



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

ADOPTING A HERITAGE

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 29, 2012

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ²So the Twelve [that is, the Apostles] gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

⁵This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Acts 6:1-6 (NIV)

Introduction: Thoughts on Citizenship

Those of you who are new to our church will be witnessing in a few minutes something that we do once a year. And it may seem somewhat strange to you. Men and women will be coming forward to be ordained and installed to begin officially serving as elders and deacons in our church—our elected officers. To do so, many others who have already been ordained will come forward to join them, and by laying hands on them (or on someone touching them) and praying for them, the responsibilities of leadership will be symbolically and spiritually transferred to them. This is not a ritual or custom we invented. It is, in fact, very old—nearly 2000 years old, to be

precise. It was described in our biblical text found in the Book of Acts, the history of the first generation of followers of Christ.

One of the great privileges of my role as a pastor is that I am able to be with individuals and families as they deal with the loss of a loved one. And in that process it is customary to hold a memorial or funeral service, speaking about the person who has died and reflecting on their life's experiences and legacy. I learn so much about people that I otherwise wouldn't know, and probably would never guess. A few weeks ago I led a memorial service for a woman from our congregation who had been born in Nazi Germany in 1942. During her childhood and youth she experienced a time when her homeland was deeply ashamed of their recent actions and trying to make sense of their heritage. She was able to emigrate to America as a young adult, and quickly discovered that she loved it here—in fact, it felt more like home to her than her fatherland. She quickly mastered our language and culture and customs, and decided to pursue the process of becoming a naturalized citizen. She studied our history and our government and our traditions, and she aced the test, and one of the proudest days in her life was when she took the oath of citizenship.

Millions of people through the past few centuries have followed the same path. They have physically relocated here from other lands, and they have also mentally and emotionally relocated, becoming fully Americans and adopting our heritage. Some of us were actually born on this continent—but unless we can claim pureblooded Native American ancestry, somewhere in our family tree (perhaps our parents or grandparents, or several generations back) someone made that big move. Even if some of you have absolutely no blood ties or DNA connection to anyone living on the North American continent in 1776, there is a very real sense in which you can rightly claim the Founding Fathers and the veterans of Valley Forge as your ancestors.

The same is true for our spiritual citizenship as part of the historic Christian faith. When we learn from the Bible and claim Christ as our Savior, we are effectively taking an oath to belong to the Kingdom of

God. From a spiritual perspective we can therefore adopt Abraham, Moses and David, Peter, Paul and John as our ancestors and identify with their heritage—even if all of them were Jews and we don't have a single drop of Jewish blood in our veins.

On this annual occasion of the “Kirkin’ of the Tartan,” I believe we can all claim a heritage from the land and people of Scotland. In fact, I am convinced that not only all Presbyterians but all Americans (and all Canadians and all who live as citizens of any democratic government) can rightly see themselves as “descendants” of Scotland—and, particularly, the Scottish Reformation—even if their blood ancestors are from Italy or Poland or India or Brazil or wherever. I hope to explain why we owe such a debt to our Scottish forefathers and mothers in liberty.

The Impact of the Scottish Reformation

When we project ourselves backward nearly 400 years, far before the first settlements were carved out of the wilderness of North America, we find a tremendous movement of the intellect and spirit sweeping across Northern Europe. The Reformation, coupled with the invention of the printing press and the translation of the Bible into common language, led to a rediscovery of the principles of Scripture and their significance for every area of life.

What was the impact of scripture upon Scotland—and, thus, upon us, some four centuries and thousands of miles removed? There are four significant principles I believe we need to call our churches and our nations back to.

Principle 1: Scripture is our primary authority.

Scotland in the 16th century was a poor nation, lacking natural resources and with inhospitable weather and soil, adrift on the outer fringe of Europe. And yet, after its spiritual Reformation, it quickly became the most literate and educated nation of the entire continent. Why? Because the leaders of church and society recognized the importance of every person—man and woman, boy and girl, poor farmer or rich landowner—knowing how to read so that they could understand and obey for themselves the teachings of God's Word.

