could simply turn my back on this little planet. I could start over again, but I cannot do it. For I love this human race. O how I love them. I have tried to break through to them time and time again. My Spirit has enabled one king to confess, ‘The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell within,’ enable a poet to say, ‘When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established, what is man ...’

“An occasional person has had the insight to see that I am ‘merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.’ But not enough have realized this.

“You know what I did? I myself visited this little planet. I became one of them. I learned the meaning of suffering, as they suffer. I died as they must die. In so doing, I was able to reestablish contact with them, and to make it possible for them to become as children to a Father to me. I sent My Spirit among them and even today, I have personal contact with millions - through my indwelling Spirit. I’m continuously trying to break through so that they may finally understand the ultimate secret of life. What they have is not theirs. It is mine, for I made it. What they have is given to them in trust, but it is perishable in their hands unless it is used in obedience to me. How can they be so blind as to clutch as ends in themselves things which I have given to them only as means to an end.

“What do you think,” says the Lord God. “Do you think they will ever learn?”

I hope that you will excuse the anthropomorphism in this sermon. I have been cutting God down to human size but only to make a point which I hope that will all remember. For what do you think? Is it not true that it is about us that God was speaking? We cling to the illusion every one of us, that we have is ours, that our time is ours, our money is ours, our skills are ours.

How long will we cling to the illusion that God is unable to give, except through the pattern which is already familiar to us?

It is time for us to recall that all that we are and have is His. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein.” (Psalm 24:1) It is true that the things of this world are ours, but we are Christ’s and Christ is God’s (1 Cor. 2:22, 23). In the last analysis, we own nothing. We have it all in trust from our God, and if we would find the ultimate secret of being, we must learn to offer it up to Him, along with our lives themselves.

To all of this, you may not assent, for assent must produce action, and is tested by a concrete challenge to action. You will be meeting such a challenge this week. For each of you who is a member of this church will be visited – not by a person whom you may or may not know, but by a representative of the Church of Jesus Christ. You will be asked what share of that which the Lord has provided you; you will be willing to share back with Him in His work at Willow Grove during the coming year. You will not be asked to pledge to a pre-set budget which will pay for certain specific things. You will be asked to pledge to Christ and to the undergirding of His work here on this small planet. God has provided you with all you have. The generosity of your pledge will be a demonstration of the extent to which you want to be identified with your Lord, the extent to which you trust Him who gave His all for you.



The message of the Christmas season still lingers with us. “His name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us.” God with us, in the Person of Jesus Christ. God has met with us; He has saved us from our sins. He has given us life and peace and freedom. Over these things we have rejoiced together. But there is more to it than this. For God has also called us out to be a special people, even a remnant of people in this world— but a remnant with a special purpose, to be the continuation of His presence here on earth.

Now I want to point out that His gift is for keeps – for all eternity and His call to us is also for keeps – for all eternity. Likewise our gift of ourselves to Him and our enlistment in His service is for keeps for all eternity. This is the way God expects it to be, between Himself and us. He is not interested in playing games with us.

But I am distressed to say that we do not look upon it this way. How easy it is for us to lose our first love for Christ, even as the Church at Ephesus did in the first century. (Rev. 2:4) How easy it is for the initial sense of urgency and of excitement which grips us as we are confronted with Christ seems to dissipate itself to the replaced by the “so what’s for dinner?” attitude. How easy it is for us to drift spiritually, seldom acting – only reacting, positively or negatively.

What is it to which we react? First of all we react to seasonal stimuli. The attendance at church services during the year follows a very definite and predictable pattern, a pattern incidentally which has nothing to do with the extent to which God needs us or we need Him.

We also react to crises or anti-crises in our own lives or the lives of those close to us. And here we divide into two groups, those who seek the Lord more intensely when in trouble and those who back away from Him under similar circumstances.

Also we react to appeals or threats (or challenges, such as this). Again it can be said that some people react positively and other negatively to the same outside appeal.

As a result of this reaction pattern, that which should be our consuming interest, the central passion of our lives, becomes something of merely

passing interest. That which should be our vocation ends up being merely our hobby.

Last week on New Year's Day on the tenth anniversary of my first coming to Willow Grove, some of you gave me and my wife a wooden plate on which was inscribed a text. I would like to share this text back with you today. It is a call from the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul to a life of action and not reaction:

“Therefore my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

What does this say to you and to me?

1. First of all, we are to be steadfast. This word speaks to me of the realm of obedience, Christian obedience, obedience to the call of God. God is looking for reliable Christians, Christians who will follow through with what they have started, who have a steadfastness of purpose so that they supply a steady flow of energy and stability to the work of the Lord. You and I know, as we work together, how much we appreciate a person on whom we can always rely. How much more must our God feel this way, for His work is more important than ours.
2. Secondly, we are to be immovable. This does not mean that we are to be static, or dead on our feet (or “immobile” as one of our local newspapers put it last week). This command speaks to me in the realm of my beliefs. In it, you and I are challenged to be secure in our faith, stabilized in our perspective on life, because our feet are set upon the rock which is Christ. We are to be mature spiritually, “No longer children,” as Paul puts it, “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the cunning of men. ...” (Ephesians 4:14) Every thinking Christian has moments of doubt and questioning, but if persisted in over a period of time, even the lesser doubts become enervating and harm our service to our Lord.
3. Finally we are exhorted to be always abounding in the work of the Lord. We are not just to dabble in the work to which He has called us. We are not to be involved in it only reluctantly and irregularly. We

are to overflow with a pattern of joyful obedience to our Lord and Master. And what is the work of the Lord? To carry on His ministry of love in this sick and lost world – preaching the gospel, learning, teaching, witnessing, reconciling, healing, and doing all these things in the name of and under the sponsorship of Jesus Christ. It is living the life of love to which He called us.

In our text, Paul closes with a word of encouragement. Through Him, God promises us that “in the Lord,” under His sponsorship and filled with His Spirit, our work on His behalf will not be in vain, no matter how long the hours, or how trivial the occupation.

“Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord ...” Surely this is a call to action. And it is my call to you on this first Sunday of the New Year. The news is bad, the winter is hard, the distractions of life are many. But I am calling upon you afresh to put first things first and leave them there. How is it possible for us to fulfill this injunction? Let me remind you, we cannot do it alone. But, as we learned this fall in our adult study group we have but to ask and it will be given to us. “For if we then who are evil know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.” (Luke 11:13)

Among us here at Willow Grove, we have the ability, the potential, the faith, and the understanding that are necessary for us to be a congregation of action, available to Christ. Let us rededicate ourselves for the winter ahead, that our ministry may be faithful and effective for Him.

Some of you may have already heard the story upon which I am basing this sermon:

There was a carpenter who was working on a scaffold many stories above the ground. He slipped and fell off the scaffolding. In his extremity, he cried out to God for help. Seconds later, as he fell, his suspenders caught on a protruding nail and he jerked to a halt in mid-air. He mopped his brow, as the story goes, and called out: "Never mind, God, my suspenders just caught on a nail!"

Now the humor of this story lies in the fact that it presents us with a caricature of our thinking about God. We are trapped into admitting that we, like the carpenter in the story, are apt to feel that:

1. God intervenes in our lives only when all else fails.
2. God's intervention must be in some indescribable spectacular way.
3. Within these limitations, the chances of God's acting at all are very slim.

It is my purpose today to declare to you that this is not so. The God who created is a God of order. He works not outside of His creation, but in the creation which is His. He has set the laws of nature. Within these laws, He presents the conditions under which apparent coincidences take place. He then works through the fall of the events.

Cause and effect are under his sovereignty.

The law of gravity is under his sovereignty.

Even the laws of chance are under His sovereignty.

He is the Lord of nature. During the early upheavals of the earth, combustible materials were located in the Plain of Sodom ready to be ignited in the time of Lot. (Genesis 19:24) Long before Moses confronted the Pharaoh of Egypt, the meteorological conditions were in motion which ultimately brought about the east wind that parted the waters of the Red Sea at the time of the Exodus. (Exodus 14:21) For centuries before the entrance of the Israelites into the Promised Land, a fault was forming at the narrows of the Jordan River at Adam, which probably caused a landslide, backing the river up and leaving the dry riverbed for the passage of the Israelites. (Joshua 3:16)



In these and other nature miracles in the Bible, am I ruling out the arm of God by explaining them through natural causes? By no means, for God is very much at work in them. He is the Lord. He is at work in nature, not in opposition to nature. He is the Lord of the coincidences of nature, the perfect timing of natural events. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein.” (Psalm 24:1)

He is the Lord of history. We are told in the Bible that God raised up Pharaoh. I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you.” (Romans 9:17) We are told that God raised up the Assyrians in judgment against the Israelites. “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury. Against a godless nation I send him...” (Isaiah 10:5) God was at work in the person of Cyrus, King of Persia. “The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, the King of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom.” (Ezra 1:1)

Beyond these specific references, we can ask these questions: Why did Joseph prosper in Egypt? Because a non-Egyptian king was on the throne at that time. Why did David and Solomon prosper during their reigns? Because Egypt had ceased to be a world power and Assyria had not yet risen to this stature. Why did the Babylonian captivity come when it did? Because at this point in history a great monarch, Nebuchadnezzar, came upon the scene. Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem of Judea? Because Caesar Augustus decided to take a census of his empire. Why was the Christian Church able to spread within one generation to move across the whole Mediterranean basin? Because Rome was at the height of its power as a nation.

And even giving these explanations, am I ruling God out of history? Am I ruling Him out of His Bible? By no means. I am ruling Him in, very much in. For He is the Lord at work in history, even the history of evil men, not in spite of history.

He is the Lord of our individual destinies. Was it a coincidence that Moses was found as a baby by Pharaoh’s daughter? Was it a coincidence that Jesus met a woman at Jacob’s well? Was it a coincidence that the father of the Apostle Paul emigrated from Galilee to Tarsus?

To put it in very personal autobiographical terms, was it a coincidence that I went to one particular concert in Philadelphia many years ago and there met my wife? Was it a coincidence that she and I in 1948 decided to live in the suburb of Tarrytown, NY and there met the people through whom our whole

vocation in life was changed? Was it a coincidence that each of you through a different chain of circumstances came to live in this area and worship God in this church?

None of these things happened by chance, for God is very much in our lives. He is the Lord of life. He is at work in all of the coincidences of our life. Before we call to Him, He sets the machinery in motion to answer our needs. “Before they call I will answer. While they are yet speaking, I will hear.” (Isaiah 65:24)

If the cause and effect of nature and if the loom of history are so firmly in the grasp of our God, why then should we pray at all? There are many answers. Here are some of them:

1. We pray because we need, because we recognize our utter dependence upon God.
2. We pray because God yearns for our prayer, and for the intimate fellowship of providence and trust which is activated therein.
3. Because the Holy Spirit moves us to pray, helping us to pray in the name of Christ.

As we respond in fullness of our common concern with our God for the things that He wills, we anticipate with Him the working out of this will through the machinery which He has already set in operation.

So – in our prayer, we make our requests known to God and God is at work, both guiding our requests and answering them. He is at work in the circumstances of our daily lives. He is at work in adversity. He is at work in our mistakes. He is at work even in the open rebellion of our lives. “In everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Today, it is time again for a science lecture. I am going to discuss the subject of friction. We all use this term but how many of us can define it accurately? Well, we learn in high school physics that friction is “the resistance to relative motion between two bodies in contact. Nothing more, nothing less. Sometimes friction is a good thing, such as when I am running, or braking my car to a stop.

Usually, however, from the engineering standpoint, friction is a bad thing. And one whole branch of engineering design has been devoted over the centuries to the elimination of the problem of friction within machinery. A cart could be pulled with less effort after the runners were replaced by wheels. The wheels could be made to turn more easily when the ordinary bearing was replaced by a roller bearing. But the problem of friction has not ever been fully overcome. Only orbiting projectiles are free from the problems of friction and even they have their problems at the point of re-entry into the earth’s atmosphere.

What is the trouble with friction? It generates heat by the rubbing together of the atoms and this heat is dissipated and lost. Therefore, friction breeds inefficiency, whether the friction is within the machine or between the machine and the outside load, the result is the same.

In our adult study group, we are spending last week and this week discussing the problems connected with estrangement and reconciliation. Man is described in these terms: “They have forsaken the Lord; they have despised the Holy one of Israel; they are utterly estranged.” (Isaiah 1:4) In contrast, God is described in these terms: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation...” (2 Corinthians 5:17,18) Now the more drastic estrangements of life separate men totally from one another. The more proximate estrangements which are recurring on a regular basis, lead to all types of spiritual friction. As in the case of the machine, there is internal and external friction, spiritually speaking.

*Internal Friction.* As we examine ourselves, we find the tug of war going on within us which is described by Paul in the eighth chapter of Romans, where the mindset on the flesh and the mindset on the Spirit are in opposition to one another. This is an all-top-prevalent state of affairs with we who are

Christians. Sometimes the sparks fly. There are violent conflicts with our natures. Desires pursue us. Guilt follows. Much heat is generated to our loss.

Sometimes on the other hand, the internal friction keeps forming eddy currents which force our minds to go around in circles. Indecision, brooding, wishful thinking, daydreaming – these are some of its manifestations. At still other times, we are seized by just plain boredom. Life is dull and dragging about us. These kinds of internal experiences not only are agonizing to us, they also dissipate our energy. They undermine our ability to concentrate and therefore our productivity. They leave us feeling hot and depleted.

*External Friction.* Even when we are at peace with ourselves, we find it hard to maintain the peace at times between ourselves and others. How much external friction is caused by the rubbing of one human personality against another? Sometimes these bits of friction come from obvious conflicts of interest. At other times, they come from misunderstandings, from over-sensitivity or lack of sensitivity, from feelings of rejection. The friction produced by this process of attrition leads either to open tensions between people or perhaps more often to secret submerged unspoken tensions, tensions which are all but forgotten, and which occasionally are never even recognized.

As the Church deals with the outside world, these tensions must be taken for granted. But where they happen within the Church, they are again most wasteful of the Church's potential.

The answer to mechanical friction is proper lubrication and so it is also in a strange way with the spiritual friction. For we have a lubricant – a most effective lubricant – which can be used by all. This lubricant is the Holy Spirit who strangely enough is referred to in the Scripture, constantly identified with the symbol of oil. As the Spirit comes to have dominion over our lives, we find Him first of all unifying us from within. This He does as He enables us to “put to death the deeds of the body.” As the Holy Spirit gets more complete control over our minds, boredom changes into expectancy, indecision into incisiveness; the conflict is dissipated as the Spirit conquers the flesh.

Secondly, we have the promise that “Hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5) This love within us, guided by the Spirit, can drive us to the point where we look at one another as Christ looks

at us and where the sensitivity which love brings enables us to accept and be accepted.

Are you a Christian? Have you put your faith in Christ as your Lord and Savior? If so, the Holy Spirit is in you. He can bring wholeness to our minds and hearts, eliminating the internal friction which life generates. He can also enable you to drop the barriers, even the subconscious ones which tend to divide Christian from Christian.

Not only for our own sakes but for the sake of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ out into the world, we need to overcome the frictions of our lives. Let us be more efficient machines in the service of our Lord. And to Him be the glory.



I will never forget my first long plane flight. I flew from Washington to Houston, Texas on a perfect spring day, like today. Throughout most of the trip we were flying through brilliantly white cumulus clouds. Sometimes we were above them, hovering above the unseen earth, warmed by the sunshine. At times we were below them, caught in the shadow, as if we were walking on the ceiling with the earth far below like a toy world. Then we would plunge into the cotton mass, and be lost for a few minutes, only to break out into a clear patch of sky from which we could see both sky and earth and all the wonder of it.

I will never forget that flight, and many, many times within the last ten years I have thought of how typical it is of our spiritual experience in this life of ours. Like the plane, we take off on our new life in Christ, soaring on wings of eagles, seeing in clear perspective...

The uniqueness of Christ,

The radical nature of the Christian life

The essential incompatibility between Christ's standards and those of the secular world, and

The need for us to walk in the Spirit.

Soon, however, we find ourselves plunging into the cloud banks. At one time we lose sight of God, His glory and love. At another time, we lose our perspective on the world. We plunge into a spiritual fog on other occasions, to the extent that we almost forget what makes us different from the rest of the world about us.

Back and forth we swing, between clarity and confusion, between certainty and doubt, between God and mammon. And perhaps the most frightening thing is that in some instances we plunge into a thick cloud bank from which it seems that there is little prospect of our emerging – at least humanly speaking.

In many ways I have been describing my own life, and in one way or another I have been describing the spiritual journeys of most of you whom I know well. Apply this picture to yourself. It will fit.

Now let us try, with the help of the Scriptures, to narrow down what's going on. In our text, (John 14:15-26), we find our Lord repeating several times that love leads to obedience, which leads to the presence of God.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray to the Father, and He will give you the Spirit of truth.” “If a man loves Me, he will keep my word, and My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make Our home with him.”

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the fullness of God will belong to him who is obedient out of love. Notice that it is not the presence of God that induces obedience, but the converse. However, an awareness of God certainly produces love, and so we have a triangle, which spirals into the full Christian life.

This, however, is a vulnerable spiral. It can be broken at any point.

The spiral can be broken by lovelessness. In all too many cases, the dulling of the Christian life starts with this cooling off of one's warm love for his God, the God who loved him enough to die for Him in Jesus Christ. This was the tragedy of the Church of Ephesus. (Revelation 2:4)

The spiral can be broken by disobedience. So often the vital life of a Christian is choked off by resistance to the will of God perhaps at just one key point. He who is disobedient is fair game for the prince of darkness, who is described by Paul as “the spirit now at work in the sons of disobedience.” (Ephesians 2:2)

The spiral can be broken by lack of awareness of the presence of God. This lack, whether it involves insensitivity to God's loving presence, or forgetfulness of His past blessings; whether it comes from fatigue, doubt, or some other source, is ultimately again the work of the god of this world who has also “blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:4)

As the spiral is broken, lovelessness leads to disobedience, which lead to loss of the awareness of the presence of God. The clouds have closed in. The Christian perspective is limited if not lost.

Thank God, the clouds in most cases are broken clouds. Thank God that He has furnished us with a sort of spiritual radar, the Holy Spirit, Who stands with us, faithful to the end.

However, we need not fly through the clouds at all. As Paul repeatedly tells us, we died to our old natures and rose into newness of life in Jesus Christ. We are fellow heirs with Him of all the riches of heaven. We can have heaven now. A high, clear flight is our privilege.

Let us not therefore live in the specter of the past, following the old nature which can only destroy us. Let us on the other hand cash in on our inheritance. Let us pray afresh for the filling of the Holy Spirit, who is the “down-payment” of our inheritance.

It is He, we are told by Christ, who can dispel the clouds. It is He who “will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26) It is He, through whom “God’s love is poured out into our hearts.” (Romans 5:5)

His presence is always with us. Calling upon Him, we are always enabled to restore the spiral of the Christian life, seeing clearly, loving, obeying.

We need to live our Christian lives in as cloudless a sky as possible – for our own sakes, for the sake of Christ and our witness to Him, for the sake of those whom He has entrusted into our care.

We can.

Let’s!





*“Bereshith bara Elohim eth hashamayim wa eth haerits.”* Thus the Bible begins – with a great affirmation. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth.” And today we begin our summer sermon series with this same great affirmation. It is an affirmation that has four parts at least.

1. *God is.* The first statement in the Bible is “In the beginning God.” God is the ultimate reality. He always was, He is, He ever will be. He is always the same. He bears the name “I am that I am.” Of Him the Psalmist speaks: “Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.” (Psalm 90:2)
2. *God has created.* Genesis 1:1 goes on to say. “In the beginning God created.” And what was the scope of His creation? The heavens and the earth, the total scope of finite existence. There was no hesitancy, no exhausting labor, no bungling half-starts in this. Over and over again during the creation poem, we read: “God said ... and it was so. ...” The mechanism was obviously elaborate and imponderable. The fact was simple and clear.

As we search the Scripture we become more and more aware that this creative activity of God was an activity that involved Him in all His complexity in the trinity of His Person. We get an inkling of this in a most remarkable verse in one of the Psalms: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of His mouth.” (Psalm 33:6) The word and the breath – the Word and the Spirit – are these not the terms for the second and third members of the Trinity?

More explicitly John reminds us that “In the beginning was the Word ... all things were made through Him ...” And the author of the Book of Hebrews echoes this insight: “In these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son ... through whom also He created the world.”

More explicitly John reminds us that “In the beginning was the Word ... all things were made through Him. ...” And the author of the Book of Hebrews echoes this insight: “In these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son ... through whom also he created the world. ”

And, referring to the Spirit, we find reference already made in the first chapter of Genesis to the fact that “The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:2) And the Psalmist reminds us: “When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created and thou renewest the face of the ground.” (Psalm 104:30) Yes, God creates. This is one of the central affirmations of His Nature.

3. *God's creation is good.* Not only do we read in the creation epic that “God said ... and it was so,” we also are reminded seven times that “God saw that it was good.” At the climax of the first chapter, we read “And God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31) By its very definition a good God can only create what is good. “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows His handiwork.” (Psalm 19:1) Looking back on this, the Apostle Paul reminds us that “everything created by God is good ...” (1 Timothy 4:4)

This affirmation not only applies to the material creation, for the beauty of the earth, but for the communication that proceeds from His mouth. Paul reminds us in Romans 7:16 that the Law is good. The author of the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm agrees: “The Law of the Lord is perfect ... the testimony of the Lord is sure ... the precepts of the Lord are right ... the commandment of the Lord is pure. ...” But if the Law is good, the proclamation of the Gospel is better. From the very beginning of the Christian era, it has been labeled “good news.”

Finally we can see that the good that proceeds from man is also of God. “He who does good is of God.” (3 John 11)

4. *God is good to His creation.* God has not only fashioned a perfect creation and put us in it, He also continues to demonstrate His goodness to His creation. “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights with whom there is no variation or shadow of change. Of His own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures.” (James 1:17,18) So the author of the Book of James sees us as sitting under the bounty of a steady, reliable, faithful God. Paul says the same thing in that very familiar verse from the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

This affirmation, however, is not new with the New Testament. Over and over again we hear the same refrain in the Psalms: “The Lord is good to all and His compassion is over all that He has made.” (Psalms 34:8) And then again in a recurring refrain: “O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His steadfast love endures forever.” (Psalms 206:1; 107:1; 118:1)

It is a small wonder that Jesus challenged the rich young ruler who had called Him “good teacher,” with the question: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” (Mark 10:18)

Yes, God *is* – God has *created* – God’s creation is *good* – *God is good* to His creation. We have this on the authority of the Scripture, as it communicates to us from the first chapter of Genesis on. But if this were not enough, we have other evidence. For we can see the goodness of God in the beauty of nature. We see it in the spontaneous generosity and gentle character of so many people who do not even know the Savior and of course we see it most completely in lives which have transformed through God’s greatest and most perfect gift – His Son Jesus Christ.

It is true, as we will be contemplating two weeks from now, that there is a curse upon creation, that sin has produced defeat and tragedy. The creation has been soiled. However, the stamp of the Creator is still present. The creation has been redeemed. It is present about us and within us now as the seal of God’s nature and is used by Him for a good purpose even while it waits “To be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Romans 8:21)

So it is that we who know the Lord through Jesus Christ His Son can rise above any pattern of cynicism and defeat. Even though the world about us is open for devastating criticism, it belongs to God. Having been made by Him, it was created good and one day it will fulfill its goodness.

“And God saw everything he had made and behold it was very good. – O give thanks to the Lord for He is good. For His steadfast love endures forever.”

Today's sermon has been coming to me for several weeks. If you feel that I am preaching to you individually, I probably am. If you feel I am preaching to only you, you are wrong, for this sermon enmeshes us all. It starts with an oratorical question from the lips of Jeremiah, the prophet: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil." (Jeremiah 13:23) In this question are packed all the pessimism and frustration of a defeated prophet. Jeremiah represented the Old Covenant. The demands of the Law were too great for Israel. Their old nature was not up to it. All that lay ahead for his beloved people was resignation and doom. His conclusion – you can't change people.

So we argue today – sometimes about ourselves and sometimes about others. We come to Christ, wanting a change. Perhaps this is because we need it, perhaps because we accept the knowledge that He wants it in us. But either way we try to change, sometimes valiantly in our own strength, sometimes half-heartedly and cautiously in His strength. We go just so far for one, two, five years and then we tend to sag back as half-free, half-healed, half-transformed men and women.

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin, can the leopard change his spots? Neither can I." "God can't expect it of me. I am still human. This is my nature." In other words, in its bluntest, most theological terms we say, "I must resign myself to continue in sin that grace may abound." Isn't this so?

Now this may have been true before Christ, but with the Christian it just isn't so. In arguing this way, we are denying the power of the Cross, of the new life of Christ. For we are no longer under Jeremiah's gloomy covenant. It was not fifty years after Jeremiah that Ezekiel promised on behalf of God: "A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you. ... I will put My spirit within you." (Ezekiel 36:26-27) Jesus clarified this prophecy: "I will pray the Father," He said, "and He will give you another counselor... Even the spirit of truth... He dwells with you and will be in you." (John 14:16,17) This promise enabled Paul to declare triumphantly, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

In the transforming power of the Gospel, the Ethiopian can change his skin. The leopard can change his spots. You and I can be totally changed people. This being the case, it is important for us to know how we can be totally changed, and why it is that we must take advantage of God's offer. Both answers are simple and profound.

First, as to how. We can start off by saying that with man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible. It was Christ who said, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24) Here is the clue, a clue that becomes fully developed at a later date. It is in Romans 6 that we read that Christ died so that we, like the grain of wheat, might also die. "We know," Paul writes, "that our old self was crucified with [Christ] so that the sinful body might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." (Romans 6:6)

This is a fact. Even as our salvation through Christ is a fact, done, finished, accomplished and appropriated, so our death to sin and our new fruit-bearing creaturehood in Christ is a fact, done, finished, accomplished and waiting to be appropriated. We are ready to die with Christ, really abandoning our self to Him. You can do this and so can I.

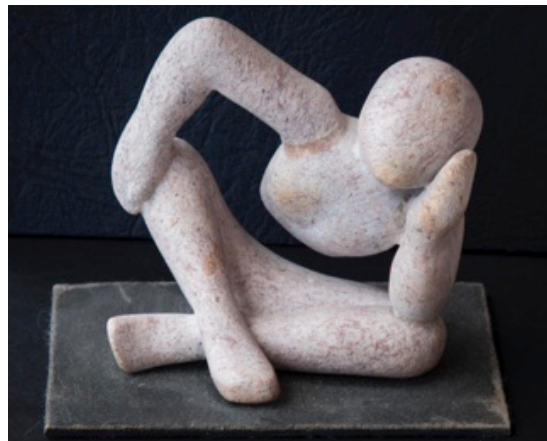
But why is this a must? As we saw last week, Christ has called us for a purpose – that we might be His instruments of love and healing and reconciliation in this world. To this end we must be filled and dominated by His Spirit. But this can be no token filling.