And with universal education and regular reading of the Scriptures, a common understanding and common values spread naturally. A political and moral consensus was possible because nearly everyone understood God's purposes. From small country parishes to great cathedrals, the Word of God was read and discussed every Sunday. And thus its shadow of righteousness and truth was cast across the lives of the people Monday through Saturday. To change the image, the Bible served as the intellectual and spiritual "glue" that kept them together and unified.

The culture of the West in Europe and North America in the past few decades has lost this central "glue." Our obsession with "multiculturalism" has robbed us of a common culture and authority. Being overly-cautious about offending the minority viewpoints, we have lost a majority consensus. We're intellectually fractured into multiple opinions and multiple truth sources. Let me offer one example of how our biblical illiteracy has infected us, through a simple comparison: an incident in June 1940 to one in January 2001.

June 1940: Hitler's army has compressed the British Army into a pocket at the French seaside community of Dunkirk, their backs to the English Channel. All of Britain is anxious that their forces will surrender, leaving them defenseless. A three-word cable is sent by the besieged British commander back to London, and it is instantly flashed across the country—to the great relief of all. The message: "But if not..."

It was a reference to a story in the Bible. Three Jewish believers in the Book of Daniel (chapter 3) were about to be thrown into the fiery furnace by the Babylonian tyrant, who demanded that they either bow to worship him or perish in the flames. The three men reply that they will not bow down. "Our God can, if He chooses, rescue us from the furnace," they proclaim. "*But if not* ... we will still be faithful to Him and will not give in." The clear message to the British people: their troops were hoping for a miracle, but if it didn't come they would not surrender. All the leaders of the nation, the news media, the church leaders and even the common people understood the reference—

because the Bible was still their cultural glue. (And, of course, those troops *were* rescued, in what many believe to be a miracle, as hundreds of fishing boats ferried them across the Channel to safety). Would Americans (or English, or Canadians) understand that biblical reference today?

Fast forward to **January 2001**. President George W. Bush, in his first inaugural address, outlined his intention for what he called “compassionate conservatism.” He used this sentence: “When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side.” It was a clear and obvious reference to one of the greatest and best-known stories told by Jesus, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And yet a CBS news correspondent, immediately after the address, commented: “I don’t get what he was talking about with that ‘road to Jericho’ stuff.” No, he obviously didn’t. Nor did many Americans—even though President Bush’s reference to the Bible is much clearer to anyone who has read it than the cable from Dunkirk 60 years earlier. This is how our society has changed. We’ve lost our spiritual glue.

Which is precisely why it is important for us, right here, to make sure we know and are anchored in the Bible. I estimate that 700 or more of us are reading through the New Testament this year. Some of us have encouraged a family member or friend who is not part of this church to do so as well. We have to start somewhere to rebuild the foundation bequeathed to us by the Scots. There’s no better place to start than within these pages.

Principle 2: Power belongs to the people, not the government.

Grounded in their reading of the New Testament and the logical consequences from it, Scottish reformers like John Knox and the brilliant scholar George Buchanan proclaimed that, in Buchanan’s words, “political power is ordained by God to govern mankind, but that power is vested in the people, not in kings or nobles or clergy.” This was radically democratic and liberating. It was not especially welcomed by the king of England, who arrogantly thought of himself the way all powerful people tend to do. Nor was it welcomed by the Archbishops

and Bishops of the Church of England, who wanted to impose their ecclesiastical authority on those stubborn Presbyterians in Scotland.

A few decades after Knox, the Scots bonded together and by the thousands signed what came to be known as the “National Covenant” in 1638. In doing so they pledged to resist tyranny and outside control, and to fight with their lives and honor to retain their God-given rights to choose and empower their own leaders. It would be impossible to imagine the Declaration of Independence being written in 1776 in Philadelphia if a group of brave Scots had not done the same thing nearly a century and a half earlier in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and then had the courage to stare down the king’s muskets to preserve their freedom.

When Scottish pastor Andrew Melville was invited to preach before the court of King James, he spoke bluntly: “Scotland is two realms. You, your majesty, are king of the first—the government—but in the second realm you are as subject as I am to Jesus Christ in His Kingdom.” The king had never been spoken to like that, and he was dumbfounded. But Melville spoke the truth.