In the Book of Judges, we are told that the Spirit of the Lord "clothed" Himself in Gideon. Being filled with the Spirit means just that, but we must be a "good fit" for Him. All our attempts to clothe the Holy Spirit in "ready-made, off-the-rack" clothes are doomed to failure. We must be custom-fitted. The tailor must go to work. It was necessary for an unreliable Peter to be remade into a rock. It was necessary for a high-spirited John to be remade into the Apostle of Love. It was necessary for the culturally half-Greek, half-Jew Paul to become the preacher of the folly of the Cross. It is necessary for you and me to be transformed into our best selves if we are to become worthy "temples" of the Holy Spirit, Christ in us.

So it is that you and I can and must be changed, and that this change must be carried through to the end. The bold, blundering, impulsive person must die to his boldness and impulsiveness in order that he may rise again as an eloquent witness for Christ. The shy and sensitive person must die to his

shyness and sensitivity in order that he may rise again as a strong, compassionate lover of people. The skeptic, with the mind like a steel trap, must let that mind be put to death in order that he – and it – may rise again as a keen apologist for the faith. The rich man must die to his wealth in order that he may rise again as one who can effectively implement the work of Christ. Regardless of our particular personalities, you and I must die to them in order that we may rise again, free and teachable and available to our Lord.

Let each one of us, then, shake off the defeatism and doubt, the lethargy and dullness, the compromise and complacency of our half-changed lives. Let us shake them off before they become ingrown. Let us dare to give ourselves over once and for all to death, dying with Christ to the weaknesses of our old natures, that like the grain of wheat, we may in dying bear much fruit. God can change us – even you, even me – contrary to nature. Let us give Him a fresh chance to do so and to Him be the glory.



This morning we as a congregation have again pledged ourselves to “bring our children up in the discipline and the instruction of the Lord.” This we can do only if we are clear in our own minds as to what our faith is. For this reason I am going to repeat a sermon today that is familiar to many of you.

I want to present to you the national religion of the American people. It is a noble religion. It is as American as our flag, and it is so imbedded in our culture, our schools (even in their present state), our civic and political institutions that it is part of our life blood. The emphasis varies from person to person. but the common denominator of its major tenets can be summarized in the "creed" which follows:

- I believe in one God.
  - He is our universal Heavenly Father.
  - Men call Him by different names and worship Him in different ways, but He hears and accepts all who follow their own religious convictions with sincerity.
  - Every man can pray to God in his own way. When a man prays in faith, God will answer his prayer (within certain obvious bounds set by natural law and human nature), and will help him to fulfill his deepest desires.
- I believe in man. He has been made in the image of God. As such he has certain unalienable rights. For example:
  - Man has an essential dignity.
  - All men are free, the masters of their own destinies. It is up to them to strike out and achieve.
  - All men are equal. No one man is better than any other man.
  - All men are brothers, as children of the One Father.
  - Man has an essential potential of accomplishment.
  - If he has faith in himself and in his fellow man, he can “with God’s help”, do all things.
- Man has an essential virtue.
  - He is basically good at heart.
  - He sometimes makes mistakes and gets in trouble.
  - In the long run, however, he learns by experience that “right triumphs,” “crime does not pay,” and “that virtue is its own reward.”

- I believe in Jesus of Nazareth.
  - He was the greatest religious leader the world has known.
  - He so perfectly reflected the character of God, that in some way he could be called "divine."
  - Jesus is our great teacher and example.
  - His teachings can be best described and summarized in the golden rule, or in the commandment to "love your neighbor."
  - A Christian is one who lives, or tries to live, by these and other "Christian principles."
  - If a man leads a good life, and tries to do what is right, he will "pass on" into an eternity in heaven.
- I believe in the Church.
  - It is one of the most important of the community organizations that work so hard towards building character and improving the community.
  - The Church is not the most effective of these organizations, but is probably the most all-inclusive in its concern.

Now this religion passes for Christianity. It is enough like it on the surface to be mistaken for it, even by many sincere Christian people. However, this religion is not Christianity. Nothing I have said is uniquely Christian, and much of it is in actual opposition to the deeper implications of the Christian faith and life. This Great American Religion is a mixture of humanism, Americanism, and Judaeo-Christian theism and ethics.

Over against this, the Bible affirms that there is One God (Deuteronomy 6:4) who is Lord of all, but Father only to those who have come to Him through Christ, (John 1:12). Men have the privilege of access to God only through Christ, (1 Timothy 2:5; John 14:6). When the Christian prays in faith, God leads him into the center of His will. (Matthew 6:10; 26:39)

The Bible teaches that man is a circumscribed creature. He has certain, God-given privileges (Psalms 8:3-5) He has dignity as a child of God, but when he forfeits his status, he forfeits his dignity. (Rom. 1:21-24) Men are free only when they yield their lives to Christ as Lord. (John 8:34; Rom. 6:22). Men are equal only in their need for God, and in their ability to find happiness in Christ. (Galatians 3:28) All Christians are brothers in Christ. Man can do nothing apart from God. He can build bridges and bombs, but is powerless to change himself. (John 15:5). God is the source of all that is



good. Man is basically sinful, incurably selfish. He can do good only as God is at work in him. (Romans 7:18; Philippians 2:13).

Jesus Christ is uniquely different from any other religious leader. He is Emmanuel (God with us); the Word of God; our Lord and Savior. His teaching is best summed up in the Great Commandment: You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbor. A Christian is one who has entered into a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. No man can earn his own way into heaven. "The free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23).

The Church differs from all other institutions in kind. It is a colony of heaven. We are members, of the Church by invitation, and are members with a mission. The Church is a revolutionary organization.

In summary...

- The Great' American Religion is man-centered.
  - Christianity is God-centered.
- The Great American Religion puts its faith in man, helped by God.
  - Christianity puts its faith in what God has done for man in Christ.
- The Great American Religion is based on what is most noble in man.
  - Christianity is based solely on the revelation that God has given.
- The Great American Religion is one of the best of the world's religions.
  - Christianity is the only true religion, finding its origin in God.

If we are to mature in our faith, and have a faith to pass on to our children in these vital times, it is well for us to be reminded of what makes our faith unique. May God give us the necessary understanding and discernment.

*“Gloria in excelsis deo et in terra pax ...”* Peace – what a wonderful word it is! What universal longing it represents. How we cry out for peace. It is one of the compelling yearnings of the human soul. You and I, as well as anyone, yearn for peace.

It is true that peace means different things to different people:

- To those living under the threat of war or persecution (and we’ve had a taste of this recently), peace means freedom from hostilities.
- For those caught in the impasse of disagreement with one another over issues (as for example in labor-management relations or in the theological perspective), peace implies the resolution of issues which can bring about agreement and settlement.
- For those who are harassed by the kaleidoscope of daily life, peace would seem to involve inactivity and quiet.
- For those who stand helpless in times of anxiety, on the other hand, inactivity does not bring peace. It is something quite contrary to this.
- Finally, for those struggling with inner conflicts, peace involves an inner healing and release and freedom.

Regardless of the form our yearning takes, however, we all do want and need peace. And that is one of the reasons that we are intuitively always ready for Christmas.

*“Gloria in excelsis deo et in terra pax ...”* It’s Christmas Eve. The Word has just become flesh and the angels sing. The credit line of their chorus goes to God: *Glory to God in the highest ...* and the promise comes to man: *“and on earth peace ...”*

Yes, the Word has become flesh. The God of peace has become incarnate in the Prince of Peace, the one whom Paul describes as *“our peace.”* (Ephesians 2:14)

Now there are three things concerning this peace of God which I would like to communicate this morning by means of a very simple outline.

1. *This promised peace is part of our inheritance from God the Father.* It is the inevitable consequence of his grace, that compelling attitude on His part that culminated in His reconciling act on the Cross in Jesus Christ. I know of no better way to underscore this statement than by pointing out to you that eighteen out of the last twenty-two books in the Bible start with phrases such as: “Paul ... to all God’s beloved in Rome ... Grace to you and Peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” “Paul, an apostle ... to the churches of Galatia ... Grace to you and Peace ...” “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to the exiles of the dispersion ... May grace and peace be multiplied to you ... “ “John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come ...”

It is just as true that any one of these apostles could have written to the church at Willow Grove, communicating this two-fold benediction that the grace of God be upon us and that we receive His gift of peace which inevitably follows. Yes, the peace of God which answers each of the many longings of mankind is in the inner peace which God’s grace communicates.

2. *This promised peace is the result of the work of Jesus Christ.* Let me quote from the second chapter of Ephesians: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For He is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. By abolishing in His flesh the Law of Commandments and Ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.” (Ephesians 2:13-18)

Our peace with God which has been purchased for us on the Cross is the grounds for the inner peace which follows, the peace which enables us to live with ourselves and with one another. As Jesus Himself promises: “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

3. *This promised peace is mediated to us by the Holy Spirit – God in us.* As we just have seen, the peace which Christ came to preach results from the fact that we have access *in one Spirit* to the Father. This peace of God under the conditions of stress which prevail does not come naturally to us even when we understand the promise. We find it described by Paul in the fifth chapter of Galatians as one of the fruits of the Spirit, one of those virtues like love and joy and patience and self-control which we experience almost as a benign but alien thing moving in upon us.

Do you really want peace in your inner being? Well, it is yours for the asking.

The grace of God has promised it.

The incarnation of God has made it a reality.

The Spirit of God can implement it in your life.

Seek afresh to recognize the person and the presence of the Spirit of God in your life. Turn over to Him the turmoil, the anxieties, the conflicts, the fears of your life. Do it now and experience afresh the promise of the angels on the night that the Word became flesh.



Several weeks ago we sang a hymn, the first verse of which goes like this:

*Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown  
When Thou camest to earth for me;  
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room for Thy holy nativity;  
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus! There is room in my heart for Thee.*

Here in simple words we have the statement of the Advent of our Lord. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke give the most details concerning this Advent. But, in a sense the most profound statements occur when John tells us that “The word became flesh and dwelt among us;” when Paul reminds us that “When the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons;” or perhaps when Paul tells us elsewhere that Christ Jesus ... “Did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men.” (John 1:14, Galatians 4:4, Philippians 2:5-7) Advent means to us that God moved into man’s predicament. He took the initiative. He acted. The world was waiting – and the world still waits, as expressed in the refrain of the hymn: “*O come to my heart, Lord Jesus; there is room in my heart for Thee.*”

The statement of the Advent is not enough, however, for as John reminds us: “He came to His own home and His own people received Him not.” The Advent was rejected and the Savior could not save. And still He cannot without a response in the world. In other words, as the Advent is proclaimed, there must be a response.

This happened from the beginning. The shepherds on the field below Bethlehem heard the proclamation of the Advent and responded by going to Bethlehem to see. Simeon and Anna in the temple at Jerusalem were given insight as to the Advent through their close relationship with God, but they had to come in order to see. The Magi saw in the stars the proclamation of the Advent but they too had to come at great cost in order to present their gifts to the Child who was born to be King. Even later on, the multitudes thronged about Jesus. They only partially recognized Him for who He was, but in their coming, they were healed.

And so it can be and must be with us. God has stretched His hand out to us in Jesus Christ. This is good news, but in order for it to be our good news we must reach out and grab it. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*” (John 3:16)

You need the salvation which has been offered to us through the Advent of Jesus Christ. You need the renewal which comes day by day as you die again with Him and are raised in newness of life. You need the refreshing that comes as day after day, you feed upon Him who is the Bread of life. I need these things too. Therefore, our response must be real and positive and recurring.

I opened with a hymn; I will close with the words of a hymn. This is not a Christmas hymn, but it is one which describes with great eloquence the response of which I have been speaking. Listen carefully as I read its words and incorporate it into a prayer – a prayer to the Word made flesh.

*Out of my bondage, sorrow and night, Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;  
Into Thy freedom, gladness and light, Jesus, I come to Thee.  
Out of my sickness into Thy health, Out of my want and into Thy wealth,  
Out of my sin and into Thyself, Jesus, I come to Thee.*

*Out of my shameful failure and loss, Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;  
Into the glorious gain of Thy cross, Jesus, I come to Thee;  
Out of earth's sorrows into Thy balm, Out of life's storms and into Thy calm.*

*Out of distress to jubilant psalm, Jesus, I come to Thee.*

*Out of unrest and arrogant pride, Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;  
Into Thy blessed will to abide, Jesus, I come to Thee;  
Out of myself to dwell in Thy Love, Out of despair into raptures above,  
Upward for aye on wings like a dove, Jesus, I come to Thee.*

*Out of the fear and dread of the tomb, Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;  
Into the joy and light of Thy home, Jesus, I come to Thee;  
Out of the depths of ruin untold, Into the peace of Thy sheltering fold,  
Ever Thy glorious face to behold, Jesus, I come to Thee.*

I have been planning for two or three weeks to preach some Sunday on the importance of our being stable and steadfast in our faith, Christians who persevere to the end so as to be true witnesses to our Servant Lord. However, at least three unrelated conversations during this past week have led me to feel that what must come first is a rediscovery and a reaffirmation of God's prior role in any such activity. He cannot expect us to be consistent and persevering in our faith unless He sets us an example of steadfastness, then provides the power whereby we can be steadfast.

So I am taking for my theme today Mendelssohn's paraphrase of Psalm 121:4 – "He watching over Israel slumbers not nor sleeps." Here is an affirmation of security, of comfort, of joy. And it involves many things as we shall be seeing.

1. "Know that the Lord is God!" First of all let us recall and meditate momentarily upon the fact that God is. Never forget that! He is the same yesterday, today and forever. Our whole religious affirmation and experience focuses upon Him, not upon ourselves. Our intellectual understanding, our religious feeling, our moral behavior, these things are real but secondary. He is the ultimate reality, and thank God He is.

2. "We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture." (Psalm 100:3) As many of you will be clarifying tomorrow in your circle meetings, we who profess the name of Christ and who have accepted the salvation which He has offered to us are marked people. We are part of the people of God, the New Israel, the "many nations" of which Abraham was father. We like millions of others have been called out from the secular world in which we live.

Notice that I put my last statement in the passive. It is God who has acted, not we. He has known us, He has loved us, He has called us, He has saved us. As Paul describes this in the first chapter of Ephesians, he reminds us that God "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world. ... He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of His will." (Ephesians 1: 4, 5)

3. "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." We are the sheep of His pasture. The sheep are kept and guarded and watched over by the

shepherd and this steadfastly and without a break. It is Jesus of course who describes this picture most vividly. "I am the good shepherd, I know my own and My own know Me. ... And I lay down My life for the sheep. ... My sheep hear My voice and I know them and they follow Me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish and none shall snatch them out of My hand. " (John 10:14, 15, 27, 28)

4. "He is able to guard..." Our God not only keeps a strict watch over us (twenty-four hours a day through life) but He is able to do so, competent to guard us.

a. "I know whom I have believed and I am sure that He is able to guard [my deposit] until that day." (2 Tim. 1:12) Our past belongs to God. We have offered to Him as a fragrant offering our original decision to accept Christ as Lord and Savior; our subsequent works of obedience; our love for Him who first loved us; ourselves as living sacrifices. On deposit also in a sense are the works of the flesh of which we have been guilty, confessed forgiven, redeemed. These are all on deposit with God and He is able to guard them until we meet Him face to face.

b. "He is able to keep us from falling and to present us without blemish before the presence of His glory with rejoicing." (Jude 1:24) Our future belongs to Him. As we submit our destiny to Him, trusting Him to undergird for us the tenacity and steadfastness of our faith and our growth towards Christian maturity, we know that our future is secure.

In all that I have been saying this morning, the spotlight has never once been on us. It is God who is," it is God who has chosen us, it is God who has saved us, it is God who keeps us without slumbering or sleeping. It is He who will keep our going out and our coming in from this time forth and forever more. This He will do, for He is able.

So we affirm as Christians. If our present or our future hinged upon our own reliability, the prospect would be forbidding, but in God, we can be secure. No human doubt can be great enough to unnerve us. No discouragement or disappointment can be great enough to defeat us. No Satanic fog can cloud our vision sufficiently to rob us of our steadfast gaze on reality. For "He watching over Israel slumbers not or sleeps."



Are you ever discouraged, disillusioned, disenchanted, disappointed – and find yourself laying it all in the lap of God? In other words, are you ever disappointed with God? Perhaps you are now, even without realizing it.

Perhaps He seems to have let you down in some crisis. Perhaps you feel that He has permitted some internal failure to develop without sustaining you. Perhaps He has been seemingly slow in working some dramatic change in your life or in the life of someone for whom you have been praying earnestly. Perhaps He has permitted some of His own people, fellow church members or even one of your ministers, to treat you in some way that you feel to be unfair.

I have said, “God has seemed to be unfair,” because somehow this attitude of disappointment with God, prevalent as it is, does not fit in with the Biblical testimony. How different is the testimony of the Psalmist who in the 103<sup>rd</sup> Psalm speaks on behalf of the faithful of all ages,

“Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me, bless His holy name who forgives ... who heals ... who redeems ... who crowns you ... who satisfies you. ...”

Notice the order in which the Psalmist lists these benefits of God. First comes forgiveness and healing, then freedom and satisfaction – a thrilling development of the emerging grace of God. As Paul echoes many years later: “What then shall we say to all this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him?” (Romans 8:31,32) As a matter of fact God is the incapable-of-being-disappointed-with One.

If this is what God is like, why our disappointment with Him? Let me suggest at least three answers: First there is the problem of our own self-hood, our sinfulness. When we are enchanted with ourselves, God seems unnecessary. Worshiping Him impresses us as much ado about nothing. When on the other hand we are disenchanted with ourselves, we must find someone to blame and God is handy. Secondly, we must live with the limitation of our own humanity, the natural weakness of vision and cloudiness of mind that makes it hard for us to see God even when we are not in active rebellion against Him. Finally, there is one, even the devil,

who would use both of these things within us to cloud our vision and separate us in every possible way from God. Many are the ways in which he can cloud and confuse, working in us all kinds of discouragement, disillusionment, disenchantment, and disappointment.

Realizing the source, then, of our disappointment with God and remembering the testimony of the Psalmist that God is the “incapable-of-being-disappointed-with One,” let us turn back to the 103<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Here we find that our God is one who recognizes both our sinfulness and our humanity and who acts to remove all causes of disappointment with Him.

“He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities ... as far as the East is from the West, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.”

“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love ... For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love towards those who fear Him.”

“As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower in the field ... but the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear Him.”

Even more remarkable than these acts of God is the affirmation of the Psalmist with its glimpse into the future that “as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him.” Here is the beginning of the New Testament in the Old. For we can affirm and experience that it is through Christ that the Father-child relationship is authenticated. Through Him a unity is secured through which the steadfast love of God becomes totally ours and with it, all contention with God.

We are coming together today around the Lord’s table. We will be partaking of Christ together. Our relation with Him and with one another will be restored. So let us come, let us eat and be filled. Let us then, “Bless the Lord ... and forget not all His benefits.” Never again!

For He is the One who forgives all of our iniquities, who heals all of our diseases, who redeems our lives from the pit, who crowns us with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies us with good as long as we live, so that our youth is renewed, continually being renewed like the eagle’s.

It is not often that we in the Presbyterian Church celebrate both sacraments, Baptism and Communion, on the same day, – that day being Pentecost Sunday – and then include confirmation also. Yet that is what we are doing at 11:00 this morning. My question therefore is: does this make a “variety show” of the worship service, or is there some unifying principle into which we can gather these diverse elements? The answer is that there is, and it is found in the words of our Lord which we just read from John 3.

Nicodemus, the Pharisee, came to Jesus by night, searching for something that would enrich his understanding of life. He probably hoped to find it in a deepened intellectual comprehension of God. But Jesus stopped him short, saying, “Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” A new birth – a new life – a new start – this is what Jesus says is necessary, not simply the reforming or renewing of the old.

This concept was as foreign to Nicodemus, the earnest law-abiding Pharisee, as it is to many of us today. So, in answer to a further question, our Lord goes on: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”

*Water* – born of water – here is Jesus’ reference to baptism, to the symbolic act which declares to the world that a person has been cleansed from the guilt of sin, and that in fact their old nature, the root of sin, has been destroyed so that “we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” (Romans 6:6)

*The Spirit* – born of the Spirit – here is Jesus’ reference to the necessary infilling of the Holy Spirit if birth is truly to take place. The Nicene Creed refers to the Spirit as the “Lord and Giver of life”, and He is just that. Life within us is God’s life within us, and this life became a real option with coming of the Spirit on Pentecost.

But what about Communion? Our answer here is in a text which I used in my sermon last week. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians about the unity and diversity of the Church, said: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:13)

The new birth, with its putting off the old through baptism, and its putting on the new through the coming of the Spirit, lends us inevitably to the *koinonia*, the fellowship of one body. And it is of course to this fellowship that the Communion Service bears witness. “The bread which we break, is it not a participation [in Greek – a *koinonia*] in the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:16)

There are those this morning who for the first time will be coming to the table of the Lord. There are others for which this will be a familiar experience. Let us remember, however, either way, that the communion testifies to a living Church, and that behind the signs of life which are in our worship, there is the One Who made that life possible, Jesus Christ, and there is His Spirit through Whom this life becomes a reality to us who have been born anew into the Kingdom of God.



Reluctant as we are to admit it, we live today in an explosive world. It is a time of revolution, a time of change, a time of disintegration. Problems thrust themselves upon our consciousness, problems that we cannot duck even by eclipsing them with our own problems. During the next three or four weeks, I am planning to speak on several of these problems, trying to define a truly Christian position in the midst of the many voices that are heard.

Today I am going to start with the racial issue. To quote Time Magazine's lead article this week: "Spring 1963 will long be remembered as the time when the U. S. negroes' revolution for equality exploded on all fronts ... In the weeks, months, and even years to come, there will be lulls in the revolution but it will revive – for after the Spring of 1963, there can be no turning back." The impatience of the negro, his restlessness with the slowness of the integration procedure are beginning to penetrate our consciousness. According to Martin Luther King, it would take 92 years at the present rate to integrate the public schools, and he states that what the negro wants is *all* of his rights *here* where he now lives, *now*, this year. And when we stop and think honestly, we cannot blame him for his impatience.

The tragedy is of course that the problem has been caused by the avarice and sin of men whom we never knew. Neither those of us who are descended from the free men nor those of us who are descended from the slaves had any choice as to which group we were to belong to. Neither of us chose the fear or the frustration under which we live, but today we all suffer the consequences together, and we are at a point of no return where our society must shift to provide the final solution to our racial problem. Now a solution will come but the cost at which it will come depends very largely upon the level of motivation on each side, and especially on the side of the whites.

1. Integration may come as the result of fear, fear of violence, fear of revolution, fear of mass retaliation. And this option is no joke.
2. Integration may come as the response of the majority of law-abiding citizens to the legally stated court orders. This is a higher motivation.

3. National self-interest – the world image of the United States in this time of international crisis may hasten integration in our country.
4. The still higher motive may be found in James Baldwin's analysis that "at the root of the negro problem is the necessity of the white man to find a way of living with the negro in order to live with himself." It is true that we who are white and privileged can never be truly ourselves as long as we are living at the expense of others.
5. Still more to be hoped for is that our country will triumph over its racial problem as the result of humanitarian reasons, reasons which include an honest compassion for the underdog and an honest interpretation of the Golden Rule.

These are some of the levels of motivation which individually or collectively may consummate the integration of our nation. They are all true, all valid. But these are the secular motivations of a secular world. As such, they have not been more compelling to Christians in a Christian Church than to anyone else in any other organization. If the Church is to fulfill its function, in this crisis, it must search out its own perspective and define its own level of motivation in the fight for racial integration.

The best analysis of this Christian motivation which I have seen is in an article in *Motive* magazine – an article by Will D. Campbell. I will be freely using some of his ideas in the rest of this sermon. As Mr. Campbell points out, "THE Church's failure in the racial crisis has not been functional, but organic, not sociological, but theological." That is, the Church has not been a failure because of its lack of social action. It has been a failure in that it has not been true to its own nature. Instead of seeing itself and its role from God's perspective, it has succumbed to looking at both from man's perspective.

When the Church focuses on man, the whites within it see a very natural and easily described white supremacy. Likewise, the negroes see themselves as continually inferior. From this perspective, when both groups out of humanitarian motive attempt to equalize the races, there is inevitably something patronizing on the side of the whites who want to help the negroes become "like us" and likewise, there is something limiting about the negroes who set as their standard the pattern of life of their white neighbors.

The Church will find itself again in this issue when it realizes that the answer to the racial issue is in our focusing on God and recognizing His

absolute sovereignty over all. God is God. We are not gods, nor can we make one another into gods. On the contrary, we are all sinners together. Black and white we stand before Him and our destiny is in the hands of Him who redeemed us. What is our text in the matter? Nothing less than Genesis 1:27, the basic statement: “So God created man in His own image...” There is only one image of God and there is no record in the Scriptures that God ever modified that creation. Truly this is what the Apostle Paul means when he reminds the race-conscious, class-conscious, sex-conscious churches of Galatia: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male for female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Under God’s sovereignty, there is no place for the arbitrary and cruel distinction that color makes one person inferior to another. Basically it is as unreasonable as making the categorical statement that all blondes are liars or all left-handed people are insane. There is no question about it that: *The Christian message about race is that race is irrelevant.*

God essentially tosses the subject out of court for He is color-blind.

What is our role then as Christians in this crisis?

1. First we must be concerned and informed on what is going on in the south, in our own northern communities, in the government, in our church circles. Uninformed Christians are by definition loveless Christians.
2. We must be united together in prayer – prayer of confession for the collective sin of our nation, for our own indifference to the acute problems of others, both white and colored as they are caught in the grips of this explosive issue. We must also be in prayer that the Lord will protect our country from extremists on both sides, that a resolute but moderate course may be carried out.
3. We must face the fact that we are not remote from the problems that we are talking about, that in our northern communities in our own schools, in our churches, there is still a de facto segregation.
4. In the freedom and the power that the Holy Spirit can give to us, we must become color blind as God is color-blind and admit once and for all in our own hearts that any form of segregation is wrong. And we must be sensitive to speak out and to act as God opens the way.

In Acts 18, we have recorded for us a strange and amusing incident. Paul is preaching in Corinth. The Jews are opposing him, and they call upon the state to stop him. The proconsul Gallio refuses to do this, and thus we have an early instance of the neutrality of the secular government in religious matters.

It is in the spirit of Gallio of Corinth that our Supreme Court acted this past week in declaring that Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer in the public schools is unconstitutional. It is in this same spirit that our own General Assembly took exactly the same stand only four weeks ago. Here are church and state at their most responsible levels agreeing that something is wrong, and yet our instincts as Bible-loving Christians are disturbed. Somehow we feel that religion is being suppressed, or at least pushed out of education. So it is to our advantage today for us to evaluate what is behind these two opinions.

What has actually happened is that both the General Assembly and the Supreme Court have held up a mirror before our eyes. In it we see two disturbing things:

1. We do not live in a Christian country in which our public schools are really Protestant Parochial schools. In the past this has been the case almost by common consent. It is no longer the case. Our nation is composed of a religiously diverse mixture of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, non-Christian sectarians, agnostics, etc. Perhaps the most prevalent religion is secularism. Our schools reflect this diversity and must try to do the impossible, to give a religiously neutral education to our children.
2. For two centuries or more the church has been receiving financial and other aid from the state in the form of freedom from taxes, etc. And in addition to this, the Church has been essentially paying the state to evangelize on its behalf by teaching religion in the schools which everyone must attend. In this latter case, as our General Assembly has put it, Bible reading etc. are either meaningless rituals, in which case they are an offense to the Church, or they constitute religious indoctrination which is an offense to others.

The first of these things is a matter of great concern to us as Christians. It is



a reality that we have resisted facing for a long time. It is good that we can now be realistic. Perhaps we can do something about it.

The second of these things should also be of great concern to us. It also represents a wrong state of affairs.

1. It is illegal, for in many subtle ways it violates the first amendment of the Constitution which affirms: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."
2. It has never worked. No one can ever legislate faith. Never in history, even in the history of the Hebrews, has a nation prospered religiously under an official state religion. Emptiness, as in modern Sweden, or intolerance, as in modern Spain, invariably ensues.
3. In a shifting society, our Protestant faith would itself be endangered, for if some other religious system were to become the majority system, our children would be taught that in the schools.
4. It runs counter to our deepest understanding of Christian freedom. God alone is the Lord of conscience. No man, no group of people can force their faith on another man. We are free to believe, free to disbelieve, free to be right, free to be wrong. This our state affirms. This our faith affirms.

Therefore, we must see that the two statements in the spirit of Gallio which have been made by Church and State, are actually steps which in the years ahead will insure true freedom of religion in this country. For this we must rejoice.

In its role of absolute neutrality, the state is being the state at its best. Over against it, the Church must now be the Church at its best. And this puts us on our mettle. What must our challenge be?

1. We must practice our religious freedom in our homes and our churches. We are free to read the Bible and pray in the home. Let's do it. We are free to gather and worship with no restrictions of any kind. Let's do it.
2. We must carry our Christian witness into government, into industry, into the schools. Our freedom of religion and of speech, entitles us to share our faith, to speak out in criticism, to exhort, to encourage, to vote, to evangelize. Whereas we cannot ask the state to do these things for us, we are obligated to do them ourselves. Lets use this freedom.
3. Few must make sure that the second part of the first amendment is carried out as well as the first part, and that no irreligious minority forces its convictions upon us any more than vice versa.

On Wednesday evenings, we have been studying the Book of Galatians. We have been gradually coming to see the full meaning of Christian freedom as freedom from any kind of external law which would bind the conscience. We have seen that only in free response to the love of God can we be what God has intended us to be. In the words of Professor Butterfield: "Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted."

In our country we are remarkably free to do this. Let us protect and use this freedom, that we may truly be the Church in the world.



In the first chapter of Genesis from which our lesson is taken today (verses 26-31), God commanded our first parents: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." A look at today's population statistics indicates that finally we are on the verge of literally fulfilling this symbolic command.

Not only is the population of the world increasing rapidly, but the rate of increase is increasing. It took 16 centuries for the population to double from 250 million to 500 million. It will take only 40 years for the population to double from 3 billion to 6 billion at our present rate of growth. If that rate had been the actual rate of growth from the time of Christ till now, the population of the world would now be 40 million persons per square foot of the earth's land area. These are only sample statistics to help us realize that so-called population explosion is a problem facing the world equally as important and difficult as that of the hydrogen bomb.

It seems to us tragic that this problem is the result of the best that man has been able to give himself over the centuries. God's gifts of scientific wisdom and concern for one another have enabled and motivated man to advance medical science, to improve agricultural methods, to free the bodies and souls of the race to the point where our life expectancy has drastically increased. Babies that are born live instead of dying. Men and women in the prime of life live and reproduce instead of dying. These facts are wonderfully good news to us as Christians for whom human life is sacred. But they are also a threat.

They are a threat because those factors that emerged from human love and compassion could be the means of destroying human love and all human values. Migration can no longer solve the population problem, at least not for long. The result therefore will be famine, genocide, encroachment, war, and/or the depersonalization of man that would virtually destroy that for which Christ died.

Now it is obvious to all thinking people, Christian and non-Christian alike, that the only way of avoiding world-wide tragedy in the near future, i.e., to reduce the world's birth rate, and that very quickly, and this brings to the forefront a most difficult situation, for this cosmic problem can be solved

only at the level of endless intimate personal decisions, on the part of people with all kinds of religious and emotional and personality perspectives. Man's ability to reproduce could be destroyed by mass action, but it cannot be controlled short of forms of action close to murder (See Exodus 1).

There is no swift and easy answer to the problem that has been stated. There are certain steps that we Christians can take, individually and collectively.

First, we can think through from a Biblical perspective the true meaning of sex and the marital relationship. As we do so, we will find two erroneous attitudes that are prevalent in our society and in other cultures of the world.

One is that the sexual relationship is a natural biological function that can be indulged promiscuously, either with the unlimited irresponsible production of children, or with the equally irresponsible avoidance of child-bearing because of the trouble involved.

The other is that the sexual relationship is a God-given function solely for the production of children. This attitude can lead in turn either to a determined use of this function, or to a somewhat grim abstinence from its use.

Over against these, we come to realize that God has made us male and female not just to have children (He could have invented some other means) but to draw us into the intimate family relationship in which children can be properly reared. The sexual relationship serves both of these purposes, purposes which are related but independent at the same time.

A right understanding of this dual purpose of sex leads us to the realization that both purposes will be enhanced with the responsible use of the best methods of family planning and birth control.

Second, it is therefore totally in keeping with our Christian concept of responsible freedom to emerge from that pattern of taboos which either results in unwanted children, or puts a strain on that entirely valid expression of love that is at the center of a marriage.

It is also in keeping with this Christian concept to encourage the discovery of more effective methods of birth control, to work for the elimination of legal barriers to their responsible dissemination and use, and even to search out means of re-educating the great masses of the world's population in this area.

Most of all, however, it is our Christian responsibility to proclaim to our society and to the world God's kind of love, which redeems man, which alone can make possible in his life responsible faith and action.



One Church - One Body of Christ. So it is on paper. But we know that the Church is far from that. For four centuries the Church has been splitting until today we have in our midst literally hundreds of denominations and sects. This splintering of the Church has been most often the result of a desire for purity within, for "coming out from them and being separate." (2 Corinthians 6:17)

Whereas there is the potential for human sin in bigness, it has become evident that there is an equivalent potential for sin in smallness. The devil has us coming and going, as he seeks to divide and conquer.

Today the tide has turned, therefore, and from a combination of trivial and profound motives there is an inexorable move towards Church unity. Of course the deepest dynamic for this is the serious recollection of Jesus' words: "I pray that they may be one." (John 17: 20-23) The tide has not only turned, but its flow has accelerated within the past year. The Ecumenical Council in Rome, the Faith and Order Conference in Montreal this month, the Consultation on Church Union in Oberlin in March – all these have been more than straws in the wind.

So far, Church union moves have been primarily listening, comparing, defining.

1. Rome has discovered that it can speak in freedom, that it can change, that there are other Christians outside of its orbit.
2. The World Council of Churches has discovered that not only protestants from the West have convictions and ideas, but that the Orthodox Churches, and the new Churches of the East also have insights which may come from the Holy Spirit.
3. The Six American denominations which are presently considering the possibility of Union on the basis of Dr. Blakes's proposal of two years ago, are discovering many things, among them:
  - a. That on most points there is as much difference within the individual denominations as between them,
  - b. That in practice the three traditional forms of Church government tend to operate very similarly,
  - c. That in all of them there is a tendency towards centralization, and

- d. That the different denominational attitudes towards the relation of word to sacrament in worship, and the relationship of Scripture to tradition in doctrine can be mutually enriching.

The result of all this is the breaking down of set patterns, and definite progress towards One Church - this for better or for worse. What then is our attitude to be as we seek to be true to our Lord? Let me suggest four answers.

1. We must be informed though at present uncommitted. This present movement is as revolutionary as that which brought about the reformation in the 1500s.
2. We must let ourselves be enriched by what we learn. New insights into the nature of the Church, the practice of worship, the confessional expression of the faith, etc. can deepen our faith and life, insofar as they are from God and not from men. Life at Willow Grove will be affected by what is going on.
3. We must be on guard. There are several dangers in these unity movements. There are the dangers of centralization, of a large power structure such as that at Rome, of a dilution of the faith to the least common denominator of truth, of theological compromise. All of these must be fought for the sake of the purity of the Church.
4. We must be so close to the Spirit ourselves, that we can discern truth where it is, and human error where it is. We must be informed enough to be able to take part in discussions on this subject, each at his respective level of responsibility.
5. We must be in prayer (and I really mean this) that the Church will be open to the Spirit of God Himself, so that what results will be of God and not merely the accomplishment of men.

As in all other phases of activity today, we are living in times of transition and movement. It is a great time to be alive – if we are alive in Christ.

This is Communion Sunday – a time for knitting together the Body of Christ at Willow Grove.

During the summer, in spite of our unusually good week-by-week participation, we as a congregation are always separated. The result:

1. Since communication breaks down, we become a little bit estranged one to another; and
2. Because of unsynchronized similar summer experiences, we can become a little estranged from one another.

Every fall a certain amount of fence mending is necessary, and this fall is no exception. Lots of time and lots of conversation are needed, but these, no matter how conscientiously undertaken, are inadequate except for the simultaneous inner action of the Spirit of God. This is where this morning comes in.

I would like to lead you briefly back to the Apostolic Church at Corinth – the church as a matter of fact to which Paul wrote the institution of the Lord's Supper which I will be reading to you later. I wish I had the time to develop, as I have many times on Wednesday evenings, the nature of this church. It was a church of saints, of men and women zealous in their devotion to Christ, but it was a church which Satan was able to divide, using their very zeal as his wedge. Two kinds of divisions were present in the church at Corinth. In first Corinthians 1 we read of divisions based on personal loyalties. In first Corinthians 12, diverse gifts of the Spirit caused the divisions. Now the thing I want to point out is that in both of these cases the qualities which produced the divisions were fine in themselves, Loyalty in the first case, and spiritual manifestations in the second, are things which are of God. But as Paul points out in our text for this morning (1 Corinthians 13), one vitally important thing was lacking in the church at Corinth – that love from God Himself about which we have been talking for the last few weeks.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,” (a fine experience in itself), “If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith...” (more power to the man who has these things), “if



I give away all I have..." – (what commendable zeal!), "but have not love, I am a noisy gong – I am nothing – I gain nothing."

Now let's put Paul's argument in modern garb and let the Lord apply it to us: If we have recently had an experience with Christ – one which has set our hearts aglow, which has given a new excitement to our Christian life (it may have been in this church or at a summer camp or elsewhere); if we have achieved a new measure of intellectual maturity which is showing up either in increased theological discernment or perhaps in a more powerful life of prayer and faith; if we are by now up to our ears in work for the church, or if we have given generously to the building fund of our church –

Even if we have experienced all or some of these things, and all of them are good and can be blessed by God – SO WHAT! – unless in the process we have achieved that graciousness, that consideration and love for one another which is truly God working in us. Indeed, we need to love more, we need to love more of the time. This alone can keep our sincerest Christian convictions and experiences from becoming liabilities instead of assets.

We need to love more, but what does this love involve? Well, it is to answer this that Paul, practical theologian that he was, gives us as he gave to the Church at Corinth that simple, penetrating, gently convicting check-list of what love is in practice. Well we know this check-list – or have we half-forgotten it? Listen to it afresh as our hearts are bowed quietly before God.

“Love is patient and kind;

Love is not jealous or boastful;

It is not arrogant or rude.

Love does not insist on its own way;

It is not irritable or resentful;

It does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends..."

Love takes the other excellences with which God has endowed you and me – you have one, I have another – love takes these and knits them together to the glory of God and to our enrichment.

This love is ours in Christ. Let us come to His table therefore, open to receive Him afresh in Whom and through Whom we can love. And we will again love more perfectly.

The old man had finished writing. His memoirs of Christ were complete. Incident upon incident, conversation upon conversation he had blocked out in memorable, verbal strokes the portrait of his Lord. He had amassed the evidence from friend and foe alike. He had sifted it; he had digested it for decades, and the things that he had written were written “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in His name.” (John 20:31)

But something was lacking. The jewel lacked a setting. The portrait lacked a title. The memoirs needed a prologue. And where could the old man find a single unified concept that would describe the essence of this event in history? And then the answer came. For in the current vocabulary of the first Christian century, there lay a word a word that had been “kicking around” for a long while, a word that had many meanings, meanings of deep significance to the different contemporary cultures. It was the word *logos*. In his Jewish background the old man had heard this word used over and over again to translate the Hebrew word *davar* – the term for “word” or the reality or “thing” behind the word. In the Old Testament, *davar* had been used in its most exciting form to represent the creative activity of God. “And God said...” Thus the creation narrative started. This *davar* of God was His means of self-expression, a self-expression in history.

Later on in life the old man had undoubtedly learned how the Greeks used this word *logos*. To them it had a quiet, contemplative force. It meant not only “word,” but “reason,” “system,” or the rational structure of things.

But did not this word have a new meaning? For surely the One of Whom John had written was God's personal Word, His personal means of communication to the world – the One through Whom His gospel of grace had broken into men's consciousness. Yes, this word had been kicking around. Its ultimate meaning had eluded mankind – but only till now.

And so, taking his pen again, the old man started to write those immortal words that are to Christianity what Lincoln's Gettysburg address is to American history. In the words he wrote, we have a reflection upon a reflection upon the One Whom John never could forget, who sixty years

earlier had made an indelible impression upon him and whom he still heard and saw and looked upon and touched in his imagination. (John 1:1)

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

At the beginning God expressed Himself and from the beginning the One in whom this expression took place was and is central to life. In fact, "In Him was life." In Him was "light," the light that snuffs out the darkness. This One who was the expression of God entered the world of time and space, but He came incognito and all but a few missed the significance of His coming. There were those, however, who saw with the eyes of faith, who believed in His name, having been born a second time by the regenerating power of God. Among these was the author himself, and so he is able to give the definitive witness for the whole Church:

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth; and we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

The One who was God's ultimate expression to man became flesh and "pitched His tent" among us. The eyewitnesses saw His splendor, splendor fit for God alone. They saw Him full of grace and truth. In Him, they saw God Himself.

What more can we say that can add to this priceless testimony? Nothing but to underscore the wonder of it all. The Word became flesh, the Word was full of grace and truth. In Him came those qualities that lifted mankind above the law which had been given through Moses. The creation beheld Him but only some received Him.

Today the Word of God continues to be resilient within His Church. We have Jesus' own words that "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20) However imperfectly grace and truth are transmitted to the world through the Church, if we look we can behold it and we do well to ask ourselves, "Have we received Him? Have we believed in His name? Have we experienced becoming children of God?"

Today the Word of God continues to be incarnate in us who profess His name. For indeed we have died. We no longer live but Christ lives in us. And it inevitably follows that we can reflect His glory also, being full of grace and truth. Oh what responsibilities and privileges are implicit in this

affirmation! And yet it is for this gracious purpose that the Word became flesh and lived and died and rose again for us.



In that great catalog of faith and the faithful, Hebrews 11, Moses is described as “choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.” (Hebrews 11:25) The fleeting pleasures of sin! “Pleasure is fleeting.” “Pleasure is apart from God.” So many Christians have picked up and distorted this statement throughout the ages. From the time of Simeon Stylites, who in the fourth century stayed for thirty years on the top of a pillar near Antioch in order to avoid the sinful world and its pleasures, to the present in which we all know Christians who look suspiciously at all forms of pleasure, most of us have been infected with the suspicion that God is against pleasures, or at the best tolerates it.

Eating, drinking, parties, merriment, sex, loafing, creating – either we abstain from these things in order to gain greater holiness, or we continue to do them, sneaking away from God for the purpose, and then, getting in trouble, so that our resultant guilt feelings confirm our suspicions that God is against pleasures.

What a different picture we get in our text for today. (Read John 2:1-11) There is a wedding – and there is a feast after the wedding – and Jesus is there – and Jesus is approving of both – and Jesus performs the first of His miraculous signs to authenticate His approval and to graciously save a young country couple from embarrassment.

For centuries, our Christians have attempted to allegorize this story, and to give it a totally figurative meaning – and it has such a symbolic meaning as we shall see – but we cannot face it honestly without accepting first of all its literal impact.

1. God is telling us first of all that He is in favor of the institutions of human life – of sex and marriage – of parties and fun and feasting and friendship. God wants us to be joyful, and not just joyful in a sort of sepulchral way. Dr. Barnhouse pointed out years ago, in a famous sermon of his, that throughout the Bible oil is used as a symbol of gladness, “which makes the face shine” and wine is referred to as that which

“gladdens the heart of man.” He goes on to show how often these two are coupled together, reminding us that God wants us to be joyful.

2. God is telling us secondly that He wants to be invited into the fun. That which makes our pleasure sinful is not its fundamental nature, but its Godlessness. The reason that our pleasures get us into trouble, the reason for hangover, and bad taste, and guilt, and furtiveness is that apart from God we don’t really know how to have a good time. The result is that sinful pleasures, pleasures apart from God (the “good” pleasures apart from God as well as the “naughty” pleasures apart from God) are and always will be fleeting, and our attempts to recapture the fleeting experience leads to excess, to perversion, to debauchery, and destruction.
3. God tells us thirdly that His intrusion enhances them both qualitatively and quantitatively. Here is where the symbolism, the sign language of the miracle comes in.

The wine supplied by man proved inferior – and it ran out. The wine supplied by Christ was the better wine, and there was plenty of it (over 120 gallons of it!).

And so we come to the second section of what proves to be a couplet. In Psalm 16 we read: “Thou dost show me the path of life; in the presence there is fullness of joy, in the right hand are pleasures for evermore.” (Psalm 16:11)

The fleeting pleasure of sin – pleasures for evermore in God’s right hand! When we take the elements of joyous living into our own sinful hands we mess them up. When we entrust them into the hand of God, He shows us the path of life. It is a lie that God doesn’t want us to have any fun, and that we must slink away from Him to enjoy ourselves. It’s a lie that we earn merit badges in heaven by denying ourselves those things that the world enjoys.

God offers us something better than either living it up apart from Him, or running away from life except in its sober aspects. We can entrust our pleasure to Him, and He will guide and control us into that use of the institutions of human life – of sex and marriage, of parties and fun and feasting and friendship – which will put a glow into our lives without hangover or regret or guilt.

It is true that the nature of our use of these institutions, their timing and purpose and extent and application may change, but the change will be from something abnormal to something normal, from something empty and destructive to something enriching and full.

The pleasures of sin are fleeting. We destroy that which has been given to us.

At God's right hand are pleasures forevermore. God redeems that which we have destroyed and gives it back to us.

Let us gratefully receive His pleasures as His hand and enjoy them.



In the dark a man moved swiftly through the silent streets of Jerusalem. He came to a certain door. He knocked and was ushered up the outside stairs onto a roof. There in the quiet of the Judean night he met the man whom he sought, Jesus of Galilee.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin. His age and position, and his open, inquiring mind made him an admirable representative of his race at its best.

He came on behalf of a group of sincere Jews to inquire of Jesus concerning the new teaching about the kingdom of God, and the call to repentance which had been spreading through the country.

If we listen carefully, we can hear them as they talk, expanding their conversation for our benefit.

“Rabbi,” began Nicodemus, in a friendly man-to-man fashion, “we know that you are an unusual teacher. The miracles you have performed have convinced us that you come from God. Now about this kingdom of God ...”

But here Jesus interrupts him: “No, Nicodemus, you are approaching this the wrong way. It is true that you are high in the Jewish religious circle, but no one, not even you with all your learning, can comprehend the kingdom of God, unless you start over again and are born a second time.”

Nicodemus is astonished by this turn in the conversation. He gets just a little glimmer of what Jesus is saying, but even this slight understanding puzzles him. “How can a man be born again when he is as old as I am? How can he unlearn all that he has built his life upon? Must he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and start all over? This is impossible.”

“No, Nicodemus,” Jesus replies, “that wouldn’t solve the problem. A physical re-birth would only result in another earthly life like your present life. A spiritual life, and this is what I am speaking about, can result only from a spiritual birth. The person who wishes to enter the kingdom of God



must repent of his past life and be baptized with the water of cleansing as John the Baptist has been preaching, and then, he must be baptized – that is, filled – with God’s own Spirit, the source of spiritual power.”

“Don’t be puzzled by what I am saying – that you must be born again, anew. It isn’t impossible. It need not be explainable. Do you hear the wind in the trees above us? We don’t know where the wind comes from or where it is going. Its behavior is unpredictable. But we can see its effect on the trees. This is the way the heavenly ‘wind’, the Spirit of God, works. We can’t see it, but we can see the effects of a new, spiritual birth in the life of the man who has been born again, and we know that a miracle has happened.”

The Jewish ruler is by now deeply interested. “How can this come about?” he inquires.

Jesus replies again, “John the Baptist and I know what we are talking about. You, yourself, as a learned man, are familiar with both the Greek and Hebrew concepts of new birth. Take for example Ezekiel’s prophecy, where he writes on behalf of God: ‘I will sprinkle clean water upon you ... I will cleanse you ... and I will put my spirit within you...’ If I have told you facts already accessible to you and you do not believe them, how can you believe if I answer this last question of yours which involves telling you things directly from heaven, things known only to Me, the Son of Man, the one person who has come down from heaven.

“However, Nicodemus, I’ll try to answer your question anyway. You remember the time when our ancestors were in the wilderness, and were attacked by poisonous snakes. Many died, and Moses, realizing that this crisis was the result of a rebellion on the part of the people, prayed to the Lord. And, as you remember, at God’s direction Moses made a bronze serpent which he put on a pole in the sight of everyone. (Numbers 21:4-9) Everyone who had faith enough to look at this serpent when bitten, because God commanded it, was healed.

“In this same way, I, this Son of Man, will be lifted up, on a cross, and whoever looks on Me in faith, trusting in Me, will not face death at the end of his physical life but will find that he has been born into a spiritual life which will never end. This trust in what I am going to do less than three years from now is the way by which you can experience the new birth of which I have been speaking.”

We have been privileged to hear one of the first recorded conversations of Jesus, to hear from His own lips the central message of our Christian faith. It is the timeless message that John himself summarized in the very next verse: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” It is the same message which was expanded later in the writing of the apostles. It is the same message that has been preached ever since. Let us review it again briefly, moving backwards through Jesus’ arguments:

Jesus Christ died on a cross for us.

He made it possible for all who put their trust in Him  
to be freed from the guilt of their sin,  
to be purified symbolically in the water of baptism,  
to see and enter the kingdom of God, the life which is ours in  
Christ.

You and I may not have the wisdom or learning of Nicodemus. We may be like little children. However, when born anew, we can see the kingdom of God as clearly as he.

It is your privilege and mine to do so.

The Bible is studded with symbols, none of which is more vivid than the symbol of water. Sometimes in the Bible water is used as a symbol of destruction. Civilization was destroyed in the flood. The Egyptian armies were destroyed in the Red Sea. The army of Assyria is likened to a river “strong and mighty. He shall reach even to the neck.” (Isaiah 8:5-8)

Water is also used as a symbol of cleansing. “Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean: Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.” (Psalm 51:7) Here we see the foreshadowing of that baptism which for us is “a sign and a seal for our cleansing. ...”

Most often however, water was for the spirit of the Hebrew what it also was for his body – a symbol of that which sustains life and which refreshes in a land parched and dry. “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.” (Isaiah 55:1) How inviting these words sound, especially to one who could say with the Psalmist, “O God ... My soul thirsts for Thee. My flesh pants for thee as in a dry and weary land where no water is.” (Psalm 63:1) This thirst yearning is not limited to the ancient Hebrews. It is echoed in our own western music in the very familiar song: “All day I paced the barren waste without a taste of water – cool, clear water.”

Now to the Hebrew the still water which was caught and stood in cisterns was often adequate. It could quench the thirst, but it ran a poor second to that rare commodity the living water, the water that flowed and moved, laughed and bubbled from the all too scarce springs and streams. In the Song of Solomon the beloved one is described at one point as “A garden fountain, a well of living water and flowing streams from Lebanon.” (Song of Solomon 4:15) The prophet Jeremiah is the first to make the spiritual transition as speaking for God, he says: “They have forsaken me. The fountain of living waters and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.” (Jeremiah 2:13) It is the Apostle John who makes the final tie-in in the very last chapter of the Scripture where he says “And let him who is thirsty come; let him who desires take the water of life without price.” (Revelation 22:17)

Into this context Jesus emerges from the Jerusalem road one morning to have a noon-time rendezvous with a woman at the Well of Jacob near

Sycher in Samaria. (Read John 4:7-15) What a frustrating and at the same time thrilling conversation is recorded here. Jesus asks for a drink of water. The woman chides Him humorously for being so dependent on her, a woman of Samaria. In accepting the water which has limited use and effectiveness, He goes on to offer her a different kind of water. The water from Jacob's well which can only temporarily quench our physical thirst is symbolic of all that Jacob can offer. Life under the Old Covenant of Jacob and Moses can only temporarily satisfy our spiritual thirst. The living water offered by Jesus on the other hand is able to quench the spiritual thirst of mankind and not only this but generate itself from within, "welling up to eternal life."

What is the reality of which this living water is the symbol? John himself answers the question for us when at later he records Jesus' second reference to the living water. In John 7:37-9 we read, "On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed: 'If anyone thirst, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this He said about the Spirit which those who believed in Him were to receive..."

As we were discovering earlier this fall, eternal life is really the life of God Himself being lived in us through His indwelling Spirit. "The written code kills but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:6) The water from the cisterns leaves a man thirsty, but the living water refreshes him in depth. You and I who have accepted Christ have tasted and drunk. The well is there to taste. The rivers are there to flow. You and I have the living water welling up in us now. We have Christ's word for it.

I say this and yet I know that neither you nor I experience this exciting life of the Spirit with any great regularity. There are times when our lives are spiritually dull, when we are discouraged or defeated, when we are looking back wistfully on a past closeness to Christ or looking ahead almost desperately for an experience we have never had. How pathetic we are at those times in our own eyes. And how unnecessarily unhappy we must appear in the eyes of God. For what we are experiencing at these times is the result of the Devil figuratively speaking having flicked our own old natures up over our heads hiding the reality of God's presence from us. To a greater or lesser extent, our hearts are blinded. The reality of God's presence and God's creative loving power in us has been snatched away.