Where did this principle of the people choosing their own leaders come from? The positive example is found in today’s text, Acts 6 – the church gathered, prayed, and then voted to select their next generation of leaders. That is the template for us in this church, and in all Reformed churches. And that is the template we follow in republican democracies as well—such as we are doing in our election Tuesday.

Principle 3: The equal worth of all

A sinful and destructive tendency of human nature has always been to divide, separate and stratify people into higher and lower, preferred and rejected groups. But God’s Word stands in dramatic repudiation of that temptation. All of us—of every nation, gender, age, race, level of income and education—are equal in the eyes of God. None of us is inherently better than anyone else. This radical equality, expressed in the words of our nation’s great Declaration (“we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights...”), is a biblical concept. Admit-

tedly and tragically, it was not fully followed when our Constitution was written a decade later, due to the self-interest and blindness of the slave owners of the American South, and it took a horrible Civil War to finally fulfill the vision of the 1776 Declaration. But the concept of the equality of all was taken seriously by the Scottish Reformers.

And we find in our biblical text a clear warning about the necessity of this. The church in Jerusalem in Acts 6 was in danger of being splintered apart. There were believers who were “Greek-speaking” and those who were “Hebrew-speaking” (actually Aramaic, a first-century Hebrew dialect). We understand this potential division. There are in southwest Florida today some people whose native and first language is English, and some whose native and first language is Spanish. Language and culture and nationality often divide people. If we let it, differences like this can cause a wedge in a community, turning it against itself. The apostles and the entire community of Christians in Acts 6 quickly recognized the danger and acted to correct it. Since the “Greek” group was being treated as second-class, the people purposely elected men with obviously Greek names, like Philip (the name of the Greek father of Alexander the Great), and even one guy from Antioch who was a Greek and only a recent convert to Judaism. By this act, the church prevented a “class warfare” or division from developing within it.

As we fulfill our citizenship duties to wisely choose the leaders for our community and our nation, we need to be on guard against this oh-so-human tendency to try to divide people into “us” and “them.” Politicians are always tempted to do so to try to get votes. *I’m on your side, not theirs. Vote for me because I’ll look out for your interests versus those other people.* Sometimes politicians try to divide us on racial lines, other times on economic class, age or other so-called “populist” themes. Be on your guard. Any politician of any party who tries to drive a wedge, or who tries to divide our nation between “us” and “them,” is threatening the unity we need to maintain. The New Testament warns us against that. When you watch the political ads and listen to the platforms, be very suspicious of those who play to class or group warfare.

Principle 4: Leaders are called to the highest standards.

A people will not be able to live up to standards of ethics and behavior that their very leaders are violating. This is a clear theme of Scripture, and one that the Reformed Church of Scotland made pre-eminent. Certainly no human being this side of heaven is ever perfect and blameless. But, though imperfect, it is possible and reasonable to expect our leaders to be genuinely seeking to grow and to be living out their faith consistently.

What is most destructive to any organization or community is hypocrisy: leaders requiring their people to obey one set of laws or standards while exempting themselves from those same laws and standards. The problems and corruptions in our Congress and our federal bureaucracy have fueled the righteous anger and distrust of Americans. When members of Congress won't live by the laws they've made, and when they give each other mild wrist-slaps for crimes that would land most of us behind bars, we have every reason to protest. If anyone is going to live to the highest standards, it should be our chosen leaders—whether in the civil government or in the church. And if they will not, they have forfeited their authority and should be removed.

Conclusion

We have briefly looked at four foundational and biblical principles that have created our heritage: Scripture is our primary authority, power belongs to the people, the equal worth of all, and leaders are called to the highest standards. Even if you have heard nothing new today, it never hurts to review—to return together to refresh our memories and renew our dedication to what we hold most dear.

Lest we ever think the Bible is just a collection of fairy tales and pious platitudes that relate only to an ethereal and other-worldly spiritual zone divorced from real daily life, today (and hopefully every Sunday) we seek to apply its timeless truths to the world we live in. If we allow Scripture to be our guide and the Holy Spirit to apply it, what a practical and profound difference the Truth will make! ■