The goal of our Enemy would certainly be for discouragement to lead to immobilization and to that spiritual coma which for the rest of our time here

would negate the eternal life which he can never snatch away from those who are in Christ Jesus. But this need not be. Fortunately reality does not depend upon experience, and the presence of God's Spirit within us as the well of living water is in no way affected by what we think or feel or do not think and do not feel. His power to triumph in our lives is there. All we need do, is take Jesus' promise at its face value, pray into the darkness for the power to triumph and thank God that the power has already been given and the prayer answered through Christ's finished work on the cross.

I ask you to join me in looking forward to a winter and spring in which streams of water flow from the midst of us here at Willow Grove for the revitalizing and enriching both of us and our families and the community which is our world.



“America wept tonight, not alone for its dead young president, but for itself. The grief was general, for somehow the worst in the nation had prevailed over the best. The indictment extended, beyond the assassin, for something in the nation itself, some strain of madness and violence, had destroyed the highest symbol of law and order.” . . . James Reston

The tragic event of Friday afternoon has brought a strange, new collective meaning to the familiar phrase: “The wages of sin is death.” (Rom. 6:23) Normally it says to us that our personal sin, our self-separation from God leads to hell. Now, for me at least, it has a new ominous meaning. Even before the border is passed from here to eternity, the prince of this world, the devil, who “was a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44), insinuates himself into the human scene. Separation from God leads to separation from one another – which leads to estrangement and rejection – which leads to resentment and hostility - which leads to destruction and murder.

Our first parents separated themselves from God in the garden. In their wake the first murder was committed, and the blood of Abel cried to God from the ground.

Similarly has it been with our nation. Our separation from God is great. We have been left vulnerable to all sorts of hostility, violence, contagious violence, rioting, and death. Left-wing extremists and right-wing extremists have taken turns, cross-feeding each other. Cuban rioters at the U.N., dogs and bombs in Birmingham, rioting spectators at the Roosevelt Raceway; a woman beating Adlai Stevenson with a poster, a shot from a window in Dallas – these are not unrelated. For hatred breeds hatred. “Injustice collectors” exchange causes. The right-wing excesses breed left-wing excesses, and vice versa.

We weep today for the Kennedys. We weep also for ourselves. The wages of sin, the end product of hatred, is death. Now we know it – together – in the stunned silence of this weekend.

And the words of our Lord come softly and searchingly to us:

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘you shall not kill.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to

judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council and whoever says 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. ... But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:21, 22, 44 ,45)

Now you and I don't belong to the extreme groups, right or left. (We live in suburbia.) But does this clear us of guilt? Tragically not. For it is our subdued, partially controlled, sophisticated hatreds that form the broad base of the pyramid on which the occasional act of murder is built.

How often have our political differences turned into personal argument and recrimination?

How often have our personal irritations with others brought forth curses?

And how often have we poured these sentiments out to others, so that our discontent has fed another's discontent?

The pyramid builds inexorably and if weren't for the restraining grace of God, each time it would build – to sudden death. A sobering thought for the day!

"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." A young man died a violent death this past week, and we all feel the poorer. But the shadow lengthens, and behind him, we see another, younger man, dying a violent death - and we are the richer.

Our Lord Himself "bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." (1 Peter 2:24)

God offers us something better than the pyramid of hate. In Christ, God died for us that we should not perish. In Christ we died also to all that would impel us to hate. We are lifted above this, and our prayer, "Have mercy upon us," is answered.

My dear friends - I have talked about this freedom from hate and the Spirit-given capacity to love again and again. It has not adequately transformed us. Perhaps in God's providence this week's tragedy will drive the lesson home to us with new force. If it does, John Kennedy's death will have been used for good by our gracious God, and he will not have died in vain.

Ash Wednesday has passed and we have entered into the forty days of Lent which are intended to prepare the Christian Church for the celebration of its most holy week.

Again the cross is hanging in the front of our sanctuary. As a *cross*, it points to *death*, but as an *empty* cross, it points *beyond* death – testifying to the fact that He whom we worship is not a dead, historical Jesus, but a living, contemporary Christ.

The cross is therefore a triumphant symbol and we can almost hear the Apostle Paul shouting: “Far be it from me to glory [or boast] except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (Galatians 6:14) Now the Christian knows the truth that he cannot boast in himself. He sees clearly the simple fact of life that is obscured from the thinking of the non-Christian, that the failures of life are all his and the successes are God’s. He cannot boast in himself but he can boast in his Lord and especially in the central act which his Lord performed on earth.

Elsewhere Paul states: “We preach Christ crucified ... I decided to know nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 1:23 and 2:2) One third of the space in the Gospel narratives deals with the crucifixion of Christ. This event is the continuing emphasis of the New Testament. Jesus Himself told us, “The Son of Man also came ... to give His Life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) Peter reminds us: “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree (the cross) that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” (1 Peter 2:24)

Yes, Christ died for our sins. It is small wonder that the central symbol of Christianity is the cross. We initiate estrangement and destruction. God initiates reconciliation and renewal. Man searches vainly for salvation. He cannot find it in his own goodness or faithfulness or energy or wisdom, but he does find it at the hand of God “Who was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” (2 Corinthians 5:19)



Before we go any further – have you reached out and accepted the forgiveness and victory, the freedom and the new life which are yours for the asking because of the cross of Christ?

But let us hear the Apostle Paul in our text: “Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.” It is not the saving power of the cross that here excites Paul. It is something beyond this. It is an experience described in terms of death whereby the Christian and the world, the man who has found God in Christ, and the secular culture which is apart from God, are violently and effectively separated.

Follow me closely – some may be hearing this for the first time, others may have heard it many times and never fully comprehended it. In first Corinthians, we read that Christians are “called to be saints together.” In first Peter we read that Christians are called to be “a holy nation, God’s own people.” “Saints” – “holy” – both of these words indicate that we are to be set apart. To put it bluntly, the goal of God for the Christian is total separation from the world! Now over the centuries many have taken this literally and have retreated to cloister or cave. In this way they have attempted to achieve total separation from the world.

It is not this physical separation, however, that Paul alludes to in our text. Quite to the contrary. Ours is a religion of incarnation. God came *to* us and *entered* our lives. God has loved us and He calls us to love – and we can love only real people, people whom we know and with whom we are identified. Paul sees this and so he rejoices because through the cross of Christ, we who are Christians can be separated from the world while remaining within it. Spiritually speaking, we have died and risen. Our minds have been renewed. Our perspectives have been changed. Our capacities to love both God and man have been expanded and altered. Christ is in residence in our hearts through His indwelling Holy Spirit.

As we claim this transformation and allow the Holy Spirit to control our lives, we can mingle in the world and participate with it and at the same time be separated from it in such a way that we are not soiled by it and on the other hand are able to serve and enrich it.

This work of Christ on the cross is a new dimension of living, not compromise, not defeat, not escape but meaningful involvement and service can be ours for the asking. It is small wonder that Paul was excited.

Lent has started and we are entering that forty-day period during which we can in a special way glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us do so for through it, we have been saved and through it we have died to the world. Through it we can be what we are – Christians without reservation in a world that needs the Lord we serve and the love that we can give in His name.



“Of course I’m a Christian – or at least I try to be. I believe in God. He means a lot to me. I try hard to live a good life. Of course I’m a Christian.”

Have you ever caught yourself or your family or your friends reasoning this way? If so, I would say you are normal, for in Christendom, that is that part of the world where the Christian religion is traditionally accepted as *the* religion (including twentieth-century America), being religious is identically equal to being Christian – or so we think. Even among church people this is so. Ten people will refer only to God in their religious comments to everyone who mentions Jesus Christ by name.

For example, I recently came across a statement – almost a full typewritten page – by a Presbyterian elder from another church defining the nature and the mission of the Church. He mentioned the second and third persons of the Trinity each once and that was in the first sentence or two. The rest of his statement referred constantly to God in general terms, but it could have been written equally by a member of one of several alternate religions.

Quote my original statement, however, to a first century Christian and you would get laughed at, for the early Christians knew better. In our text this morning (Acts 3 and 4) we find Peter and John transmitting the healing power of God to a man born lame. But there are a series of striking things we notice. First of all, it is by invoking the power of Jesus Christ that the healing occurs. “I have no silver or gold but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” (Acts 3:6) Secondly, Peter standing the next day before the Sanhedrin reiterates, “By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth Whom you crucified, Whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man is standing before you well.” (Acts 4:10) Thirdly, he goes on to testify that not only in the healing of the body but in the total salvation of the person “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved, than the name of Jesus Christ.” (Acts 4:12) Finally the boldness and demeanor of Peter and John are recognized as resulting from their having been with Jesus.

Notice the centrality of Christ. Christianity is not equivalent to belief in God. It is not equivalent to trying to live a good life. In fact, Christianity is not belief (that is intellectual acceptance) of anything. Christianity is not the

following of any ethical pattern. *Christianity centers on Christ, the incarnate Son of God.* Christianity represents a personal relationship with Him who alone represents God. Let me put it in a more striking way. *Christianity is the only legitimate personality cult.* Man cannot legitimately be God to his fellow man, but Jesus Christ can be and is.

Listen to His own testimonies. “If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23) “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me.” (John 14:6) The Apostle John puts it this way: “He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son has not life.” (1 John 5:12) To Paul the end of life is “That I may know Him (Christ) and the power of His resurrection.” (Philippians 3:10)

Yes, Christianity is the only legitimate personality cult, a way of life, in which our attention is the risen Christ, the One in whose face we see the glory of God, (2 Corinthians 4:6) the One through whom we have access to God as “the one mediator between God and men.” (1 Timothy 2:5)

So it is that we the church have our focus on Christ, not on God-in-general. *We the church preach Christ.* He is the center of our testimony. He is the One who, confronting mankind, draws all men to Himself. He is the One with whom the world must reckon. He is the Lord of history. He is God’s chosen focal point.

Not only do we preach Christ, *we also serve in the name of Christ.* The church must constantly recognize in itself the continuity of Christ’s presence. Through us, He is still Emmanuel, God with us. It is incumbent upon us to do the greater works which He promised that we could do in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also incumbent upon us to identify these good works with Him, truly to do them in His name, as Peter and John did.

Not only must the words and the works of us who are Christians point to Christ, but our very inner thinking and being must be identified with Him. We must be able to say, with the Apostle Paul, for us to live is Christ or “We have died and our lives are hidden with Christ in God.” (Colossians 3:3) It is only through our union with Christ, our death to the old and resurrection to the new in Him, that our attitudes, our words, our actions, our very natures can be transformed in such a way that men looking at us will know that we have been with Jesus.

In the light of all this, it is good for us to re-examine our faith. How about you? How Christian is your Christian faith? Is it only “theocentric” that is, God-centered? Or is it truly “Christocentric,” that is, Christ-centered? If it is Christ-centered, do others know this? Can they see Him in your face, in your words, in the tone of your voice, in the integrity of your behavior, in the love which you show them?

Some of us may come closer to answering these questions in the affirmative than others. But I am afraid that there are none of us that can remain unchallenged by them. Let us then be willing to accept the challenge this morning and focus our lives anew on Him whom to know is life.



“Is this trip really necessary?” We hear this expression used every now and then even today and it reminds those of us who are older of the pressures that curtailed our traveling during the gas rationing in the 1940s. It was a sobering question as well as a frustrating question and we asked ourselves many times whether the whole war was necessary. But that was long ago.

Even longer ago, however, a trip occurred about which the same question could be asked: “Was this trip really necessary?” In Luke 9:51, we read that Jesus “Set His face to go to Jerusalem.” He had spent over two years in a transient ministry through Galilee. He had made a number of visits to Jerusalem during those two years, but had always returned to where the ground was spiritually more fertile and the minds of men more open to His Gospel.

This time, however, the trip to Jerusalem was for keeps. He had a rendezvous with death.

Jesus Himself apparently thought this trip was necessary. He went about it purposefully, deliberately and obediently. At its beginning, “He began to show his disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and be killed and on the third day be raised.” (Matthew 16:21) “He became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8)

We know that He did not go as an innocent dupe, a gentle naive dreamer who blundered into a set of circumstances and a hostile environment beyond His control. Not a trace of this picture is evident in the Scriptures.

We are also sure that He did not go as the result of some mistaken martyr-prone instinct. It is true that He gave and gave generously. But the whole thrust of His teaching was that true religion is not idealistic but very practical. Many a time, prior to the last week of His life, He avoided the opportunity to become a martyr either in its relative or ultimate sense.

Finally we know that He did not go as one allured by the Adversary. His conversation with Peter (Matthew 16:23) makes it quite clear that Satan had the wisdom and shrewdness to oppose this trip. He attempted to dissuade Him in a direct frontal attack which had to be rebuked.

Jesus' evaluation of this question was of course correct. His trip to Jerusalem was necessary. For it led to the climax of the eternal dialogue between God and man, the eternal conflict as to whether the world would be run man's way or God's way – a climax which God had decided to play man's way on man's field of battle. And so Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem.

Ever since Eden this dialogue had been in the making. God at that time had blessed the human race, charging it to be fruitful and multiply, to till the garden, to enjoy the “creaturehood” that was theirs in loving response to their Creator. There also man had replied, “We want to be God.” The struggle had gone from then on as to whether man would control God or God control man. But now the dialogue was entering its final stage. God had entered man's life in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus had shown His credentials and as the journey to Jerusalem started, the conflict was entering a new stage.

On the one hand, God's way was being demonstrated. “God so loved the world that He gave...” (John 3:16) “The Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve and give...” (Mark 10:45) The example of the gentle, patient love which went out of its way time and again to heal the bodies and souls of men – to lift their morale, to share their sufferings with them spoke eloquently of the character and purpose of God Himself.

On the other hand, however, man's way replied and reacted. Jesus' enemies repudiated Him. They plotted His death. Their assessment of Him was that His way was no good. This business of “Love your enemies,” of “Blessed are the meek,” of “Love the Lord your God ... and love your neighbor as yourself,” was not only impractical but offensive.

Not only did His enemies repudiate Him, but His friends likewise misunderstood Him. Their attitude was ultimately voiced by Thomas who said so clearly: “Let us also go that we may die with Him.” To them, His way couldn't win. Peter felt this when he became the unwitting mouthpiece for Satan. Judas felt this when in his utter disillusionment he agreed to betray Jesus. Thomas felt this in the courageous words which I have already quoted.

It is interesting but not surprising that Jesus' friends and enemies alike questioned Jesus' behavior. They were men like all other men. They were seeking to run the world their way.

And do you know what God did? He let them run it their way according to their own rules. He let them run it their way and He died. He said to the

world: “Yes, this is how people are. See what comes of it.” And as we know, God won by losing.

In the recurrence of this conflict today, where do you really stand?

Do you stand with the vested interests, religious or otherwise, that cannot see any purpose or any validity in God's selfless way as reflected ultimately in Christ's obedience unto death?

Or do you stand with the disciples who, loving their Lord, still thought in terms of the power structures, seeking to combat the power of the world with the power of the Church used according to human patterns.

Or do you stand with Christ whose way is selfless and whose love was strong and steady.

Your answer will characterize your faith and your effectiveness in the kingdom of God.



## **The Invasion of Jerusalem – Man’s Religion and God’s**

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March 9, 1964

“Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem.” And to Jerusalem He came. It was on an April Sunday, perhaps in 30 A.D. that He came. It was on the day after the Sabbath. His coming was simple – a morning in Bethany, a noon hour making contact with the owners of a colt, an afternoon ride down one slope and up another slope from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem. Nothing spectacular, but ...

His coming was significant. With His eyes wide open, Jesus performed a Messianic act. He identified Himself with the peaceful coming of the King – and not any King, but with the Messiah Himself. As the prophet had written: “Lo your King comes to you. Triumphant and victorious is He, humble and riding on an ass, on the colt, the foal of an ass.” (Zechariah 9:9) Jesus was King of the Jews, and on this one occasion, He was willing to make His claim public.

The move was God’s move – and the response? Strangely enough, man’s response was not cold indifference but warm enthusiasm! Last week, we began to examine the dialogue which was coming to a climax as to whether the world would be run man’s way or God’s way. Our first reaction would be to say that man’s way would be an irreligious way. But this is not so. For man is not irreligious. He is instinctively religious and most religions like most magic represent man’s quest to dominate God and man. The Jews were religious on Palm Sunday because they saw a chance to have their way. They saw in Jesus *their* King, *their* Messiah. Their dream was coming alive. He would deliver the goods, spreading before them freedom and prosperity.

No more Roman soldiers with their haughty indifference, no more Roman governors throwing their weight around, no more taxes levied by an occupying power.

The downtrodden people of God would experience their deliverance. Had not their own prophets promised this? And had not Jesus Himself picked up this promise? Some who were present that day on the road to Jerusalem may well have remembered that first Sabbath day in Nazareth when Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to set at

liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” A year earlier the people had tried to make Jesus King. But He had backed away from their efforts. Now He seemed open to exactly that to which He had been closed the year before. It seemed as though they with their dreams of glory could control Him and have their own way. And so the Hosanna of the multitude; the homage symbolized by the palm branches were man’s response, man’s move in the argument, “We will capture God – we will make Him work for us!”

The trip to Jerusalem was a triumphant trip and yet there was a tinge of sadness in it. For Jesus’ coming was misunderstood. I wonder how He felt as He rode into the city, as He dismounted and walked through the Temple area, as He looked around at everything and then, as Mark tells us, as He went out again to Bethany with the twelve. Part of the answer may lie in the fact that He did nothing until the next day.

Then came God’s counter-response, His move in the argument. No call to arms was given, no battle plan was presented. Instead a word of authority was heard directed not at the oppressors, but at the oppressed, not at the Romans who knew not God, but at the Hebrews who knew God. This word of authority took many forms, but two stand out as we read the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Chapters of Mark.

*The first was a call to holiness.* Jesus’ very first act after His entry into Jerusalem was His attack on the vested interests of men who were exploiting and staining and corrupting the Temple of God. We read the simple account of how Jesus drove the money changers from the Temple with such authority that no man could withstand Him.

*The second was a call to love.* Challenged as to “Which commandment is the first of all?”, Jesus answered: “You shall love the Lord your God ... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Holiness and love – these were two patterns of religion that did not sit well with the religious Hebrew. Where did either one of these fit into the nation’s need to be free and to get ahead? What kind of Messiah was this? Even though His actions had been foretold by the prophet Malachi, “Behold I send My messenger to prepare the way before Me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His Temple ... but who can endure the day of His

coming and who shall stand when He appears? ..." (Malachi 3:1,2) Even though Isaiah and Amos had cried out for justice and holiness and a religion which produced results in the heart of men, even though the two commands to love were lifted out of the Torah itself, those who listened to Jesus in the Temple would not accept Him on His terms.

Here man's religion and God's religion clashed head-on. It was not possible for both to survive. And since the game was being played man's way, Jesus had to be destroyed.

I'm not going into detail but I would like to suggest once again that the same conflict between God's religion and man's religion is present in our churches today. How subtly we maneuver our faith and refashion it so as to make God seem to serve us. How many of us look upon the Church as a refuge in time of trouble and that alone – or as the place where they are giving out free tickets to heaven and that alone – or as a sort of supernatural Mr. Fixit? How often do we either in word or in spirit sing "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine" and leave it at that?

When we do, are we not being like the Hebrews who sang joyously "Hosanna, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," and so singing, we are thinking only about what's in it for us?

Well, when we refashion the faith in such a manner, God's word speaks again. Christ says, "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24) And He means it. He offers to us not so much an assurance as a challenge. He presents to us a call to holiness and with it the power of His Spirit to become holy. He presents us with a call to love and with it He gives us the power to love as He loves.

And the choice is ours – whether we will side with man and contribute afresh to the destruction of Christ or whether we will choose the side of God and experience His religion, that which will triumph even as Christ triumphed.

Have you ever planned a special party, a special date, or perhaps a trip to which you are really looking forward – only to have something happen to rob it of its joy? Perhaps you had a quarrel with someone before the event. Perhaps you heard some disturbing news. Perhaps you were just tired enough to take the cutting edge off your enjoyment. Events like these can be a real letdown.

Such was the state of affairs at the most important dinner ever held. Jesus admitted to His disciples, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer...” (Luke 22:15) Apparently, He had earnestly desired this for some time. But by the time the event occurred, the climate among the disciples was not good for an intimate farewell dinner. Already, before the disciples had reached Jericho about a week earlier, James and John had sought guaranteed positions of honor for themselves in the Kingdom. They had been rebuked. But the atmosphere persisted with so much intensity that “a dispute also arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest,” (Luke 22:24) right at the supper table.

Perhaps the sense of rivalry, which came from a sense of expectancy, reached its peak early in this meal. The disciples had come off the dirty street. Their feet needed washing. No basin of water was in evidence, and in their present state of mind, no one disciple was about to fetch water for the others. And so Jesus acts.

With full deliberation, loving His tense disciples, knowing the significance of the hour, Jesus filled a basin with water and He Himself washed the disciples’ feet. He had trouble with Peter (and probably none with Judas). “When He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and resumed His place, He said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example that you should also do as I have done to you. Truly, truly I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is He Who is sent greater than He Who sent Him.’”

Never had God been greater than at this moment when He was kneeling at the feet of a group of silent, selfish men. And what a contrast Jesus held up

between the world's standards and God's standards of greatness. As He had explained it to His disciples only a week earlier, “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:42-44) The world looks longingly at people on their way up. Its interest and its wealth follow them. God looks with special favor at people on their way down – giving is the standard of excellence, not getting. God calls us to love and to serve.

To love and to serve without reservations – not only those who already love us or are attractive to us or receive our approval, but all. This may cause us inconvenience as we “put out” for others. It may cause us to bury our pride and to become of no reputation (as Jesus did). It may cause us to offend our dignity (something God is not really very interested in) – but it will also make us more like Christ, more totally part of His Body. And is this not the purpose for our existence?

The atmosphere at the Last Supper was not good. It could have been a failure. Jesus' presence can redeem any situation and it redeemed that one. The foot-washing scene was finished. The lesson had been communicated, the example given, and we then read that Jesus “took bread and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying ‘This is My Body.’” (Luke 22:19)

He gave the bread and with it His body.

He gave His body and with it His Spirit.

He gave His Spirit and with it the power to love.

He gave the power to love and with it the motivation to serve.

The same Spirit and the same challenge are with us today. Our purpose is to reflect the very nature of Christ. The privilege is ours whenever we choose to use it.

For the past six weeks, we have been tracing the dialogue, the eternal dialogue, between man and God. Ever since Eden this dialogue had been in the making. God at that time had blessed the human race, charging it to be fruitful and multiply and till the garden, to enjoy the "creaturehood" that was theirs in loving response to their Creator. Man had replied, "We want to be God." The struggle had gone on from then as to whether man would control God or God control man.

We know by now what God did. He let man run things his way according to his own rules. He let man run it his way and God died. He said to the world, "Yes, this is how people are. Let us see what comes of it." During the past weeks we have seen man's efforts not only to control his fellow man; we have also seen him attempt his ultimate goal: "We will capture God – We will make Him work for us!" We have seen God at His greatest, kneeling first at the feet of a group of silent, selfish men washing their feet and then in a garden pleading as a man for God to remove the cup from Him.

As we saw Thursday night, man's last word came noisily – with swords and staves and torches, with mocking voices and shouting, cursing men. Man's last Word was to destroy his God, to roar Him to His death. In the dusk of Good Friday, a small group of men staggered down the hillside from Calvary, carrying a corpse. They put His limp body on its shelf in the tomb. They shuffled out into the night. "So much for that heart-lifting talk about the kingdom of Heaven, so much for love and forgiveness and peace." They had seen their high dream nailed to a couple of boards. Love Him still? Of course they did. Never a one of them would forget to his last day how he had run away from the Lord. "We could have stood by Him, but we did not. Still and yet He was wrong. The most wonderful man this rotten world ever saw, but He was wrong. He said that life wins when it loves and loses when it hates. Well, see who won!"

But God had the last word and God's last word came as usual quietly. It had come before as a voice in a burning bush in a desert. It had come before as a still, small voice after an earthquake, wind and fire. It had come before in the course of a simple birth in a stable in Bethlehem. And now it came in a pre-dawn breakthrough apparent only to a few soldiers and a few peasant

women. God's last word was as usual the quiet total negation of the negative. God won by losing.

As one studies the New Testament, he becomes convinced that the resurrection is no appendage to the faith. It is the faith. The Church is the result of the resurrection. Good Friday was not enough. Man to be true had to speak his piece. He had to have his last word; but then God had to speak and it's God word that counts. The early church determined that being an eyewitness of the resurrection was a necessary prerequisite for apostleship. The early preaching centered on the fact that this Jesus God had raised up. The convictions of the early church were underscored in Paul's brief summary of the faith: "I delivered to you as of the first importance what I also received that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried and that He was raised [perfect tense] on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." (1 Corinthians 15:3,4)

It's God's word alone that counts, for it alone is gospel. The resurrection proclaims promises and then fulfills our deliverance.

The resurrection proclaims that Christ was victor. Sin no longer is the "sure killer." In Colossians 2 we read, "He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in Him." (Colossians 2:15) The powers of evil from top to bottom have been dealt a crippling blow. He Who is in us as Christians is greater than he who is in the world.

The resurrection promises that God in Christ has opened the way to heaven. "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:20, 21) We shall live again after death. The "authentifying" event has taken place.

The resurrection fulfills our deliverance. God in Christ has had and continues to have the last word over our last words, not only once but again and again. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5) Easter speaks to us not only out of the past and the future but out of the present and into the present.

In so many ways we find ourselves reaching out in our sin to satisfy our own lives. We find ourselves trapped over and over again by attitudes, memories, desires and habits that get the better of us. Humanly speaking, we pass the point of no return. Again and again our last word is inevitably, "No, we cannot change. God must accept us as we are or not at all." But in these

circumstances we cannot face the cross, for it is for us a voice of doom. Our last act is to curse God and die.

But God does not leave it there, for after our last words, again and again God has His last word – that quiet negating of the negative. Again and again Good Friday and Easter are re-enacted in us. When we are prepared to hear, we experience again the resurrection. Ours is the privilege of moving with Christ from the Hill to the Garden, to the Mount of Ascension for “God who is rich in mercy out of the great love with which He has loved us [has] made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with Him and made us sit with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4-7)

In the resurrection, God has brought into action His power to free. That which dies in us in the process is better dead. That which lives is His gift to us. This Easter Sunday should not be for us simply a day of rejoicing and positive thinking. Let us make it a day of positive action. I urge you to take all that is dead in you today, all that which burdens and shrivels and discourages you, all which pricks your conscience and bothers your sense of well-being and place it at the foot of the cross. Claim the deliverance of the Cross of Christ and the power of His resurrection. And may God bless you in your resultant freedom.





What is the Church? Every now and then, we must re-address ourselves to this question. What is the Church? The simplest answer from our Protestant perspective is to say the Church is people – us. But what kind of people are we? Just ordinary people? Well, maybe, but that isn't what God says. "For to Him, we are a peculiar people." And we have this on the word of no lesser authority than the Apostle Peter.

A peculiar people – the thought of this sets us back. We have visions of being a bunch of eccentrics, a bunch of oddballs. We react: "On no, not us." And we squirm back into our ordinariness.

This shock, however, at least initially, is unnecessary. All it does is show that we do not know our own language. When we look up the word "peculiar" in the dictionary, we find that its first and normative definition is as follows: "belonging to an individual – privately owned." Well, let's let Peter talk. He of all people should now what the Church is. And as he talks in our text of this morning, he tells us that we are, "A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people (or as in the RSV – God's own people)". (1 Peter 2:9) This, then, is it. We are a people who belong to an individual, to God. We are privately owned by Him. Now what does this mean?

1. First of all the Church is made up of individuals who are privately owned by God. "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited by your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." (1 Peter 1:18) We have been bought up by Christ, one by one, as we have put ourselves on the market. Moreover, "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable through the living and abiding word of God." (1 Peter 1:23)

Ransomed, born anew, rescued from the old, transformed into the new – and both through the instrumentality of Christ. We are privately owned by God as the result of the work of Christ, our Savior.

2. Secondly, the Church in its collective sense is privately owned by God. And it is greater than the sum total of all its parts. This has deep implications which our text unfolds to us. As Peter continues: “Come to Him, to that living stone (God Himself) rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; (Here Peter is quoting Jesus, Matthew 21:42, who in turn is quoting Psalm 118:22, 23) and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:4, 5)

Ever since the dawn of history, men have reached out toward God. Their religious expressions differ, but have in common a certain standard pattern. Most have:

1. A holy place, a *Temple* – in which their god resides;
2. A *priesthood*, or group of men or women set apart by certain rites to keep the secrets of the god, and to represent their fellowmen to him;
3. *Sacrifices*, usually of a material nature, that are offered up by the priests for the worshippers in order to earn his favor.

In Jewish history, God sanctified and utilized His pattern under the Law of Moses. He formally established the Temple at Jerusalem, the Aaronic Priesthood, and the elaborate Hebrew sacrificial system, as the way to Himself under the Old Covenant. But, “When the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son,” (Galatians 4:11) Jesus Christ, and He who “came not to abolish but to fulfill the Law” (Matthew 5:17) assumed these three basic religious functions Himself.

1. He Himself became “*Immanuel*,” “God with us,” God’s residence on earth. In John 2:19, He actually applies the word *Temple* to His body.
2. He Himself became our great *High Priest*, the One who offered on the cross the final sacrifice for the sins of mankind, the One who is now at the throne of God, making intercession on our behalf. (Hebrews 4:14, 7:25)
3. He Himself became our *sacrifice*, the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. (John 1:29, 1 Peter 1:19)

Thus Christ Himself, became *temple, priest, and sacrifice*, fulfilling for all humankind in His own person the age-long needs of men groping after God.

This is why the Christian faith and life can be centered so totally around the person of Christ, rather than around any combination of secondary beliefs.

Now with this background, let us read our text again: “Come to Him ... and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Starting as it may be to you and me in the 20<sup>th</sup> century secular environment, we, as members of Christ’s Body, the Church, with the backing of the Holy Spirit, have had passed on to us Christ’s function of standing between man and God!

1. You and I, together, are now the *temple* of God, His abode on earth. (1 Corinthians 3:16)
2. You and I, together, are now *priests*, the holy separated people who are to represent man before God. (Hebrews 4:9)
3. You and I, together, in our self-denial are continual living *sacrifices* to God, the only sacrifices now acceptable to Him. (Romans 12:1)

This spiritual function is our chief task on earth, ahead of business and family!

So we are a peculiar people and being a peculiar people, God’s own people, becomes an amazing and thrilling concept, one that staggers our credulity. It may even make us appear to the world to be a bunch of eccentrics. But this is our nature and our privilege and our destiny. We have tested the kindness of God and it therefore behooves us to be what we are. This we will be exploring for the next two weeks.

But for today let’s content ourselves with just a few more of Peter’s words, words which are necessary for Christians of all times and places “So put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander ... love one another earnestly from the heart ... like newborn babes long for the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up to salvation ...” (1 Peter 2:1, 2 and 1:22)

As God’s peculiar people, we must start by reflecting His nature and by being capable of growth into the fullness of His destiny for us. What better time is there than now to start?

What is the Church? Last week we found in God's eyes it is a "peculiar people," a people privately owned by God. If we had finished our text from 1 Peter, we would have discovered that the Church (we its members) is not a decorative, but a utilitarian possession. "You are ... God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

Our Scripture for today (Ephesians 2:1-10) comes at this from a different angle but says the same thing. "God ... when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..." He "saved" us – and "we are His workmanship [His works of art, His poems] created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Again this reference to our being a utilitarian possession. We, you and I, the Church, are here for a purpose, and how often we have to be reminded of this!

And so, with a renewed conviction of this, we are thrown back to where we left off last week, where we came to realize that:

1. You and I, together, are now the *Temple* of God, His abode on earth.
2. You and I, together, are now *priests*, to represent man before God.
3. You and I, together, are the only *sacrifices* now acceptable to Him.

Let us explore the implications of this concept further:

1. We are the Temple of God, the residing place of God here on earth. If the world is to see God and make contact with Him, it is in and through us. We are worthy and functionally equipped for this task by accepting a call to unity and purity. In 1 Corinthians, Paul twice reminds us that we are God's temple. Once he uses this reminder in the midst of his discussion of divisions in the Church: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him." (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17) The other time he is warning against personal immorality: "Shun immorality ... do you not know that your body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit within

you ... you are not your own; you were bought with a price.” (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)

So we must take seriously the Biblical exhortations that we “agree and that there be no dissensions among you” (1Corinthians 1:10); that we be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3) Unity among Christians, whether on the individual or congregational or denominational level is no sentimental option of God. If we are to be the Temple of God, we must be the temple together, affirming our unity even in the midst of disagreement and estrangement.

We must also take seriously the Biblical exhortations that we “Put off our old nature which belongs to our former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and put on the new nature.” (Ephesians 4:22-14); that we seek to “Be perfect, as our Heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) Purity within Christians is expected. God does not waste His words holding up before us impossible standards, but standards towards which we can reach, and into which we can gradually grow. If we are to be the Temple of God, we must begin at least to reflect the nature of that God.

2. We are God’s priests, that holy, separated people who are to represent God to one another. To be worthy and functionally equipped for this task, we must accept a call to commission and love. First of all there must be within us a renewal in which we let “all bitterness and wrath and ... be put away from us with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave us.” (Ephesians 4:31, 32) Then there must be that motivation of God’s kind of love that drives us to pray for one another to bear one another’s burdens, to proclaim the whole Gospel to the whole world, in word and action.
3. We are God’s acceptable sacrifices, the only acceptable sacrifices. It is not our material possessions as such that God wants; it is not our inconveniencing ourselves in itself that pleases God. God wants us, and if we’re to be worthy of this vocation, we must accept a call to availability. We are told that “Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:2) If we are His, we must “present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1)

Time and again our Lord confronts us with a total call to total commitment. “If any man would come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”(Luke 9:62)

How often our involvement with Christ is on an off and on basis, at our whim and personal convenience. How often we limit our availability to Him Who should command all of our lives.

So – God has chosen, saved and made us alive for a purpose. Our purpose involves our fulfilling Christ’s own role as *Temple, Priest, and Sacrifice*. Ours is a call to *unity and purity*, to *compassion and love*, to *availability*. In ourselves we are not sufficient to answer this call. But we are to remember that the very fact that we are fulfilling Christ’s role, makes His life through His Spirit available to us. We can be successful, growing, triumphant in our lives for Him.



Last week in my sermon, I laid the groundwork for an understanding of total stewardship. If we are God's peculiar people, His utilitarian possession, if we have been called, made alive, saved by Him, the purpose of all these things is that we might fulfill or bring to completion Christ's work on earth.

Now this is not a new concept to any of us here at Willow Grove. But how often do we face it squarely as Christian individuals. Not very often, in all probability! When we do, our response is probably one of bewilderment and panic. Even when you and I are walking in the Spirit, we are all too aware of the "human" lag, the last ditch stand of our sinful natures that makes us recoil from Christ's claims on our lives. We try to grow into our role, but our growth patterns over the years are unpredictable.

For some, there is steady growth. For most, however, there are ups and downs, periods of eager growth, followed by periods of spiritual dryness, or skidding as it were along an icy road. Complacency and discouragement, and deep unspoken disappointment with ourselves, with others and ultimately with God, are the result. And somehow the call of Christ loses its compelling force.

The result is that I will be speaking this morning to the eager, to the complacent, and to the discouraged. Into which group do you fall? In the last analysis it makes little difference, for the Bible has the same message for all of us - namely, that it is God's firm intention that we (individually and as congregations) "are to grow up in every way into Him Who is the head, into Christ." (Ephesians 4:15)

1. First of all, the Bible speaks to us in the indicative mood. We can grow spiritually, and our horizon is unlimited. God does not tantalize by presenting us with impossible goals, impossible standards, impossible requirements, only to doom us to defeat. Quite to the contrary, His standards and requirements are promises to us. We can be "changed into [Christ's] likeness from one degree of glory to another." (2 Corinthians 3:18) We have God's promise that Christ, "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood," will also "make us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father." (Revelation 1:5, 6) Paul assures us, "that He who

began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6)

We can grow because God Himself supplies the wherewithal. “He who has the Son has life.” (1 John 5:12) So John tells us. And where there is life there is growth. The promise is that “God is at work in [us] both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13) His Spirit accompanies us. He convicts us of sin. He brings us freedom. He enables us to love. He moves us up the ladder of glory. He guarantees the indicative.

2. Secondly, the Bible speaks to us in the subjunctive mood. We can grow – but only if and as we apply ourselves to it. God rarely works in us unless we permit it, and work with Him. If we are to grow up in every way into Christ, we must strive for this growth, as we strive for growth in every other area of our lives. In the same sentence in which he tells us that God is at work in us, Paul also reminds us that we are to “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.” We must capitalize on one of the gifts of the Spirit which is self-control or self-discipline. Elsewhere Paul describes to us how he himself does not run aimlessly or box as one beating the air, “But I pummel my body and subdue it lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:26, 27)

Partnership with God in our growth is essential; it is also exciting. It draws us not only closer to God but also closer to one another as Christians. We will not “grow weary in well-doing” if we faithfully “bear one another’s burdens.”

3. Thirdly, the Bible speaks to us in the imperative mood. We must grow: A plant cannot produce fruit unless it matures. Neither can we. We cannot experience our full potential in Christ; we cannot function as we should unless we grow to maturity. And God has commanded us to do this. Twice this command comes through clearly and simply, pointing the way creatively for us.

At the end of Second Peter, we read: “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Grow towards Him, with all that implies. And in our text for the morning: “We are to grow up in every way into Him Who is our head, into Christ.” Both commands point to the same thing, to our becoming more and more Christ-like and therefore more and more mature. We are to understand as He does, discern as He



does, love as He does, give as He does. Thus, alone, can we represent Him on earth.

And so the Bible tells us that we can grow and that we must grow into the fullness of what it means to be God's peculiar people. From God's point of view this can and must be a continuing process. Remember, the horizon is unlimited.

But our text makes another point clear. The congregation and the individuals that comprise it must achieve their growth together. As Dr. John Mackay, the former president of Princeton Seminary, has put it: "The maturity of individuals cannot be realized apart from their growth in the Body and their personal contribution in unison with other Christians to the growth of the Body. On the other hand, the Body as a whole cannot grow apart from the growth and harmonious functioning of its members. Christian manhood and the communion of the saints cannot be separated." (God's Order, p.15S) A strong congregation can only be made up of strong Christians. Conversely, growing Christians must be organically and continuously related to one another in a congregation.

So God calls us into a new venture of growth together. As we worship together, as we let ourselves become more totally involved with one another in Bible study and theological and ethical discussion and action, on both formal and informal bases, we will realize and accept afresh the "truth that will make us free." As we undertake our search, "speaking the truth in love," being wholly honest with each other and at the same time wholly accepting each other, we will experience the power of the Spirit triumphing in our midst, freeing us from all that would hold us apart and hold us back, and preparing us for the high calling to which we have been called.

Let us with new devotion determine to grow together – horizons unlimited.

John 13:34 “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another.”

1 John 4:7 *et seq.* “Beloved, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love. ... This is love; not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ... Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. ... We love because He first loved us.”

1 Peter 1:22 “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart.”

1 Peter 3:8 “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.”

1 Corinthians 13 “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am nothing. ... Love never fails. ... So faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.”

Romans 12:9, 10 “Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection.”

Ephesians 5:2 “Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us.”

Philippians 1:9 “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment.”

1 Thessalonians 3:12 “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men.”

The message from all these quotations comes through loud and clear. We are God's own possession, His own people. We are called through the challenge of stewardship to be answerable to God for the proper use of all that He has given to us. We are called through the challenge of Christian education to grow up in everyway into Him Who is the Head, into Christ. We can grow and we must grow, but as we grow up into Christ, it inevitably follows that

we will take on His nature, even though imperfectly, and that we will become a community of love.

There are four reasons why this unfolding of the nature of the Church as a community of love is necessary.

1. First of all we are to love one another because we are commanded so to do. Jesus told His disciples: "A new commandment I give you that you love one another."
2. "We love because He first loved us." We are to love one another "for love is of God." We reflect the love of Christ "for the love of Christ constrains [or controls] us. Not only are we commanded to love, but love will tend to become spontaneous as it is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.
3. We are to love because it is our responsibility to witness. In order to love the world outside of the Church, we must first love one another. We need the practice; we need the communication of action. As our Lord said: "By this all men will know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another."
4. Finally we must love because the only alternate is to perish. Christians and secular experts alike agree that if man cannot love, there is little hope for him. He will be caught between hostility and clinging desire, between rejection and possessiveness, and will shrivel up spiritually in the process.

Of what does this love consist in the Christian community, this love for one another which testifies to our Christian vocation?

Love involves awareness of one another.

Love involves acceptance of one another as we are.

Love involves forgiveness of one another.

Love involves compassionate concern for one another, recognizing the mutual nature of our needs as Christians.

Love involves intercession for one another, standing by one another in all the varieties of needs that we have.

How can we fulfill the command that we love one another? Obviously, as we have each one experienced ourselves, we cannot do it in and of ourselves. But here the community of love is operative. We are promised that, "Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. ...

And we have fellowship with one another.” As we walk in the light, as the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin, and as He abides in us through His Spirit who has been given to us.

Deep within each one of you is the desire that God has planted there, that you may love more totally, more freely. Pray then for the renewal and the deepening of that love that this church in Willow Grove may truly and faithfully represent the nature of its Lord.



For a number of weeks now, we have been examining the Church, its nature and its mission. We have seen it to be God's peculiar people, a very special possession belonging to Him. We have seen it reflecting His nature, being a community of love. Imperfect as this reflection is, it indeed makes the Church the light set upon the hill.

I am now moving in this series in the direction of a sharper definition of the mission of the Church in the world, for as we have already seen, the Church is a utilitarian possession of God. But in order for it to fulfill its mission, in order for it to function effectively in this world, we must know who actually comprises the Church. And this brings us today to the subject of church membership.

All of us will agree that the Church is made up of people who are in it by invitation of God. But as for the way in which membership is defined, the way in which this invitation is consummated, the Church has never been in total agreement. The Roman Catholics, for example, taking very literally Jesus' commandment to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," consider that all who have been baptized are members of the Church. Protestants on the other hand, have always agreed in general that the membership of the Church is comprised of those who have professed their faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord. But then the differences begin, for how does one interpret this profession? Opinions vary all the way from its being applied to anyone who is willing to "sign up" to the constricting interpretation that such a profession involves their being "just like me."

Now as I see it, none of these interpretations are satisfactory. Our relationship to God through Jesus Christ determines whether or not we belong to the family of God, the Body of Christ. But this is not what is at stake. For church membership has nothing to do directly with the Church as it will emerge in heaven, but only with the human organization which enables the Church to function here on earth. The concept of church membership is not in itself Biblical. Instead it is a functional thing having to do with church order. As we understand it here at Willow Grove, the membership of our church is made up of those who are identified with Christ and who are available to the local congregation for His service. Every one of

you, when you joined this church, affirmed such a relationship and promised such availability. Thus understood, the church membership roll is the source for all estimates of strength, for the recruiting of manpower and for the raising of financial resources so that the Church can deploy its forces in mission.

With such a functional approach to church membership, there is very little room for sentiment. It is our Lord Himself who on several occasions challenged His followers to “put up or shut up.” Listen to just a few...

“Not everyone who says to Me ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21)

“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

“Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away and every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes that it may bear more fruit.” (John 15:2)

The response to this challenge and this concept on the part of each one of us individually must be one of undertaking total availability. The Church makes a very poor witness in the world. The cutting edge is taken off its message. It is indeed a weakened instrument for God when its members drift in and out – when they have lost their first love of Christ and become indifferent to Him and to the organization into which they have been called. Half-hearted Christians, Christians with split personalities, seeking to serve both God and mammon are of little value in the tensions facing the world today.

Secondly, the Church itself as a collective congregation must likewise constantly tighten up its standards and goals, for a timid, indifferent church in a community offers a poor witness. Even as the individual Christian must discipline himself, in the power of the Spirit, so the Church must discipline itself collectively in the power of the same Spirit. This involves its members challenging one another and accepting the challenge one from another.

It involves at times the pruning of the church roll – the transfer from an active to an inactive roll of those who will not, temporarily or permanently, fill the role to which Christ has challenged them.

Someone just yesterday asked me why the Church was so weak in its influence and in its perspectives in this generation. My answer to him was that the Church is not weak, its message is not weak, its Lord is not weak,

but that indifference, vacillation and a kind of sentimentality can weaken it at its point of contact with the world which is through us. May we resolve afresh here at Willow Grove not to let our witness be weakened by our indifference. May we accept the challenge to total availability to Christ. May we accept individually and collectively the pattern of self-discipline which the Church follows for the sake of its mission. May we all work together towards being what we are – that indeed our mission may be strong and our organization vital.



Recently we have been dwelling on the nature of the church. We move now to a sharper definition of the mission of the Church in the world, and as my text for today, I would like to return to that verse from 1 Peter from which we started. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s (peculiar) people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9) You are a peculiar people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him. The church’s first and central mission is to declare the wonderful deeds of God or to proclaim the Gospel. There are other phases to the church’s mission but this one is central.

1. *The Gospel is to be proclaimed in simple terms.* What is its content? Those of us who were present at our mid-week Bible study this week remember that the Apostle Paul reviewed it in very simple terms. “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried and that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” (1 Corinthians 15:3,4) We get the message that God did something important that centered around the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Putting it in more detailed Pauline language, we could summarize the terms of the Gospel in this way: “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God ... the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord ... believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved ... for by Grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your doing. It is the gift of God, not because of works lest any man should boast.” (Romans 3:23, 6:23, Acts 16:31, Ephesians 2:8,9)

The purpose of the proclamation is not to amuse or fascinate or educate or to moralize or to reform society. It is none of these things at least at first. The purpose of the proclamation is to save the souls of men, to bring them from darkness into light, to bring them from death to life.

2. *This Gospel is to be proclaimed with urgency.* Bringing man to Christ is an urgent need, for God’s sake who is dishonored by man’s continual rebellion and estrangement. It is also for man’s sake who is caught in the



trap of misery and under the threat of hell until God's salvation has become his possession.

There is a great precedent for this urgency. We can hear the apostles stating before the Jewish Sanhedrin: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19, 20) We hear Paul standing before King Agrippa recalling how the Lord had said to him on the road to Damascus: "I have appeared to you for this purpose to appoint you to serve and bear witness ... to the Gentiles to whom I send you to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins ... wherefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision..." (Acts 26:16-19) We read the words of the Apostle John as he writes: "That which was from the beginning which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands ... we proclaim also to you so that you may have fellowship with us ..." (1 John 1:1-3)

3. *The Gospel when so proclaimed will have telling effects.* In Romans 1, we read Paul's testimony: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith..." (Romans 1:16) The reason for this is evident. For Christianity is God-centered; it is He who redeems and transforms. It is He who succeeds where man fails. This is grace and this is God's activity. How often we speak of men and women who have been disappointed with God, who have expected Him to respond to some preconceived plan of theirs or preconceived pattern of activity. It is true that God does not seem to answer many of *our* prayers (reason: He is God and He loves us), but we read that it is not the will of God that any should perish. His saving activity is sufficient for all men, and our receiving it or not is the only limitation set upon it. The Gospel indeed is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.

And so the Gospel is proclaimed but by whom? To answer this, we must go back to our text: "You are a (peculiar) people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called 'you' out of darkness into his marvelous light." In other words, the proclamation is to be carried on by witnesses, by those who have themselves experienced the salvation, the forgiveness of sins, the new life which is in Christ Jesus. This means that the proclamation

is to be carried out by you and me. There may be an Outreach Committee in our church; there may be witness teams, but each of us is charged with the responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel. No course is needed to instruct us how to witness to what we have experienced. We all spontaneously witness to those things which excite and interest us – to a sporting event, to a concert, to a movie we have seen, to a new hobby which has seized our fancy. Why should we need such special training in witnessing to what we have experienced through Christ?

It is true that we may feel our inadequacy. We as individuals and as a church may feel in all humility that we are but an earthen vessel (2 Corinthians 4:7), a crude earthenware pot in which resides the reassurance of the Gospel. We may feel that our witness may be inadequate, but it need not be empty, for the Church and we who are in it belong to Christ Himself. It was He who promised us just before His ascension that: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be witnesses...” (Acts 1:8)

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s [peculiar] people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

May God allow us in a fresh way to experience the transforming power of the Gospel and the new life that is in the Spirit that we may be able with eagerness to witness to His saving activity in us and thus fulfill the central thrust of the mission of the Church of the world.

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“You are a holy nation, God’s [peculiar] people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of God.” The Church’s first and central mission is to declare the wonderful deeds of God, to proclaim the Gospel. This we affirmed last week. But the mission of the Church does not end there, for if it does, it leads to an absolutizing of the sacred, that is the setting apart of the Church as an outside agent through which the Gospel is proclaimed. The result is that the Church retreats into...

1. *A behavioral cloister* – a pattern of rules and prohibitions which protects the individual Christian from the world by making him different. These rules and prohibitions may have to do with religious forms or with social behavior and may become involved in such trivia as whether meat can be eaten on Friday on airline flights.
2. Retreats can also take place into a *verbal cloister* which the Christian faith is expressed, frozen and ultimately isolated from the world in certain stereotyped words, phrases and modes of expression. As one frustrated author has complained, “Many people cannot distinguish between truth and the words in which the truth has been traditionally expressed.” In this statement, he is undoubtedly not only complaining at the continued use of expressions such as “vouchsafed to us” but also at the use of such words as “faith” and “sin” without adequate explanation among those millions to whom those words have little meaning.

Now in a “religious” society such as existed in the world pretty much up to the beginning of this century, this sacred framework for the faith was quite satisfactory. After all, the Joneses were religious. They were impressed by our monastic behavior as Christians, and so were we. *But it is gradually dawning upon us in the Church that we now live in a secular society.* As Dr. Gibson Winter has put it, “The secularization of the world, which the churches are called upon to affirm, is man’s assumption of responsibility for his history in full recognition of the relativity of his perspectives.” Putting this in different words, man is now sufficiently in control of his mechanical affairs so that he does not need God as an operational principle – and the Joneses are no longer impressed by the sacred. The result is a dangerous one for the Christian. For a gulf is opening up between religion and life. The Christian in his attempt to cope with this gulf, as often as not ...

1. *Becomes pious and irrelevant*, carrying his Bible so to speak through a self-made vacuum in his environment, or
2. *Is drowned by the world and ends* by rejecting the faith as irrelevant, or
3. *Develops a split personality* in which the secular and the sacred, the visionary and practical, are isolated from one another in his thinking and in his experience.

I am sure that young people are feeling these problems already in your attempts to cope with life as Christians. So what are we all doing? Just playing games with our religious convictions?

What I have been describing, true to life as it is, is not what God had in mind for His holy nation that was to proclaim the Gospel to the world. Our Lord Jesus Christ behaved quite differently. In our text for the morning, we read that Christ Jesus “though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:6-8) In other words, in Christ God became secularized, He fused together the sacred and the secular. His healing ministry did not discriminate between the religious and the irreligious. His eating companions included Pharisees and tax collectors, good people and harlots. Christ penetrated the world and from within, and He redeemed it.

Now what does this say to us? Today is Pentecost Sunday. It reminds us that a new stage of incarnation took place after the ascension of Christ. As Jesus Christ was God in one man, so the Holy Spirit is God in all who will receive Him. God chose as the residing place of His Spirit in the secular world a very human bunch of people. And He calls upon this very human bunch of people to reflect and fulfill the work of Christ. Jesus confesses to His Father: “I do not pray that Thou shouldst take them out of the world ... as Thou didst send Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:15-18) As Dr. George Hunt puts it: “To be a Christian then is not to appear among men as a religious person, noted for his piety or the outward evidence of his right religiousness. To be a Christian means to enter fully and completely into the life of the world, to be a thoroughly human being. We must abandon every attempt to make ourselves over into something that we are not and simply allow God to work in us as we are. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's striking phrase, “We must become ‘worldly men,’ that is, people who enter fully into the life of the world with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness.”

Now separating the secular from the sacred, anyone can do. Anyone can succumb to the world and its patterns in his own power. Anyone with sufficient motivation can stay aloof from the world, sheltered by his own righteousness. Most people can lead the split life in which the secular and the sacred are compartmentalized.

But it takes the very life of the indwelling Christ, the wisdom and the power of His Spirit, and the constant practice of prayer to follow Christ into the world and, to become after Him “secular Christians” – Christians who really live in the world as Christians.

And it is to this that we are called. But what does this involve?

It involves knowing and appreciating and participating in our culture so as to stabilize and lift it.

It involves identifying with the world, recognizing and assuming our share of the guilt of the world's sin and our share of the hurt of the world is suffering.

It involves our choosing the side of right and justice as well as the side of goodness and morality and fighting for both.

It involves penetrating the world and from within proclaiming the Gospel of redemption.

It involves risk, the risk of making mistakes, the risk of being hurt, the risk of being tainted by the world. But in the power of the Spirit, these are risks that will not destroy. Would you be part of the Church in mission? Then “have this in mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus who emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, born in the likeness of men.”

As the Willow Grove Church has grown from a church of 50 members to a church of 500 members, I have more and more often heard the wistful comment that it is getting too big, that we no longer can know one another or have that feeling of belonging that we once had. Simultaneously, I am told by many who have recently joined our congregation (large as it is) that they are so glad to be joining a small congregation, for their old church had grown so big that ... ditto, ditto.

Such comments always receive a sympathetic ear from me. I fully appreciate that you and I come to the Church as needy people. We find life. We find a new identity. The full salvation that Christ offers becomes a reality to us in a particular context, and we deeply yearn to hold on to that context. This is only natural.

Not only this, but I for one am committed to the basic concept of a small church. The *koinonia*, the fellowship of Christians, is essential to the nature and the mission of the Church in the world. Organizational bigness is deadly. Imposed “togetherness” is ghastly. Being processed into the kingdom of heaven is empty.

But – by the very nature of its mission, the Church cannot hope to remain either small or homogeneous.

As we saw two weeks ago, the mission of the Church is to bring all men to Christ, into His Body, the Church. Christ’s charge is for us to “make disciples of all nations ...” He set the example Himself: “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out.” He described the process: “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground ... the earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” (Matthew 28:19; Mark 1:38; 4:26)

As we saw last week, the mission of the Church is to bring Christ to all men into the diversity of their lives within the world. From the time of Peter’s object lesson at Joppa (Acts 10:9) to Paul’s definitive statements in Ephesians 2 and 3, the New Testament makes it clear that “There is neither

Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

In other words, the mission of the Church is to bring the whole Gospel through the whole Church to the whole world. And this, by the very nature of things, is a big and diverse operation, not the exclusive task of one or many small homogeneous independent fellowships.

*What does this say to us? First* – it points up the necessity of our reflecting the true nature of the church here at Willow Grove. For the love of Christ, we must affirm in thought and action our acceptance of one another in all our multiplicity and diversity. I hasten to say that we have an above average record in this area as it is, but our attitudes and actions are spotty, and all the potential for cliques and factions, for feelings of superiority and exclusion, based on the full sweep of differentiating characteristics, is present. The person who is free in one area is apt to be bound in another area.

*Second* – and here is where we don’t do too well – it points up the need for us to break up our provincialism. As a church we are woefully unaware of and uninterested in the total work of the Church of Jesus Christ in the world, and in our part in that work.

How many of you truly see this church as anything other than a solitary congregation? Does it mean anything to you that we are part of the Elizabeth Presbytery of the United Presbyterian Church, and work cooperatively with our denomination in many ways? Does it mean anything to you that we are related to the mission of our denomination in this country and overseas in very specific and financially costly ways?

Does it mean anything to you that we are not the only Christian Church in Scotch Plains, and that just possibly God is working (the *same* God) through other fellowships? Does it mean anything to you that our church is currently involved in organizing a Scotch Plains Council of Religious Organizations as a vehicle for our Christian concerns in our community?

Does it mean anything to you that we as a church are involved in various ways with informal interdenominational activities such as the Bowery Mission, the Peniel Bible Conference, the Union County Conference on Religion and Race, the United Church Women of Westfield, etc.?

If we are to be the Church, God's peculiar people, if we are to fulfill the Mission of the Church, we must begin to identify with the total Church in all its bigness and diversity (and imperfection). We must actually feel that identity.

We must learn to cross the geographical barriers, the barriers that separate us both from Plainfield and from Pakistan, from New York and New Guinea.

We must learn to cross the cultural and racial boundaries, which confine us to those who look like us or commute like us or are interested in the same things that we are.

We must learn to cross the denominational and theological boundaries which make us Presbyterians first and Christians second, or which make us feel that we alone have a corner on the full expression of the truth of our faith.

I am not saying that we must become a uniform whole. God has purposely made us different from one another, irreversibly different, and uses our differences to enrich the world and the Church in the world.

I am not saying that we all must agree, or endorse or imitate one another's beliefs or actions. God calls one person to one form of witness, another to another.

I am saying that as One Church on One Mission, we must be informed, aware and appreciative of that which is beyond ourselves, and so reinforce one another's labors in obedience to Him "who called us out of the darkness into His marvelous light."



As God's peculiar people, we the Church go out into the world, and it may be that we fulfill our mission. When we do, we are like the seventy who returned with joy saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" (Luke 10:17) For we, too, can have the privilege of seeing the power of God in action through us.

Of course, we may be buffeted in the process. Like the Apostle Paul, we may be "afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed." (2 Corinthians 4:8, 9) Death may be at work in us, virtue may go out of us. We may share in the sufferings of Christ. These things can be taken for granted as the price for fulfilling Christ's mission.

Or, we the Church may go out into the world and fail to fulfill our mission. Like Paul's friend, Demas, we may fall "in love with the present world." (2 Timothy 4:10) We may be soiled by following our own desires or by patterning our lives after the gods of this world. Our spiritual sensibilities may be dulled. We may end up at odds with God and man alike.

But whether we fulfill or fail to fulfill our mission, or whether the pattern of our weeks is a strange mixture of the two, we the Church gather together again – and again – once more to belong to one another, once more to turn our eyes on God in praise of His being and His work, in confession of our sin and our need. We turn afresh to Him to reclaim strength that we need and to rediscover our direction as disciples of Christ. Our service under these conditions is service of a special kind. It is worship, worship of God and how we need it!

The Church dispersed for service, the Church gathered for worship. Both are needed and the mission of the Church about which we have been talking the last three weeks can only be reinforced and made authentic if the Church also knows the secret of worship, of what constitutes this worship. Well, there is no better description in the Bible than that which lays forth to us the behavior of the newly formed Christian Church which found its beginnings at Pentecost. We read as follows: "So those who received His word were baptized and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And

they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:41,2)

All of the elements of worship are involved in these two sentences. Let me take the liberty of changing the order and let me apply them to us today.

1. The Church at worship involves our sitting together. And here I underscore the word "together." This is the fellowship of which our text speaks. Without a horizontal awareness of one another, a mutual appreciation, a mutual forgiveness, a mutual, even if silent, assent to one another, worship of God is not authentic. If we attempt to sit in pews, isolated mentally or emotionally from one another, simply facing God in our solitary self-sufficiency, or our solitary loneliness, we are robbing others and we are being robbed ourselves. And God has something better for us than this.
2. The Church at worship involves singing and praying and gathering an offering for Christ together. These are the prayers of which our text speaks, the complex liturgical pattern in which we offer ourselves to God. For worship is still a form of service and we are serving God by joining together before Him on Sunday morning.
3. The Church at worship involves experiencing together the creating and redeeming Word of God. This Word of God, the embodiment of which is Christ Himself, is communicated to us. We nourish upon Him as the Bread of life. As the Scripture is read and heeded, as the sermon is read and heard, this is the Apostles teaching of which our text speaks.

The creating and redeeming Word of God is also experienced as the Sacraments are observed, the sacraments of baptism and of breaking of bread, both of which are mentioned in our text. This last section reminds us that we are needy people, that we come not only to give homage to our God, but for the reinforcement that we need, whether or not we come from having faithfully fulfilled our mission.

Summarizing briefly, we, like the early Church, experience worship as we are baptized and as we devote ourselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. It is easy for us to see the need for these things. It is hard for us to achieve them in their fullness during the worship which we have on Sunday mornings like this. How can we adequately come out of the distractions of the busy lives we lead and focus on our God? How can we achieve a happy middle ground between spectatorship and worship and an unbalanced, unstructured participation therein? How can we maintain the intimate fellowship that we need with

some Christians without seeming to shut ourselves off from other Christians? Can we structure our services to minimize these problems?

Well, the Church has struggled with these things for centuries. It has discovered some virtues in formalized liturgical services. It has found other virtues in the free pattern of worship practiced by the sectarian groups. It has discovered dangers in both. Even in our own church, we have made changes from time to time in the order of service and the approach to our worship, and we will undoubtedly do so again. You might be interested to know that our denomination is just on the threshold of approving a new "Service for the Lord's Day," a new order which it is commending to churches like our own for serious consideration. This order draws its texts from modern translations of the Bible; it includes more congregational responses; it suggests the more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper and recommends the use of a lectionary for the Christian year.

Yes, worship is essential for the health of the Church and the vitality of its mission. Worship at the same time is difficult to structure and to make meaningful to all. The benefits of worship cannot be legislated from the outside in. They must come spontaneously from the heart. And so let us appreciate the privilege that God has given to us to "worship Him in spirit and truth." Let us be sensitive to how we can contribute to our own and to one another's worship. Let us seek cooperatively and flexibly to find an ever more meaningful pattern of worship. And let us look to God from whom all blessings flow, praising Him who draws us to Himself in Jesus Christ and strengthens us in Him for our mission as Christians.



Text: Revelation 1:5-18

Time: Somewhere in the last decade of the first century

Place: The island called Patmos.

It is the Lord's Day (Sunday) and the aged Apostle John, enveloped by the Spirit of God, is about to experience those visions which are recorded for us in the Book of the Revelation. The account of these visions will stretch on for twenty-two chapters, but for our purpose today, as we complete our series of studies of the nature and mission of the Church, and as we anticipate breaking bread together, three glimpses, all from the first chapter, will suffice.

In the first glimpse, we see the Church as made up of men, women and children such as us who have received from Christ. We are told in the fifth verse of our text three thrilling things. We are told that we are loved by Christ. Let us never trifle with that love. We are told that we have been freed from our sins by His blood. Let us never forget that our salvation is not something of our own doing. "It is the gift of God lest any man should boast." Finally we have been given a new status. We are part of a Kingdom and we are priests to God the Father. Here we have John's confirmation of what Peter has been telling us for weeks that we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people..." Truly we have received as individuals and we collectively are the Church beloved by Christ.

Our second glimpse is of the Church in its unity and diversity. The Apostle turned and saw in his vision seven golden lampstands. How this communicates to our imagination the seven-branched candlestick which burned continually in the Temple at Jerusalem – seven flames – seven branches – one candlestick. The picture is that of a united Church, but a Church which is broken into identifiable units or congregations, each of which is a light-giving outpost of heaven. Why seven? To be sure it was the number of the churches in Asia to which the book was addressed. But it is also in Biblical symbolism the number denoting perfection or completeness, and therefore the seven lampstands can easily represent for us the great diversity of Christian congregations of which ours is one.

The third and most important glimpse, however, is not of the Church, for, as John puts it, “I saw, in the midst of the lampstands, one like the Son of Man.” From beginning to end, the vision in the Book of Revelation is a vision, the focal center of which is Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man. Here we find Him described as one present among the Churches, as one whose dress testifies to His position of authority. And we are reminded in no uncertain terms that the Church does not own Christ. It belongs to Him. We are reminded that the Church is made up of people who have been redeemed by His work, people who are continually sustained and renewed by the activity of His Spirit, people who are called whether they understand their call or not to be on His mission.

In the vision of the lampstands and the One standing in their midst, we the Church see the assurance of the fulfillment of Christ's own promise: “Lo I am with you always to the close of the age.” (Matt. 28:20) Truly as someone has put it, “Where Christ is, there is the Church.”

Oh, may we learn the secret as Christians of focusing our thoughts, our hopes, our ambitions, our destinies upon Him who is our Lord and Savior.

May we be empowered by Him not to focus either on ourselves or on one another, for in Him is life, in Him is the answer to all of our problems, the focal point of all our mission.

Wherein today lies the implementing of the vision? As always has been, it is in the Communion Service. For here the congregation is gathered. Christ is in the midst and the Church feeds upon Him who is the Bread of Life. It is our privilege this morning to do just this. Let us approach Him with reverence therefore in the moments that follow, as He approaches us, the Host at the table and the wherewithal of the feast.

All of you have heard the atheists attack our religion – as offering the deluding hope of “Pie in the Sky, By and By.”

1. We wince because this is not a true representation of our Christian hope, and
2. We wince because the accusation has within it some truth.

By the beginning of the middle ages, religion had become a mechanism for getting to heaven or escaping hell. Justification by faith soon became distorted into “I’m saved.”

Other-worldly religion is expressed in hymns: “In the Sweet By and By,” “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”, and also in sectarian irresponsibility for culture, politics, justice, etc.

There has been a reaction to this. In our existential, realistic age, with a new insight into the incarnation of the Kingdom of heaven, we are seeing the importance of being Christians *here* and *now*, for its own sake. Christ has called us to use us (the whole concept of the natural mission of the church).

But we run the danger of carrying the reaction too far. Heaven is very far off to most people – and not talked about much. This, too, is a partial view – for Mr. Stalin et al to the contrary.

“There will be pie in the sky, by and by!!!

We believe in “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, amen.” It is possible to so emphasize heaven on earth that there is no longer room for heaven in heaven. On the other hand, it is our Christian affirmation that this world is simply a shadow of heaven. Paul wrote: “for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

Let us not forget that this promise of heaven is Christian. The Hebrews (like other ancient people) did not think of death as total extinction, but as a shadowy place “of misery and futility where they lived as usual half-

irrational shades in a land of silence and forgetting.” “Look away from me, that I may know gladness, before I depart and be no more.” (Psalms 39:13)  
“There is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again ... but man dies, and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?” (Job 14:16)

Is God there? Psalm 88 says no – Psalm 139 says yes.

A few glimmers: “The dead shall live, their bodies shall rise.” (Isaiah 26:19)  
“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” (Daniel 12:2)

The idea of heaven and hell of paradise and *Gehenna* emerged just in time to prepare for the affirmation – Christ died and rose!

Now the assurance of heaven with God for all who will receive life:

“We will be caught up to be with Him in the air and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

“Where I am there you will be also.” (John 14:2)

“It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” (1 John 3:2)

Don’t expect all the answers, but let us keep the present in perspective, even as we keep the future in perspective, let us look forward with optimism, not forgetting our present mission – and perhaps, once in a while, it is alright for us to sing – and enjoy singing.

“In the sweet by and by – we shall meet on that beautiful shore.”

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“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...” Last week we dwelt at some length on the centrality of the Biblical affirmation that our salvation is effected by grace alone and it is apprehended through faith alone. This is a truth that is hard to understand and hard to accept. I hope that we all did it successfully.

There are further pitfalls, however, lying in wait for the person who has grasped this truth. It is so easy for him to say, “All right, I have been saved; it is not my own doing, and so there the matter ends!” This leads to two incorrect conclusions that are independent but interrelated. One is the conclusion that *I can't change*, and that therefore I am fortunate that Christ has made it possible for me to be forgiven. The other conclusion is that *I don't have to change*, that salvation by grace frees me to do just exactly as I please. Now it is just as false for the Christian to say that he cannot change or does not have to change after accepting Christ and His work on the cross, as it is to say that he can change himself or must change himself in order to achieve his own salvation. Let's examine this further.

*I can't change.* This is the attitude expressed by many sincere, devout but discouraged Christians. I know myself, where my faults lie. I've tried to change, to become more Christ-like, but I'm not really committed enough for God to be able to help me. So the reasoning goes.

Let me mark again that this is the reasoning of Christians – but, of Christians with little faith. For this line of reasoning denies the continuing, progressive act of my salvation, my being made whole. It limits the power of God to one phase of His redemptive activity – the power to forgive. But this is not what the Bible says. For every text which emphasizes our salvation by grace alone, there is a comparable text which promises that, “where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,” and that “we all are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another...” (2 Corinthians 3:17,18) It is the primary role of Christ to save. It is the primary role of His indwelling Spirit to provide the power which can destroy the evil within us and “make us live together with Christ.” There are degrees of freedom available to us which need only to be claimed. As the Spirit ministers to us who have experienced the forgiveness of God, He frees us to face, to assess and to come to grips with the pattern of our own sinfulness, with the vulnerability of our old natures, and to conquer that which is within. Through the power



of the Spirit, my nature begins to reflect the very nature of Christ, hate recedes, lust retreats, the “other” eclipses the “self.” God's love becomes normative, and I, like my Lord, become available to serve unconditionally, as He directs.

*I don't have to change.* This is the argument of an entirely different Christian, one who also understands the free grace of God but does not take his call to discipleship very seriously. After all, I am living in a real world. Here things are not very idealistic. I've got to conform. I've got to make my way. I can't be so good that I'm not accepted. So runs this line of reasoning.

But this line of reasoning denies the very purpose for which the redemptive work of God Has carried out in Jesus Christ. “You are not your own. You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your own body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19,20) So reasons the Apostle. “For the love of Christ controls us [or compels us] because we are convinced that One has died for all...” (2 Corinthians 5:14) “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10)

We must get this straight. God has created us. He has saved us by His grace. He has made possible the actual transformation of our characters. He has recreated us so that we can do a job for Him. One set of good works has been prepared beforehand by God for you. Another set has been prepared beforehand for me. We have proven ourselves both unwise and ungrateful when we do not recognize this purpose of God and accept it for ourselves.

Our freedom in Christ therefore includes the freedom to obey. It is our responsibility in sober awareness of who we are to let the Holy Spirit change us inside, and then outside from one degree of glory to another. As this happens, our scale of values will be reoriented. Our talents will be redirected, our time redistributed, and our money rededicated. Instead of living for *ourselves*, we will find ourselves free to live for Christ.

Soon all of us here at Willow Grove will be facing the challenge of promising the portion of our money and a portion of our time to the work of Christ here at Willow Grove. It is my earnest desire that as this subject comes into focus this year, you will be able to see it in the larger context of your being men and women who are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, and that you will respond in that context, thus being the vitally *alive* instruments through which our Lord can fulfill His ministry here at Willow Grove.

“The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:5) How thrilling these words must have sounded to men and women who were captives away from home by the rivers of Babylon. Their country had been occupied, their cities were gone, their temple was destroyed. Many years had passed but now a word came, a word of comfort, a word of hope the time of affliction was almost over. A super highway was in preparation. God was going to show His power and glory by returning His own people to their land.

We know historically that this prophecy was fulfilled and that in 538 B.C. Jews did come back to Palestine. There were about fifty thousand of them according to the Book of Ezra, but that which they were and that which they accomplished did not form any very impressive demonstration of God's power, a power such that “all flesh should see it together.” And this was the glory of the Lord? What is this glory of the Lord?

The word for glory in the Hebrew language, *kavodh*, with a primary meaning of weight and substance was used throughout the Old Testament in such a way that as one dictionary has put it, “The glory of the Lord is in effect the term used to express that which man can apprehend originally by sight of the presence of God on earth.” Some evidences of the glory of the Lord are most spectacular. The cloud which led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness, the great spectacle which occurred at Mt. Sinai, the show of brilliance which filled the Tabernacle, the visible evidence of God in His Temple – these were all examples of the glory of the Lord.

Elijah witnessed the glory of the Lord when “the Lord passed by,” in the wind, the earthquake, the fire and the still small voice.

Isaiah beheld the glory of the Lord when he saw the Lord “sitting upon a throne high and lifted up,” and heard the seraphim calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory.”

Ezekiel witnessed on the banks of the river Chebar: “The appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.”

But the glory of the Lord was demonstrated more in His activity than in the supernatural phenomena of His presence. The glory of the Lord was

evidenced in His rescue of the Israelites from Egypt and now in His rescue of the Jews from Babylon. Perhaps it wasn't a spectacular incident, but then the presence of God among men is not apt to be so. And it was least so in the greatest demonstration of glory.

In Luke 2 we read: "And in that region there were shepherds ... and an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them ... and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude ... saying glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." A final spectacle of Old Testament glory spread across the heavens and then the glory of God that which men can apprehend of the presence of God on earth came to focus in the manger at Bethlehem.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. We have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father." (John 1:14) "He [the Son] reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature upholding the universe by His word of power." (Hebrews 1:3) "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." (1 Corinthians 4:6)

From Christmas Day on, the glory of the Lord has been identically equal to the presence of Jesus Christ. His miracles were spot manifestations of His glory. (John 2:11) His death was the climactic manifestation of this glory (John 12:23). His resurrection and ascension put the seal on this glory of God in Jesus Christ.

And finally, as "we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of God are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another..." (2 Corinthians 3:18), as "Christ is in us, the hope of glory," (Colossians 1:27) we the Church find ourselves the personification of the glory of the Lord.

Our God is all powerful. Yet He has chosen for His own good reasons to demonstrate His glory in weakness, not in power. As we look at the face of Christ and more especially as we look into one another's faces, we are reminded of the God who "has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree;" (Luke 1:52) who "chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong," (1 Corinthians 1:27); who "opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6) As we look into the face of Christ, we are reminded again and again of the great gap between God's standard of greatness and ours. He revealed His glory very deliberately to the ancient world in His deliverance of a mere handful of Jews from

Babylon. He revealed His glory to the world very deliberately in the miracle of the Incarnation, the birth of the baby at Bethlehem. He continues to reveal His glory to the world through His Body, that weak minority group which is us the Church and which reflects the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Let us therefore be reminded at this Christmas time when we see the power structures of the world again in conflict as they always are, that God is present in our midst, that someday He will conquer this world on His own terms and that that which is only hinted at now will finally be consummated. "All the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."



“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body for we all partake of the same loaf.” (1 Corinthians 10:16,17)

It has been often said and has become commonplace in our American thinking that Protestantism and individualism belong together. The argument runs that the Reformation accorded the individual his full religious significance: uninhibited access to God. This rugged, religious individualism has characterized the American Church. Its patterns of evangelism, of church government, of financing are all influenced by this argument.

And yet the argument is false insofar as it contends that religious individualism is the characteristic stress and principal fruit of the Reformation. While I was away last week, I read portions of a book by Dr. Paul Lehmann, my former Christian Ethics professor, in which he in turn quoted from a book called *Unitive Protestantism* by Professor John T. McNeill which sought to clarify this issue by going back to the words of the reformers themselves. In the remainder of this meditation, I would like to share with you some of what I read.

According to this book, the Reformation had no sooner begun than the reformers addressed themselves chiefly to the task of bringing the true *Church* to light. The basic conception of the reformers, according to Professor McNeill, is the conception of the *communio-sanctorum*, the communion of the saints, the fellowship of believers. “The Holy Christian Church”, says Luther, “is the principal work of God for the sake of which all things were made.” “I take God and His angels to witness,” writes Calvin, “that never since I became a teacher of the Church have I had any other purpose than the ‘Church’s’ advancement.” For Calvin, the *communio-sanctorum* was the whole body of the elect; for Luther, it was the society of the justified. But it was a society.

“All the saints,” says Luther, “are members of Christ and the Church which is a spiritual and eternal city of God. And whoever is received into this city is said to be received into the communion of saints and to be incorporated into the Body of Christ and made His member.” In the same sermon, Luther explains that “communion is fellowship and *communicare* [which in English is ‘to communicate’] means to receive this fellowship.” Now the verb “communicate” in this sense has a meaning which goes far deeper than our contemporary usage. To communicate is not merely “to talk to somebody.” As Dr. Lehmann points out, surely this is an idle use both of time and of the basically human in us all. As he goes on to point out, “to communicate” is to be in an actual relationship with somebody in which you give yourself to him and he gives himself to you. Luther shared the New Testament discernment that to communicate in this way takes a bit of doing. It requires in fact a redemptive ingredient.

The communion of saints is, according to Luther, the fellowship of believers who “go to communion.” This in turn is to engage in a two-fold act, an act of receiving and an act of sharing. The celebration of the Sacrament is the celebration of the miracle of what Luther would call “an authentic transubstantiation,” which means through love being changed into one another.

For Calvin, it is the same. “All the elect of God,” Calvin declares, “are so connected in Christ that just as they depend upon one Head, they also coalesce as in one Body, compactly cohere among each other as members of the same Body being made truly one who likewise lives by the same Spirit of God in one faith, hope and love, being called even now not only to the same heritage of eternal life but also to our participation in one God and Christ.” Commenting upon Ephesians 4:15, Calvin remarks that “the phrase ‘the edifying of itself’ or the ‘upbuilding of itself’ means that no increase is advantageous unless it responds in the whole Body. Therefore he errs who desires to grow by himself... Just so, if we wish to belong to Christ, let no man be anything for himself, but let us all be whatever we are for each other.”

Notice the striking similarity between the two final quotations. Exactly as with Luther’s “through love being changed into one another” so Calvin’s “let us be whatever we are for each other” means in Dr. Lehmann’s words, “the rejection of preferential differentiation and its displacement by organic inter-relational differentiation as the true significance of *koinonia*. We are

what we are in and through God's action in Christ, bringing our authentic humanity to pass through authentic belonging. Our being at all, our being what we are is our being in the community."

What has all this been saying? Simply this: In the Communion Service which is at the center of Christian worship, we who belong to Christ constantly reaffirm whether we realize it consciously or not, that we are not lone, autonomous, individual Christians. We are indissolubly part of a greater unit. As we "communicate," we are "through love being changed into each other." We are "being whatever we are for each other," or we are, to use another Reformation concept, one another's priests, one another's intermediaries between God and man.

So as we approach the Lord's Table, let us seek to cast off our great American individualism and let us become one together as members of the Church that God Himself has ordained for the fulfillment of mankind and as the instrument of His activity into the whole world for whom Christ died.



Last Wednesday I went to New York City for the second time in a week on business and as I have done so many times, I rode the subway and contemplated the endless people who got on and got off, station after station. I walked across a portion of the Columbia University campus and passed so many students that they totally lost their individual identity as far as I was concerned.

I was in a meeting at 475 Riverside Drive when I received word of the most recent death in our church. I wanted to call home, but there in the citadel of Presbyterianism, the office structure was so coldly impersonal that it was necessary for me to go down to the street floor to a pay phone booth to call the church.

My conclusion? – An old one and a serious one. That we today live in a cold world; a world of individuals, fragmented, isolated, unconcerned, self-indulgent. Suffering is all around us, hidden in the homes, the doorways, behind the faces of people. There is loneliness, insecurity, rejection, fear. But we do not know about most of it, and we shrink from knowing it.

There were negro girls working in our denominational offices. I met one who was particularly attractive and obviously capable. She could work beside her white Christian friends but she could not live next to them and I can see her at quitting time, walking down the hill off of Morningside Heights into Harlem and a confined second-class world.

When suffering becomes personal to us in the life of somebody we know, it touches us and our instinctive compassion is aroused. But most of the time it remains impersonal and we make sure that it remains impersonal. And why is this?

1. We are so very busy. We simply don't have time to become involved. Some of our business is simply the trap of our age. Some of it undoubtedly is a defense mechanism. Either way it takes time for us to know people and have compassion for them, and rarely do we have the time.
2. We have been hurt. Every one of us has had the experience of befriending someone, of opening ourselves up to them in love, only to be



rejected or taken advantage of. Once this has happened, we are reluctant to ask for a similar experience again.

3. We cannot stand the agony of compassion. Our instinct for compassion, an instinct which is part of the residual image of God in us, is very real; but if we give it free rein, we hurt and we don't want to hurt.
4. We are off-duty. How many of us ration out a certain amount of our time in which we are available to others? The rest of the time is kept for ourselves or at least for our families.

So, instead of allowing our compassionate instinct to become too personal, we indulge it in a safe way in half-hour doses, vicariously taking part in incidents which have carefully controlled happy endings and which are timed to fit between commercials. This or other means of releasing the safety valve on our emotions continually and subtly inoculates us so that real encounters with tragedy and suffering tend to remain impersonal.

Now comes a crucial point in my sermon. It was my original intention at this point to enter into a satirical passage in which tongue in cheek, I would reassure you that Jesus would understand all these problems of ours. I was planning to point out that He obviously kept on the move around Galilee so as to avoid encounters in depth. After His feelings were hurt at Nazareth, He would not go back. He healed people many times even from a distance because He couldn't stand the sight of suffering around Him. Many times, He went off by Himself to live His own life, figuratively speaking, away from the telephone.

But you know, I couldn't bring myself to lead you through a set of half-truths like this even with my tongue in my cheek to make my point. It would have been for me a libelous activity. Because you see, Jesus Christ is so much the opposite of this that it would be doing violence to His nature to liken Him in any way to us impersonal compassionless individuals. As He said of Himself, He "came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) The thrust of His ministry is described best in our morning text which in its extended form goes as follows: "And Jesus went about all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity. When he saw the crowds He had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd." (Matthew 9:35, 36)

1. Jesus was never too lazy to do the work of His infinitely gracious Father. At all times was He accessible. "Come unto Me," we hear Him saying,

“All who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) He had compassion for them.

2. Jesus was despised and rejected by men, it is true, but never did this drive Him from the scene of His ministry. Again and again He came back for more until finally He set His face steadfastly toward Jerusalem, and went to His death for us. He had compassion for them.
3. Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He suffered with those in the world around Him. He laid His hand upon the lepers. He wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He received the homage of a woman from the streets of Capernaum, and finally, if we understand the record correctly, He died of a broken heart. (John 19:34, 35) He had compassion for them.
4. Jesus, so far as we know, was never truly off duty. He went into the hills to pray, but His disciples could find Him. He went across the lake for a rest, but met the deranged man in the tombs. He went outside the borders of Galilee for a vacation, but was willing to heal the son of a Syro-Phoenician woman. He had compassion for them.

In your imagination put Jesus of Nazareth on the streets of New York City, or in the homes of Scotch Plains. Imagine how He would act and then hear Him saying to you, “Go and do likewise.” And we must obey because we are His Body. “A new commandment I give to you that you love one another,” “Even as I have loved you that you also love one another.” (John 13:34) To us comes the challenge to allow one another to become personal to us, to take the risk of creative, consistent involvement with one another, to take the risk of remaining vulnerable in order that we may faithfully represent Christ.

In our own strength, this challenge is too great, but we can live up to it. When the love of Christ controls us, when the Holy Spirit is given recognition and free rein in our hearts, then our lives can glow with Christ's own creative love and His compassion can become our compassion.

My Lenten series this year will be unconventional (for a Lenten series) and may in some ways prove disturbing to us. I hope so, for I am dedicating this series to Jesus Christ who was a realist, a revolutionary, and as history has demonstrated, a very disturbing Person.

During my recent reading spell, I came across an account of the shattering experience which the Jewish community in Palestine underwent in the latter part of the fourth century B.C. – when Alexander the Great introduced into Palestine not only a new political system or a new religious structure or a new set of conquerors, but a whole new culture. The Hellenistic culture, which had its roots in the very best that Greeks had produced, threatened and ultimately transformed every part of the oriental world. The Jewish culture, the Jewish standards of values and the Jewish world-view were almost eclipsed.

It is my thesis for the morning that almost the same thing is happening to the Christian community in our day. Change has always taken place in the history of mankind, and changes in the direction that our present society is going have been present with us for centuries. But we are living today in the midst of a fantastic world revolution surrounded by what I would like to term a “runaway culture.” The whole structures of society are changing so rapidly and so extensively that none of us can cope with it, and the most sinister thing about this runaway culture is that the rate of change is increasing.

The causes for what we are experiencing are relatively simple and interrelated:

1. *Increased population.* As everyone is aware, the world’s population is increasing and at a frightening rate. The world’s needs therefore are increasing, the need for the essentials of life, the need for luxury items, the unfillable need for space, for peace and quiet. The world’s creative productivity has also gone up because there are more people to be active.
2. *Increased mobility and intercommunication.* Mass communications media, walkie-talkies for kids, fast moving transportation for men and boys are spreading our increasing population all over each other. Our lives are kept in turmoil and in fragmented segments as we move about

within the sprawling interlocking structures of the political, the industrial and the educational world.

3. *Increased knowledge.* Man's total knowledge and know-how is multiplying faster than the product can be assimilated. I read the other day that 90% of all the scientists the world has ever trained are still alive. I also read that the new math is beginning to be outdated. How to educate young people to fill jobs that are not yet in existence is a pretty tall order.

What are the characteristic, if provisional, results of this runaway culture? We can describe them in two ways, I think. First as a series of paradoxes:

1. *We are educated but ignorant.* Never in the world's history have so many people had access to so much information or to so many opinions. Never before have high school students been subjected to so much material. Never before have younger men filled such responsible positions. Truly we are in the presence of intellectual giants, and yet – the very pace of education is forcing ignorance upon those who cannot keep up the intellectual pace. And it is also resulting in such forced feeding and specialization on the part of those who are succeeding that whereas we see great intellects, we see few great thinkers. There is a difference between being an efficient executive or a big operator and being a great man.
2. *We are more human and yet more depersonalized than ever before.* Consider the amount of time and effort put into man's concern for man – cancer research, hospitals and nursing homes, anti-poverty legislation, the civil rights movement, UNESCO, etc. Politically and sociologically the human being is of greater worth than ever before, and yet he is more isolated and depersonalized than ever before. He is one of too many.
3. *We are conformists and non-conformists.* Never before has there been more restlessness on the part of a society for cutting loose from its past and being new and different in most of its practices of living. The potential is there for endless variety and the lack of deep roots. In most people among a trapped, transient population makes for easy change. And yet never has there been a society in which the pressures have been greater towards group conformity. Most of us just can't stand being too different. Sometimes this is good, sometimes it is bad.

There is a second way in which we can evaluate this runaway culture. We can do it by examining the impact that it is having on ultimate values. Briefly let me list five of them:

1. Our culture is secular. It is beyond God and religion. Man considers himself totally self-sufficient.
2. Our culture is pluralistic. No longer: are there homogeneous communities isolated from one another. Every type of individual is thrown with every other type in one context or another.
3. Our culture is permissive. All the conventional standards of behavior and morality are being challenged. Almost anything goes in this current day.
4. Our culture is a drifting culture. It has lost any vision of ultimate goal other than making bigger and better things. Right here lies the weakness in President Johnson's vision of the Great Society.
5. Our culture is a frightened culture. For we have the bomb and any hour the push of a button could finish the story

And, what about the Church? Yes, what about it? Well, not very much. For you see we are moving into what some people call a "post-Christian" era. I spent part of last week in the eighteenth century at Williamsburg and was impressed again as to how much belief in God and biblically-oriented moral standards were central to the warp and woof of society. This was true even among leaders who were not what we would term today evangelical Christians. This is no longer true. The Church is not an essential element in society. Any idea of its creating or molding the culture around it has essentially disappeared from the thought of the community at large. The Church has come to be looked upon either as an obsolete relic of a past culture, or as a welcome traditional fixture in the midst of a cult of conformity, or as a source of security for those who sag under the revolutionary pressures.

Now we are too close to all this to realize what is going on. What is the result? We can either give in to the cultural revolution and drown with it or accept the marginal status that it offers to religion, or we can rediscover who we are and who God is, and seek ourselves to guide our Church into the place where it should be, not as a part of a dying culture, but as the leaven in the new culture. To this end we will be addressing ourselves for the next few weeks and we will start by remembering that God is God and by meditating on our text of the morning. (Isaiah 40:12-31)

“But understand this that in the last days there will come times of stress.” (2 Timothy 3:1) Last week we spent our time together examining the runaway culture in which we live. It was and continues to be a disturbing picture – the culture in these last days. Today we want to take a good look at the Church – the Church that should be the hope of the world – in order that we may round out our understanding of the problem which challenges us at this point in history.

Often we talk about stresses and strains, but how many of us know how to distinguish between these two words? Let me just recall to you the distinction. According to Webster, a stress is a “mutual force or action between contiguous surfaces of bodies caused by external force.” The point I am making today is that the culture we live in has put great stresses upon the Church as Paul warned Timothy it would. And the Church has entered a time of crisis as the result of the strains within it. For under the stresses from outside, different parts of the Church have been “deformed or distorted” in different ways with resultant inner dislocations. Let us examine this further.

1. *Parts of the Church have become compressed.* We see about us groups, congregations, whole sects which have simply turned in upon themselves for acceptance and security, and have let the world become irrelevant to them. Their members by and large live in the world but pretty much out of contact with it. Usually their defense for this action is that they must remain pure to the honor of Christ as a testimony to a dying world.
2. *Part of the Church has become confused or perhaps I should say more accurately, diffused.* The old-timers here at Willow Grove have heard my sermon on the “The Great American Religion.” All of you will recognize that popular diffuse, lowest-common-denominator of religion which masquerades in the minds of millions of churchgoers as Christianity:

“I believe in God – the good guy upstairs who loves me.  
I believe in man – who is really good at heart and who needs  
only a little encouragement and education.

I believe in Jesus – the gentle Jesus, meek and mild –  
whose inspiring sayings so warm my heart.  
I believe in the Church – it is so good to have it around when I  
need it.  
I try to obey the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule.  
I hope I am a Christian.”

The outside stress has mashed this portion of the Church, flattened it almost to a pancake. The result is the nod to God and then secular life as usual.

3. *Parts of the Church have been bent in various different directions.* With reference to each one of these parts, some fine secular cause has impinged upon the Church, has been recognized as important, but then has been equated to the whole Gospel in the minds of its proponents. A brief list of these bent parts would be as follows – and remember the causes are all fine in themselves. They are:

- a. the drive for church unity,
- b. the numerical and financial success of the denomination,
- c. the evangelistic reaching of men and women for Christ,
- d. the harmonizing of religion and psychology and sociology in the pastoral ministry,
- e. the intellectual recasting of the faith so as to make it intelligible, and
- f. the concern for integration and civil rights.

In connection with this last point, let me quote from a sermon that was excerpted in the New York Times yesterday in order to demonstrate the spirit, the intensity, and the one-sidedness behind each of these bent emphases. “I preached about it (the negroes right to vote) last Sunday and I’ll preach about it again next Sunday, God willing. I don’t know what else to preach. There is only one subject, this experience in which we are involved...” Let me repeat again – these emphases within the Church are good and can be blessed by God but no one of them is identically equal to the mission of the Church.

4. *Some parts splinter off.* Small groups and individual congregations have splintered off and so have individuals. One example will suffice. The Rev. James Reeb who was murdered in Selma, Alabama, this week, was a classmate of mine at Princeton Seminary. There is a double tragedy in his life. The more immediate one is that his life was snuffed out at the

age of 39. The deeper one, perhaps, is that he had left the Presbyterian Church, probably because of his deep dissatisfaction in the mid-nineteen fifties with the Church's lack of interest in what he considered the deep issues of social justice. Jim's was a warm, winsome personality, and his turning from Christ in his concern for his fellow man was certainly not all his fault.

Very briefly this is the Church of Jesus Christ under strain in 1965. For the sake of our Lord we at Willow Grove cannot allow our congregation to be strained in any of the ways I have been describing. Neither can we stand by and criticize others. The challenges are great, but I am reminded of the promise of the Apostle Paul:

“For consider your call brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, Whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption...” (1 Corinthians 1:26-30)

With this promise, I feel that we can search out afresh, as a young and flexible church, what it is to be the church as God would have it in 1965 – *and be it.*





My first exhibit this morning is sixty-nine cents' worth of "silly putty." Silly putty is a wonderful doodler, but otherwise it is useless because it has the wrong combination of contradictory properties. It resists all sudden changes in shape, but under pressure it conforms slowly and passively to any shape forced upon it – any shape! It won't pour; it won't hold its shape; it can't be stored either in a box or a bottle; *it is both rigid and pliable*, and is absolutely useless.

During the past couple of weeks, I have come to the horrible realization that the comparative weakness and ineptness and ineffectiveness of the Church in our contemporary culture comes from the fact that it has built into it the same combination of contradictory properties that "silly putty" has.

We find throughout the Church strong resistance to any change from the outside. It seems to be caught in a continuous cultural drag. Scientifically, politically, socially, economically, the Church always tends to be identified with the status quo. But at the same time the history of the Church has always been one of slow and belated conformity to the world around it. In practice it has tended to be a culturally captive institution. Examples from the time of Constantine onward will verify this fact.

Now this series of sermons is addressed to the question: How can the Christian Church think and act significantly in the midst of our runaway culture? The answer to the immediate problem is not that we must find a "happy median" between the extremes that I have been describing, but that it needs to develop a whole new set of inner characteristics. This brings me to my second exhibit for the morning, a piece of foam rubber. In contrast to "silly putty", foam rubber is useful because it has the right combination of properties. Its usefulness is based on the fact that it conforms immediately to sudden changes impressed upon it from without, but it never loses its basic size and shape. It is flexible or, in more technical terms, it has a high compliance, and it is resilient. It snaps back into shape.

Now these are the properties which the Church of Jesus Christ must have, especially in changing times like ours. And these are the properties which are spelled out in our text for the morning.”

“Test everything; hold fast what is good...” (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

*Test all things.* This part of our verse speaks to those forces within the Church that tend to resist any change. Rigidity must give way to flexibility. God calls us to trust Him sufficiently so that we can lay aside our clinging conviction that the way our forefathers expressed their faith or carried it out was best. We must lay aside our instinctive fears of that which is new and unfamiliar. Even our love for things which had great meaning to us in our youth or in the first years of our Christian life must be put in its proper perspective, and we must recognize once and for all God has put us to be His servant people at a particular time in a particular culture, and that time and culture are here and now. The secular world cannot roll back the clock, neither can the Church.

The role of the layman at this point is very important because you are the ones who are caught between two worlds, who are forced to be contemporary in your everyday living, and who can bring that contemporaneity into the context of the Church so that it can think and speak in a relevant manner to real people.

*Hold fast to what is good.* This part of our text speaks to the restless, uncertain, “the grass is greener on the other side of the fence” strain within the Christian Church, and within all of us. It reminds us that flexibility becomes spineless pliability unless it is controlled by resilience. Not only must our church be contemporary, but it must discern and protect the eternal truth – that which is authentically and unchangeably Christian. There are realities about the nature of God and man, realities concerning the man’s needs and what God has done to supply those needs; there are realities concerning the purpose for which we exist that are the *sine qua non* of life. These are the affirmations of our faith, and we must not let them become confused or diluted or warped by the restless noise of this world’s thinking.

At this point the challenge to the layman is simple. It is a challenge for him to become and remain articulate in his faith, and crystal clear concerning the principles which God has given him for the direction of his life. A well-grounded steady witnessing laity gives to the Church its necessary resilience.

“Test all things; hold fast to what is good.” These, the properties of the foam rubber sponge, represent the right kind of Biblically-centered compatible, liberal, and conservative thinking which need one another and reinforce one another to provide a solid base for the work of Christ and for the development of a dynamic relevant Church. Not all churches see this clearly. They never have. Not all Christians understand it; in fact, very few do. It is my hope and prayer that we here at Willow Grove may be able to see this issue clearly and commit ourselves to do our bit not only towards being the Church at its best ourselves but towards transforming that which we are a part.



The last few Sundays I have been exploring with you the sobering spectacle of the world in which we have been placed. We have seen ourselves as caught today in a runaway culture which no longer can be characterized as a Christian culture. It is a culture to which the Church is largely irrelevant and under which the Church has shown severe strains. Last week we came to the conclusion that the only Christian Church which would stand up to the present challenge is a Church which is both flexible and resilient – “testing everything, holding fast what is good.” This morning I would like to explore this theme a bit further, especially as it applies to the individual Christian and the problem of his conforming to the world.

As you and I separate from one another and diffuse into the world, we recognize very quickly that the world is not only changing, struggling, groping with itself, but it is a world in which corruption and vice, ill will and self-indulgence run rampant. We need not ask why; we have been told often enough. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...” “The whole world is in the power of the evil one...” “If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own, but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” So says the Scripture.

It is small wonder, then, that we are exhorted in the twelfth chapter of Romans: “Do not be conformed to this world.” The structures of sophisticated intellectualism, of frantic activism, of comfortable complacency and of sensual self-satisfaction are the creations of man apart from God. They dazzle the ego, they lure the old nature, they destroy the harmony between God and man, they cause man to hate Christ and all that He stands for. It is He who has told us so, and the Cross of Calvary confirms it. John adds his warning to Paul's in these words: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life is not of the Father but is of the world.”

Now these warnings are to be taken seriously. They are our only protection against being inundated and drowned by secularism. We who take our religion seriously are drawn to response, but how? Our first inclination, that which seems most obvious, is for us to back away from the world entirely, to

renounce the whole structure of our society, to avoid contamination by and responsibility for what is going on. If the world is in the power of the Evil One, stay away from it. Plenty of Christian people would encourage this course of action and applaud our responding to it. But on second thought, and more sober analysis of the Bible, we find without question that this is not the answer, and has never been. In Psalm 24, which we read this morning: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." This is true whether or not the Evil One has trespassed upon God's domain. And what has been done about it? Let us consider the Incarnation. As we study the New Testament, we find that God left the cloister of heaven, He emptied Himself of that which would protect Him from man, He did not masquerade as man, He became man. He did not enter the human race born as a priest. He did not choose the path of the aesthetic, living among the Essenes by the Dead Sea. No, He became a working man, a carpenter who lived in a commercial town, Nazareth, mingling with the world as it went by. He ate with those of ill repute, causing raised eyebrows among the holy men. (Matthew 9:10) He acted in such a way that it was said of Him (perhaps not entirely accurately), "Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." (Matthew 11:19) In matters of religious behavior and custom, He kept coming down on the "wrong" side of the fence. In a very serious way Jesus Christ conformed to this world. He was part of it, not as an onlooker, not succumbing to it, but transforming it.

Now I feel that this must be taken and studied in depth, for the Church is called to go and do likewise.

What am I saying? Christ is calling us as Christians, neither to a passive conformity to this world which would swallow us up, nor to a non-conformity which would isolate us – but to a Christ-led creative conformity which is possible only as Christ Himself dwells in us and perpetuates the impact of His incarnation. This is His purpose as expressed in His own prayer: "As Thou didst send Me into the world so I have sent them into the world."

Let me summarize what I have been saying by means of an example. Suppose I were to cover the floor of the chancel here with a randomly distributed set of magnets. And then I tried to roll a steel ball across the floor. It would roll in a wavering path under the influence of a variety of magnetic fields and undoubtedly would end up by sticking to one of the magnets before it got very far. What am I meant to do? I can take the ball

away or I can substitute for it a non-magnetic brass ball which I can then roll across the floor uninfluenced by the magnets. So it is with us. It is our old sinful natures which are influenced by the destructive forces in the world. God knows this, but instead of removing us from the world, His solution to the problem has been to transform our natures so that we can enter the world, mingle with it, identify with its activities without being "hooked" by it.

So the challenge comes to us as individual Christians, and as a Church to be "worldly Christians" in the sense that Christ Himself was. He entered and totally adapted to the contemporary culture; so must we. He lived and served unharmed by this culture; so must we. He did not let the religious structures which were man-built hamper or make irrelevant His message to the world; neither can we. To the contrary, He communicated the eternal truths of God in a vitally relevant way to a living culture; so must we.

Provided that we have been "transformed by the renewal of our minds" so that we see the world from Christ's perspective and are attuned to His purposes, we will be flexible and resilient. Provided that we are flexible and resilient, we will be able to live and act, work and play in the world as it is as servants of Christ. God sent us into the world not to preserve a past culture, not to promote a Christian sub-culture, not to be absorbed into the world's culture, but to redeem this culture, claiming it for Christ.



Two weeks ago I used foam rubber sponge as a symbol of the Church as it must be in this generation. The sponge was flexible and resilient. So the Church must be. But as was pointed out to me, the sponge is also made up of a hard cord of solid material which cannot be flexed or compressed beyond a certain point. This too must be a property of the Church, as we will be seeing this morning.

It has become clear to us the past few weeks that our contemporary, secular culture has moved beyond God and isolated the Church in an inconsequential backwater. Now I am convinced, as all committed Christians are, that the Gospel is as relevant to today's society as it ever was, and as much needed, even if this need is subconsciously felt. The problem is, however, the Gospel has been and still is carried in a cultural package which dates it as far as the modern mind is concerned. In some ways the Church is aware of this. It is attempting to use modern methods for communicating the Gospel – moving pictures, air-conditioned buildings, television broadcasts, prayer phones, etc. But these have the same cultural package. If the gap is to be bridged something more drastic than this is necessary.

So it is that more and more today, we hear voices – including some very radical voices – crying out for a complete housecleaning of the Christian faith and life. On the more responsibly evangelical side Dietrich Bonhoefer writes that the world has “come of age,” that “man has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis ... as in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally what we call ‘God’ is being more and more edged out of life, losing more and more ground.” Within our own denominations, a new five-thousand word statement of the faith which seeks to speak more relevantly to the modern world will be presented to the General Assembly of our Church on May 20 of this year. Almost beyond the fringe of authentic Christianity Rudolph Bultmann has been seeking for several decades to remove the so-called “mythological” elements from the New Testament, insisting that the entire supernatural element of the New Testament makes sense only on a now completely antiquated world-view. Even “further out” are the comments of Bishop John

Robinson in the very popular *Honest to God*, who suggests that “a much more radical recasting is demanded in the process of which the most fundamental categories of our theology – of God, of the supernatural, of religion itself must go into the melting.” Likewise, with such ideas as the Trinity. And finally Time magazine this past week quotes Harvey Cox of Andover-Newton Theological School as suggesting “that the Church may have to declare a moratorium on talk about ‘God’ until there comes a better way of expressing the real meaning of this now all but incomprehensible word.”

In one way or another, all of these voices are seeking to attempt the accommodation with the present culture which is being forced on the Church. I admire their courage and endorse their purpose, but the way in which they are going about it carries within it grave danger, dangers which in many cases have resulted in their overshooting their goal and destroying the faith itself. In some cases, this is being done by means of successive concessions which leave a person asking only, “What can I still believe? What can be salvaged of the Christian faith for this generation?” Or the same end is achieved by redefinition which leaves the Church using terms that have lost their definitive content and which tend to become the vehicles of a different religion. In a very real sense men like Dr. Paul Tillich who has redefined God as “the ground of all being” and faith as “ultimate concern” are in danger of doing the same thing that Mary Baker Eddy did a century ago.

Yes, there are grave dangers to these attempts to accommodate our faith. It is small wonder that more conservative pastors and laymen within the Church tend to retreat from these people and clutch as a security blanket the traditional cultural forms in which the faith is communicated.

*But this cannot be so because this world needs the Gospel.* As I pointed out last week, God was in Christ in a real world, a contemporary world. St. Paul picked up the significance of this fact and sought to put it to use as described in our text of the morning in which he says, “I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:22) And it is in this same spirit that true Christians, who take seriously their relationship with Jesus Christ, who take the Bible seriously, who understand the significance of being “transformed by the renewal of your mind,” (Romans 12:2) through the work of the Holy Spirit, must pick up the challenge of the *theological avant-garde* and be the instruments through which a sound, authentic Christianity is transformed or “transculturized” and thus made



relevant to today's secular society. In other words, you and I are challenged to have all the properties of the foam rubber sponge – instant flexibility, plus resilience, plus a hard core of essential truth. As I see it, the process I am describing as “transculturizing” involves three stages, each one admittedly difficult to accomplish.

1. We must seek to free the absolute or transcultural elements of the Christian faith from the elements of the Biblical culture, and thus lift essential Christianity out of its cradle, or at least leave it flexibly loose in it. Infinite wisdom from God is necessary to know where the dividing line should be, as the Scripture is studied, book after book. Unless Christianity can become dissociable from Eastern Oriental culture of two thousand years ago, it will be increasingly be unpalatable to modern man.
2. Even more important than this, we must lift the essentials of our faith out of *our* cradle, the near-past culture of our childhood. Each one of us has memories of our religious childhood. These may be good and afford for us secure memories, or they may be bad to the point of having prejudiced us against the Church and everything it stands for. Either way, we must be freed from these memories in order that the Gospel that we preach and the life we lead may not seem merely out of date and even slightly quaint to those who need Christ most.
3. We must find ways of introducing a full-blooded revolutionary Christianity into a new culture which needs it but has no place for it.

How this world needs Christ, and how far it is from Him! How it needs to be set free by the intrusion of the very “worldly” Son of God, and how incomprehensible He is to it! How desperately the men who know everything need the perspective which reminds them that God is and that Christ died for them!

We who know Christ and are more or less secure in our faith have no right only to enjoy this security in the context of words or activities or patterns of thought or action which have meaning only to us. We have no right to leave the agonizingly difficult job of being contemporary to others such as the men of integrity to whom I was referring at the beginning of this sermon, and then criticize them for doing an inadequate or an incorrect job. In a total effort, we must be available to overcome for Christ.

Most of you know the story of the young minister who asked a senior colleague what to preach about. The answer given to him was, “Preach about Christ and preach about twenty minutes.” How could I help doing both of those things on a Palm Sunday morning such as this! And I can’t help wanting to do it. For as I indicated in my sermon last Sunday, there is an irreducible core to the Christian faith which must be proclaimed in every generation in as contemporary and winsome way as possible. The irreducible minimum of that core in turn is Jesus Christ.

We see Him before us today in what is perhaps the most unusual and yet most significant event of His ministry. People are converging for the traditional Passover feast. An air of excitement is permeating the crowd. There is a general air of expectancy. And then there appears in their midst a small band of pilgrims singing and cheering, and in their midst a man riding quietly on a donkey. No spectacular event this, even by contemporary standards, but one which is sufficiently arresting so that “When He entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, ‘Who is this?’” (Matthew 21:10)

Who, indeed, is this? The whole structure and the whole message of Christianity depend on the answer to this question, and the Bible gives us a clear answer. Let me review it swiftly for you.

1. It is at Caesarea Philippi that the Church comes into being at least in embryo in response to Simon Peter's confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16)
2. It is the “punch line” of Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly know that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:36)
3. It is the more mature testimony of the Church that “He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by His word of power.” (Hebrews 1:3) And again, “He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation, for in Him all things were created... All things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things hold together... He is the beginning, the first born from the dead that in everything He might be preeminent, for in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” (Colossians 1:15-19)

4. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8) He existed from before all time with God the Father, for "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1) He shares the contemporaneity of God, for as He claimed to His enemies two thousand years ago, "Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." (John 9:58)
5. And He will still be sharing the eternity of God when He shall reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords as "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:10, 11)

How can the eternal Son of God be anything other than central to the Christian faith when God "Has made it known to us, in all wisdom and insight, the mystery of His will according to His purpose which He has set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Ephesians 1:9, 10)

And yet, though the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth that he "decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2), he knew even then that this central message would be "a stumbling block to the Jews and a folly to the gentiles." (1 Corinthians 1:23) And so it has proven over the centuries. If Christ is to be preeminent to us, we must guard against three contemporary and yet not entirely new attempts to de-emphasize Christ and the centrality of His role in our faith.

1. The first attempt is based on the conviction that God couldn't accept the role of a fully incarnate deity. According to this line of reasoning, He is too holy, standing on His dignity, demanding protection from the full limitations of human existence. This attempt results in a variety of concepts of Jesus which make of Him something other than man.
2. The second attempt stems from the conviction that we couldn't accept a fully incarnate God. It goes against reason. The result of this attempt is the limiting of the role of Christ to that of a teacher, a leader, an example, and a fairly dated one at that.
3. The third attempt stems from the conviction on the part of some that they couldn't accept an antiquated supernaturalism. The world is too secular to put much stock in such parts of the Gospel narratives. The result of this attempt is that all that can be salvaged from the Biblical testimony to Christ is what might be called the Christ myth, a beautiful, if

unbelievable story through which the extent of God's forgiving love and liberating power is communicated to mankind.

If you love Jesus Christ, as I do, if He is at the center of your faith as He should be, it is good for you to take cognizance of these attacks on the all-sufficiency of Christ. We can denature Christianity in one or another of these ways, and can come up with any number of "Christian-type" religions. But such are no longer Christianity; they are "another gospel" and of them Paul would write as he did to the Galatians, "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:9)

Do you love Jesus Christ? Is He important to you? Then treasure His presence and guard His preeminence. Become perhaps, more sensitive as to when He is included in or excluded from a religious discussion among Christians. Remember that a clean-cut, affirmative answer to the question "who is this?" is necessary if our thinking is to remain clear and our testimony effective in the world in which God has put us.



While interviewing our tenth grade Church Membership Class yesterday, it became evident to the Session of this church that whereas most of the young people were quite clear about the significance of the crucifixion, many of them were equally unclear about the significance of the resurrection. To me, this only confirmed what I have suspected also about many adults – that to many of you Easter is pretty much of an afterthought, an exciting event in the Church year, but one with an uncertain meaning.

I'm afraid that Christians, Protestant and Catholic, tend to become so preoccupied with the various aspects of the cross, that we forget that at each step the cross is only a way-station to something better which lies beyond. We are like men and women who, having stood in line for an hour to get into – say – the Ford Building at the World's Fair, remember the outside of the building for months. While what is inside soon becomes a dim memory.

Not so the New Testament! As we turn its pages, the post-Easter atmosphere is one of sustained high exuberance. No sooner has the angel at the tomb said, "He is risen!" than the reply comes "The Lord has risen indeed!" And this is the thrust of the early Church.

The proclamation at Pentecost is: "This Jesus...you crucified and killed...but God raised Him up." (Acts. 2:23, 24)

In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul writes: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." But before the letter is finished, he adds: "For I delivered to you as of first importance...that Christ died for our sins...that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day..." (1 Cor. 15:3, 4) He then proceeds to write for 58 verses on the importance of the resurrection.

Many of us have recently noted with some interest that in Romans 10, Paul does *not* say: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Savior, and believe in your heart that He died for your sins, you will be saved," but rather: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." A very significant emphasis from one who well understood the saving work of Christ.

It was the resurrection that changed the Last Supper into a Eucharist (a thanksgiving). It was the resurrection that drew early Christians together to worship on the first day of the week rather than the seventh, and which made every Sunday into a “little Easter.”

All this being so, what is the compelling significance of the resurrection? Let me suggest two answers in the brief time at my disposal.

1. Over against the empty and bleak prospect facing the secular world as it contemplates what is beyond time, the empty tomb and the risen Christ give telling evidence to us that God has invaded history and conquered. The evidence points in at least three directions.
  - a. First, it refutes the Jewish contention which claims that no authentic Messiah would allow himself to be maneuvered into the humiliation of the cross. (1 Corinthians 1:23) Jesus was a revolutionary character. He was repudiated by the vested religious interests. But “This Jesus, God has raised up and has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:32)
  - b. Secondly, it provides us with the proof we need that Christ’s death was sufficient. Christ died to pay the price of our sins, and the receipt came back in three days “Paid in Full.” As Paul argues, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins... but in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15:17, 20)
  - c. Thirdly, it gives us an indication of what is in store for us who trust in Christ, what is meant by the “resurrection of the body.” “Our commonwealth is in heaven,” writes Paul, “and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body.”
2. Even more important, over against that recurrent religious drag which is especially evident in the Eastern religions but which infiltrates every religious context, which looks upon salvation as the negating of life, the denial of the body, the stifling of all desire, the losing of oneself in the *nirvana* of inactivity, the empty tomb and the risen Christ testify to the active, creative, positive thrust of the Christian religion. Never do the Gospel or its corollary emphases stop at the negative, satisfied with the destruction of the old. On the contrary:

Good Friday says: “Jesus is our Savior and Redeemer.”

Easter adds: “Jesus is the pioneer and “perfector” of our faith.”

Good Friday says: “He died to save us from sin, death, hell.”

Easter adds: "He rose to open heaven for us."

Good Friday says: "He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

Easter adds: "Therefore God has highly exalted Him. " (Philippians 2:8, 9)

Good Friday says: "Jesus our Lord...was put to death for our trespasses."

Easter adds: "And raised for our justification." (Romans 4:25)

Good Friday says: "He has appeared once and for all...to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." (Hebrews 9:26)

Easter adds: "He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Hebrews 7:25)

Good Friday says: "We have died."

Easter adds: "Our life is hid with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:3)

Good Friday says: "We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death."

Easter adds: "So that as Christ was raised from the death by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

You see, the Cross is a way-station to better things, things which we may understand and experience and take for granted as Christians, but which are in no instance assured by the cry, "It is finished." Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jordan, Capernaum, Bethany, Gethsemane, and Calvary – these were all steps on the path which led through the valley of the shadow to the triumph of Easter morn.

So, it is not Christmas, nor Good Friday, but Easter that is the high day of the Christian Church – and your convergence on this spot this morning is eloquent if in some cases uncomprehending testimony to this fact. Let us therefore make sure that ours is not a sub-Christian faith that skids to a halt on a hill outside Jerusalem, but a fully founded Christian faith that worships a risen Christ and finds its life in Him.

Come with me to Nazareth in the spring. The same sun that shines over New Jersey warms the hills of Galilee. Birds circle above the fields of flowers and new grain. From the rim above the town we can look north and east over the rolling farm land of Northern Palestine; south over the rich plain of Jezreel; west over the cool blue of the Mediterranean Sea. In the spring in Nazareth, as in Scotch Plains, life starts anew.

One spring seemed especially beautiful to a girl in Nazareth by the name of Mary. She was in love. She was engaged to be married. The legal ceremony of betrothal was over, and she was waiting eagerly the consummation of her marriage. But one night an amazing thing happened. An angel appeared to her, saying: "Mary, God loves you dearly. You are going to be the mother of a son, and you will call him Jesus." How could this be? The angel reminded her of the power of God and Mary bowed in faith: "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word."

The power of God did overshadow this young girl, and the whole course of her life was changed. During the years that followed, she faced first an unjustly soiled reputation; then the discomfort of giving birth to her Son in a strange stable; the anxiety of fleeing with Him to Egypt for His life; the loss of His companionship; the bewilderment of trying year after year to understand His unique mission to the world; the agony of watching Him die.

Her life was hard, for as Simeon had foretold at the time of Jesus' birth, "a sword has pierced her soul." (Luke 2:35) But it was through this simple Jewish country girl that God gave His most precious gift to man. It was from her womb that God entered the family of man. It was under her loving care that Jesus Christ "grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man." (Luke 2:52) It was from her home that He went out to become the Son of Man with nowhere to lay His head. It was with her nearby that He gave His life for the sins of the world.

Here we see no "Blessed ever-virgin", no "Immaculate Mother of God", no bejeweled "Queen of Heaven", who has been snatched bodily from the grave



to reign as “Co-Redemptrix with her Son – as the Church in Rome has so mistakenly described her. Here rather we see a woman with all the loveliness and strength, all the frailty and weakness of all women. Here we see one of us – and God so honored her and used her because she had a complete trust in Him, a gracious willingness to submit her life to Him, a desire to be nothing but a “handmaid of the Lord”. Mary the mother of Jesus deserves, as a woman, all the love and respect that a grateful human race can give her.

Most of you ladies who are here this morning know what it is to be a mother. This sermon is addressed to you and, in anticipation, to your daughters. You personally have known the joy of bringing a new life into the world. You personally have had the thrill of watching a baby become a boy or girl, perhaps even a man or woman and if not, you will have this thrill. You personally have felt the responsibility and challenge of being a good mother, both for the sake of your child and of its father, and you realize, at least in anticipation, that this requires flexibility and growth on your part. Your child or children and your husband appreciate your unselfish care over them more than they will normally admit.

But you must never forget that it is God Himself who has given you your children. He is the God who is continually carrying on His creative activity. The conception of your child, even though scientifically explainable is nonetheless a miracle only slightly less amazing than that of the Son of God.

You want the best for your child or children, but you sometimes are at a loss to know what is best or how to bring it about. God also wants the best for your child – and He knows both *what* and *how*. Like a mother, He offers to take you into partnership with Himself to achieve your common longing.

In His name, therefore, I invite you to open your heart to a deeper and more intimate relationship with God, giving yourself again and again to Christ and allowing His Spirit to control and enrich you. Submit your will to Him cheerfully, as Mary did long ago. When you can say with her: “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word”; when you become willing to subordinate your own plans for your child to those of God, then in His wisdom and power you will be able to bring your child up in such a way that, like Jesus, he will “grow in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man”. What more could you want?

One of the well known sleepy cities of southern Spain, with an illustrious past, is the city of Cordoba. This city counts among its treasures a bridge that has spanned the Guadalquivir River since Roman times; an ancient quarter through which cars cannot drive, in which the streets are flanked by white, vertical walled residences tastefully decorated with flower pots and trellises; and a cathedral unlike any other cathedral in the world.

The cathedral at Cordoba bears the stamp of every civilization that has controlled southern Spain. For centuries it was a Moslem mosque, built and expanded by the Moors, who used as their construction materials parts of more ancient buildings, Roman and Visigothic in origin. When the Moors were driven from Cordoba in the thirteenth century, Christians were caught in a dilemma. They could not suffer the presence of a Moslem mosque in their midst, nor could they bear to tear it down. They solved the problem by building a Christian cathedral in the center of the mosque, and there it stands today. The composite building is an architectural monstrosity, but in its symbols it is perfect. For the remains of the kingdoms of this world are gathered together and in the center is Christ.

You see Christ was born to be the center of human history and human culture. Recollect for a minute how easily He filled this role. We read this morning in the second chapter of Luke of the boy Jesus at the center of the learned men in the temple at Jerusalem – or the vision of St. John on the island of Patmos, as Christ stood among the churches at the center of His people. Take our Lord's own evaluation of the significance of His crucifixion. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." (John 12:32)

It is in the light of this affirmation that we must face the crisis of secularism in our culture today. Through a variety of causes, both intellectual and behavioral, personal contact between Christ and the average professing Christian has been lost. The ritual contact between Christ and the world is becoming diffuse. The collective fond memory which our nation has of things Christian is not sufficiently captivating. Contemporary religious philosophy is not providing satisfactory answers. The result is that our Christian culture has been left strictly on its own. It has been put out to pasture. It has lost not only the redeeming vitality of the living Christ in its

midst but also the stabilizing framework of Christian tradition. It is only during the last two or three years that public figures in the public press felt free to knock Christianity.

So – the tossing of the sea. How many split personalities there are, men and women “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine.” (Ephesians 4:14) How many there are who waver in their decision making like “A wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” (James 1:6)

Read the morning paper. That which is recorded is not all bad, but it does represent a bewildering seesawing. Science with its brilliant thrust forward is used by mankind for his welfare and it is tragically misused. The community at large shows deep concern at one moment and hostility at another. The leisure and the freedom which is our lot today is used at times in a healthy and constructive way, at other times in an unhealthy and dissipating way. In our midst there is creativity, there is waste, there is want and destruction; there is triumph, there is tragedy. All of these are unpredictably intermingled because there is no stabilizing center.

This morning, we have baptized three of our own children. In a new way, we have responded as a congregation to God’s intent in instituting this sacrament. This act has helped to clarify our task as Christians. It is our lot to reclaim our culture for Christ, to sift it where it needs sifting, to purify it where it is reclaimable, to redirect it in the paths which our Lord has set. And – to find means of passing the secret of all of this to our children.

This is my conviction and challenge. It is also echoed in a call to renewal that was approved a year ago by the General Assembly of our church. Let me quote to you from that call:

“... [The] 177th General Assembly calls the United Presbyterian Church in all its forms and situations to a renewal and extension of its ministry in the world. This call recognizes that the world is presently in the midst of social change unprecedented for its scope and swiftness. It recognizes that such change is resulting in upheavals of social structures which call into question many views of human life long accepted and widely cherished, producing widespread alienation of man from himself, from his neighbor, and from God. This call affirms the unchanging truth of the Gospel which declares that God so loved this world that He calls the Church into being through the work of Christ, for His continuing ministry of reconciliation.”

In the face of the Church's comparative impotence in our time, I am somewhat staggered by the complexity of the job. For our role today cannot involve retreat from the world, nor can it involve absorption or assimilation into the world. It does involve our being in communication with people of all kinds and thoughts of all kinds, free to accept and also free to resist those elements within and without the Church which are not consonant with the truth. And all of this is possible only when we ourselves are experiencing Christ at the center of our lives. God in us is sufficient for this task. The contribution we make this winter and in the years ahead will be limited only by our capacity to respond.



“I guess I don't think much about God anymore. He just isn't as important to me, now that I am out in the real world.” Thus hundreds of thousands of young people might speak today, and hundreds of young ministers might go on then to explain: “You see, people don't worry about heaven and hell anymore. The word ‘salvation’ has no meaning to them. The need for a God who explains everything and fixes everything is not as great as it was. In fact, the category of ‘God’ has no meaning to people today. *We* have got to look for new categories.”

Thus the conversation goes on today – the serious conversation and the chit-chat. And even though much of this conversation goes on among church members, men and women who are formally related to what the Church stands for, it betrays a self-consistent and clearly discernible world-view which is not Christian, in fact which is the very antithesis of Christianity.

According to this secular mind-set, man has evolved and then used a more and more sophisticated set of gods. Religion has been a beneficial category, but of course its benefits have been entirely subjective. Belief in God has been very useful in the elementary and adolescent periods of the emergence of the human race. But the world has now “come of age.” The useful patterns of religion have no longer proved useful, and therefore man is perfectly free to stand in judgment on the religions and on the gods of his own creation. And so, some voices today simply dismiss the concept of God, while others seek to save the terminology as they update the content (and trivializing it in the process).

So prevalent are the variants on this point of view that it is good for us from time to time to touch home base, and my text for this morning, or should I say my three texts, are an ideal setting for this home base. Listen therefore to the Word of God:

“God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am,’ and He said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: I am has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14) “And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me.” (Exodus 20:1-3) “Here, O Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord

and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4)

Three times a declaration, three times a command – here is no groping for God, no speculating about His relevance, no attempt to replace Him with something more modern. Here are the ultimate facts of life: God is. We are to put Him first. We are to love Him with our whole being. If we are to hold our heads above water in the midst of the enveloping currents of secularism, we must come to grips with, and absolutely commit ourselves to, the law for all time which tells us that God is, that God comes first, and that God’s will supersedes our will.

God creates time – we live within it.

God purposes – we fit into His purposes.

God acts – we react.

God loves – we love because He first loved us.

How different the course of the world would be, how different the evolving drift of the thought of man, if this law for all time were recognized, appreciated and acted upon. There would be a recovery of reverence, a recovery of responsibility, a recovery of integrity, a recovery of concern. That popular and very contemporary summary of the law “to love thy neighbor as thyself” would be seen in the context of the greater love and would then be free to operate effectively.

Are you a Christian? Measure your answer with reference to this law for all time. May you truly come to find in all of its implications the God-centered life.

We live in a day when religion is not very popular. It is true that in American suburbia the churches are full, but this phenomenon is looked on by secular thinkers as a cultic hangover, a security symbol from the past in which the upper middle class indulges. You see, the secular world-view has no place for religion. Scientifically and philosophically it is outdated. The supernatural is unacceptable. Such concepts as "salvation," "morality," "God" must be redefined if not discarded entirely. To repeat, religion is irrelevant, if not positively immoral and dishonest, from the point of view of the secular world. (And given their premises, I would be forced to agree with them.)

In this new secular world, we are faced with a vocal outer fringe of the church which seems to be penetrating it slowly, which is being swayed by what I have just said and would see the entire message and mission of the church redefined in such a way as to be made acceptable to the secular world. Putting it simply, their opinion is that the church must "go native." Let me quote from just two recent articles I have read.

1. "Men no longer see themselves as dependent upon the gods or upon almighty God for their life and destiny, but on their imaginative inventiveness and technology... Concurrently, the major emphasis of modern theology is not so much upon the transcendence of God and remote from the sweat and toil and problems of the world as upon the immanence of God who was incarnate in Jesus Christ and is in the midst of the world in all its anguish and agony with hope and promise. If this is an accurate reading of our world and of God's relationship to it, then if the Church is to be evangelistic, it must proclaim its faith in these terms. Theology is in flux, the Church is uncertain of its role, and everything that once was thought to be certain is up for question..." George Thompson Peters, *Presbyterian Life*, February 15, 1967
2. "The Church's life does not mean withdrawal from the world's life, but rather intense concern for it and 'servanthood' in it. The renewed church is not proselytizing men's souls. It is committed to a ministry of involved concern for men's bodies, minds and souls. It is a commitment based on the essential meaning of the Gospel for whole persons within whole societies. The great religious questions of today are poverty, war, racial

separation, sexuality and population explosion. Where there is lacking a Christian expression of such questions in the public sphere, increasingly this is matched by a spiritual vacuum in the lives of many individual Christians.” Rev. Malcolm Boyd, *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 1967.

Now these are comparatively restrained quotations. In its more extreme forms, the secular reaction within the Church is definitely “another gospel,” a faith so redefined that the biblical terms become meaningless. Instead of Christianity, we have left only the Christianized humanism. Instead of the proclamation and the implementation of the Gospel, we have merely the Christian arm of the great secular struggle for man and society.

It is therefore well for us to remember that in the great passage on reconciliation which is so popular in today’s church, the Apostle Paul writes: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself... So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:19, 20)

At the same time that we are being critical of the voice of secularism, we must also recognize that its critique of “religion,” that is the structures and patterns of man’s religious activity as distinct from God’s revelation of Himself and God’s activity among men, is echoed with astonishing force within the Bible itself. And this brings me to our text of the morning. In Isaiah 1, we read:

“I have had enough of burnt offerings and rams... I do not delight in the blood of bulls... Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?... Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates... They have become a burden to Me... When you spread forth your hands, I will hide My eyes from you, even though you all make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood.”

Here is God speaking to a religious people – but a people who had divorced the activities of worship from responsible and ethical conduct. What makes the vertical contact with God acceptable? “Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.” Here is a challenge to put religion into action, to tie it in with the real needs of the real world.

Of course this emphasis recurs. We find Jesus in the temple during the last week of His life denouncing the hypocrisy and religiosity of the Pharisees.



“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs... So you outwardly appear righteous men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” (Matthew 23:27, 28) And again in Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of the same thing in the parable of the sheep and the goats. In the Book of James we read: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (James 1:27)

Time and again throughout the history of the Christian Church, this pattern has been repeated. And as the secular world reminds us today, the world neither needs nor will any while longer tolerate the empty forms of religion. Therefore the challenge is to us as men and women who know Christ, who have experienced a living relationship with God through Him to take seriously the critique of the Church which is given by the world, not that we will capitulate uncritically to its standards of measurement, but that we will seek to make our faith relevant so that we may be truly Christian and not simply religious, as we look forward to tomorrow's world.



Christianity is a joyous, optimistic religion. From the appearance of our Lord Jesus on the scene until today, His resurrection eclipsed His crucifixion, the coming of His Spirit, at Pentecost eclipsed the sadness of His departure on Ascension Day, and the thrust of Peter's first sermon, hard-hitting as it was, is one of promise. And so this sermon is about the promise of Pentecost. The outline is simple.

1. *The fact of the promise.* In describing Christianity as a joyous, optimistic religion, a religion of promise, we find our precedent all the way back at the beginning. When Abraham was called from his home, he responded to the promise and we read in Hebrews 11:9, "By faith He sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with Him of the same promise." Later on the promise of the Messiah took shape, and this promise came to a head in the proclamation of John the Baptist that: The kingdom of heaven is at hand". After Easter it was Jesus Himself who carried on the tradition of verbalizing the promise. Thus we find Him at the end of the gospel of Luke saying, "Thus it is written that Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things and behold I send the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:46-49) This He followed up, according to the book of Acts, when He told the apostles, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..." (Acts 1:8) So it is in this great tradition that Peter closes his first sermon with these words: "For the promise is to you and your children and to all that are afar off, every one whom the Lord God calls to Him." (Acts 2:39)
2. *The content of the promise.* It is interesting to try to focus in on the content of this running promise that God extended to His people. Is the promise that we are to be accepted by God; is it that we are to receive a guaranteed entrance into heaven? Is it that we are be allowed a new start here on earth? In a sense, all of these are true as is the promise that we shall all be made one in Christ. And yet as we study the last chapter of

Luke and first two chapters of Acts, it becomes evident that the core content of the promise is that we shall receive the Holy Spirit and experience *God in us*. *Emmanuel*, God with us, is not sufficient. What God has in store for us is an indwelling, what Paul calls later, “Christ in you the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27)

3. *The conditions for receiving the promise.* Grace by its very nature is unconditional and God loves without demanding anything in return. And yet it is evident both from Jesus’ own words and from Peter’s words that the content of the promise cannot be assembled by us unless it is preceded by repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Let me quote the two passages in question. “Thus it is written that Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations ... “. (Luke 24:46-7) And then, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”. (Acts 2:34) It is God who calls us to Himself. It is we who react in repentance. It is God, again, who forgives and then the gift of the Holy Spirit can become a reality.
4. *The scope of the promise.* To whom is this promise offered? The answer to this question is one of the most exciting things about this joyous, optimistic religion. “For the promise is to you and your children and to all that are afar off, everyone who the Lord our God calls to Him. (Acts 2:39) Here is the answer to our question. The promise is first of all to those who are listening. If you and I are hearing and are receptive, the gift is as good as ours, even if it is not already ours. Secondly, the promise is to our children. This can be a matter of great encouragement to use as we seek in these troubled days to communicate our faith to those of the next generation. It used to be that in the Presbyterian baptismal service, the words at the time of the baptism itself were as follows: “So and so *child of the covenant*, I baptize thee in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen. The covenant that was claimed here was the promise about which we are currently talking.

But the promise is not only to us and to our children but also to all who are “far off.” Many Christians are content to assume that by these words are meant the long-range descendants of Christian families. But it means

a lot more than this. And I would quote at this point from the book of Ephesians (2:11-16): “Remember that at one time you gentiles in the flesh ... were separated from Christ Jesus [you who once were far off] have been brought near in the blood of Christ ... He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through Him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.” There is a universality to this definition of those who are far off which is all inclusive. There is a “far-offness” of race, the far-offness of culture, the far-offness of nationality, the far-offness of language. And the promise of God is that all of these “far-offnesses” will be of no consequence. This very thing was demonstrated at Pentecost in the symbolism of the miracle of speaking in other tongues which made international communication possible on very short order.

5. *The consequences of the promise.* And what is the result of the indwelling Holy Spirit? The answer is total reconciliation, the acceptance of one another, the quality of one another in Christ, the unity of all members of the Body of Christ. The dividing wall of hostility has been broken down. The brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God, which has so often been merely a humanistic platitude, gets filled with its proper content. And God’s vision of a community of love becomes a reality.

How often and how hard the Church and the world in its better moments struggled for peace and unity? In God’s grace, progress has been made many times and thus the human race has been protected against the results of its own hostility. The true basis of unity, however, and of acceptance and equality is and must be the role of the Holy Spirit working through His Church.

Pentecost has been designated this year by our denomination as the day on which the quality of all groups shall be emphasized and reaffirmed. Very shortly, the opportunity will be given to all of you to participate in the annual Fund for Freedom which supports the fight for racial and cultural equality. May this world be truly united in Christ through the works of the Holy Spirit blowing where He wills.

Have you ever experienced the thrill of seeing for the first time a city you have dreamed of seeing for many years – Washington, London, Rome – and find it even more exciting than you had anticipated? If so, you have some idea of the excitement engendered in the heart of the ancient Hebrew as he turned his thoughts toward Mt. Zion, the city of Jerusalem. To him this was the center of life. Listen:

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’ Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.” (Psalm 122:1-2)

“On the holy mount stands the city He founded; the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken to you, O city of God.” (Psalm 87, 1-3)

Why was this city so important to the Hebrew? First, it was the stronghold of David, founder of the royal line which God had established. Secondly, it was the place of the holy Temple of the Lord God. Uniquely it was the political and the religious capital of Israel, the people of God. Kings were there. Priests were there. *And God was there!*

“Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth. Mount Zion in the far north of the city of the Great King.” (Psalm 87:1-3)

Here was the point of convergence for the people of God. And here, because of the unique role intended by God for the Hebrew nation, was the point of convergence for the nations, from which they would receive the word of grace.

“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains ... and all nations shall flow to it ... for out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between nations

... and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares...” (Isaiah 2:1-4)

Zion was glorious, but tragically its glory was only symbolic, for the nation would not accept its destiny, its role in history. Jerusalem was destroyed – partially rebuilt – but never free again. But still it drew the pilgrims, and finally in the providence of God, it drew Our Lord.

He set his face to go to Jerusalem, and when He arrived, He wept over the city. He entered the Temple, and in righteous indignation He purged it. He foretold the final destruction of the city, and then died Himself.

He rose from the dead, and took upon Himself the role of the city of God! For He, Christ, entered heaven as the great High Priest. He, Christ, presented Himself as the embodiment of truth, the law. He became for all mankind the point of convergence, as He extended the invitation: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden”.

And what of the Church? By extension, as His body, it has become the point of convergence for the nations as they seek God.

It has been seen by John as the “new Jerusalem”, the “bride adorned for her husband”. (Revelation 21:2)

It has been described by Peter as “*the spiritual house made of “living stones”*” – and as consisting of a “*royal priesthood*”.

From the Church of Jesus Christ the word of God will go out, as the nations are willing to hear.

So it is to the *Church* that we now sing: “Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God ...”

The Church stands before the world today, here and elsewhere, as the point of contact, the point of unity, the point of convergence where God meets man. It is without a single location for as Jesus said: “The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father”. (John 4:21) but is “wherever two or three are gathered in His name.” (Matthew 18:20)

May we therefore come as the Hebrews came to Zion. May we bring our children to hear the word of God, and to meet Him who is the personification of that Word. May we receive at His hand, and so be equipped to serve the world in His name.

