

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 1, 2007**

STATE OF THE CHURCH

Matthew 16:13-18

Those of you who were here last Sunday heard Elder Don Colley give a brief report from the just-concluded 27th General Assembly of the EPC. At the risk of repeating some of what Don spoke about, and with your indulgence, I want to take this opportunity to share with you some personal reflections and observations from the Assembly. I hope you won't mind it if, instead of preaching this morning, I mostly just talk with you about what took place and its significance.

The most significant action of the General Assembly was the almost-unanimous approval of the proposals to establish "Transitional Presbyteries" to provide a way for congregations from the Presbyterian Church (USA) or other denominations to enter the EPC on a transitional basis. As part of the overall plan, the Assembly voted to establish two commissions, one which will oversee the Transitional Presbytery for churches seeking direct entry into the EPC, and a second commission to oversee the new EPC-New Wineskins Transitional Presbytery.

The term "New Wineskins" refers to an association of churches from the Presbyterian Church (USA), numbering around 150 congregations, who have agreed together to seek a new home in the EPC.

Of the 13 individuals elected by the Assembly to serve on these two commissions, two of them are from our own congregation here at Faith. Elder Zelda Artz is one of the five EPC members of the commission for the EPC-New Wineskins Transitional Presbytery, while Elder Alan Smith is one of eight members of the commission for churches desiring to come directly into full EPC membership.

What we have done as a denomination is to take a bold, risky step of faith. As John Ortberg said: "You'll never walk on water if you don't get out of the boat." We have, in effect, gotten out of the boat as a denomination, taking a step of faith in response to what we believe is the leading of the Holy Spirit. Exactly where it will lead and what kind of changes in the EPC it will produce we don't know. But we see this moment and we embrace it as an exciting opportunity to trust God and to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in obedience to God's Word. How many churches will be led by God to join us in the EPC is an unknown. Within the next five years (which is the life span of these new Transitional Presbyteries) the number of churches in the EPC could double. Just last Sunday – a week ago today – two churches in Illinois and three more in southeastern Pennsylvania voted to disaffiliate with the Presbyterian Church (USA) and to align themselves with the EPC. They were preceded in recent months by several other churches around the country. And many more PCUSA congregations are in the midst of a process which may lead them to join us in the EPC.

The other night, after Mary Sue and I had returned from Colorado, I was watching the movie *“Field of Dreams”* with my son Nathan. At one point in the movie James Earl Jones (Terence Mann) says to Kevin Costner (Ray Kinsella): “Sometimes we fail to recognize the significant events in our lives when they happen.”

I think that is true. I’m sure it is true in my life. But I think that those of us who were privileged to be in Denver for this General Assembly recognize that this Assembly and its actions regarding our relationship to New Wineskins churches and the establishment of these Transitional Presbyteries constitute a significant event – a truly historic moment – in the life of the EPC. And I am grateful that the Lord gave me the opportunity to be a part of it.

I want to say very clearly that we have no joy and we take no delight in the “ecclesiastical wranglings” and conflicts in the PCUSA which have brought us to this point. In his presentation of the Transitional Presbytery proposals, Rev. Bill Meyer, chairman of the General Assembly Committee on Administration, said: “We have expressed sadness and grief to God that these are conditions which exist in (the Christian church) that have resulted in people coming to us and inquiring about affiliation with (the EPC). We have not solicited this. We have not gone out, but have simply been there to respond.”

It is critically important that we not demonize those whose views or convictions may differ from ours. As was emphasized at the Assembly, Louisville – the headquarters of the PCUSA – is not our enemy. The PCUSA and its leaders are not the enemy. Sadly, many in the PCUSA have been deceived by the real enemy – our adversary Satan, the devil himself. Satan is the real enemy, and to oppose him we must be vigilant to put on the full armor of God.

Remember what Paul said in Ephesians 6:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood [not against denominations or church bureaucracies], but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of the dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm, then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit with all kinds of prayers and requests.

Our enemy is not the PCUSA or any other denomination. Our enemy is the arch-deceiver, Satan, who desires to render the church impotent and to distract us from the

mission God has given us to carry out in His name. The battles we face in this historic moment are not merely ecclesiastical. They are spiritual battles. And we must avail ourselves of the armor of God and the weapons God provides if we are to stand our ground against the devil's attacks and be victorious in our service to the Lord.

It was striking to hear these New Wineskins churches from the PCUSA described as "immigrants" seeking a new home or "refugees" in search of a safe haven from the conflicts and heterodoxy in the PCUSA. Someone at the Assembly pointed out that there is a sense in which the whole history of the EPC is a history of immigrants and refugees from other places or denominations. You see, what these New Wineskins churches are in their search for a new denominational home where they fit, we at Faith – and most of us in the EPC – once were. Almost all of us who are part of the EPC today were once something else. It is true of us here at Faith, as the founding members of this church sensed God calling them out from a PCUSA congregation 20 years ago and founding this church as part of the EPC in 1987.

In the present situation, God has provided us in the EPC an opportunity to show compassion to those churches from the PCUSA – or other places – who are seeking a safe haven and a new place to carry out their ministry in the name of Christ. The beauty of what we have done as a denomination is that we have found a way to respond quickly to the needs and requests of our brothers and sisters in non-EPC churches who wish to join us. And in doing so, we have maintained our biblical and theological integrity. We have held firm to our doctrinal standards and the essentials of our faith. In all of this, I believe God was and is glorified.

There are two other actions of the Assembly I want to share with you. First, the Assembly approved the establishment of a cooperative relationship with the Coalition for Christian Outreach (or CCO) to impact college students and college communities for Christ. The CCO, which was founded in 1971 and is based in Pittsburgh, holds a special place in my heart and Mary Sue's because 30 years ago this summer, on the heels of graduating from college and getting married, Mary Sue and I joined the staff of the CCO. We spent our "honeymoon" in new staff training with the CCO that summer, and then spent the next three years working with students at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania (Susan Booher's alma mater) and then Ashland University in Ohio, before God called us to seminary.

I'm thrilled about this new relationship and the opportunity it will provide for EPC churches in or near college and university communities to partner together to reach out to students at a critical juncture in their lives.

Second, the Assembly approved an overture which originated with the Session of our sister church in Dundalk, Maryland, and was endorsed by our Presbytery. The overture approved expresses the support of the EPC for the proposed Marriage Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, confining marriage in our nation to the union of a man and a woman.

EPC General Assemblies have historically been reticent to speak to the civil authorities concerning social and political issues, and the Westminster Confession of Faith (31.4) cautions against doing so, except in extraordinary cases. This General Assembly concluded, rightly in my judgment, that when the institution of marriage and its very definition are being attacked and undermined, it is truly an extraordinary case and it is not only appropriate but incumbent upon the church to speak with a clear voice.

Some of you may have seen the article on our General Assembly in last Sunday's (June 24, 2007) *Washington Times*. The sub-heading read: "Conservative offshoot silent on gay pastors, same-sex 'marriage.'" That is not quite accurate, given the Assembly's approval of the overture endorsing the Marriage Amendment to the Constitution. And if the Assembly was silent on the matter of gay pastors, it is because it is not an issue in the EPC. It is settled on the basis of clear biblical teaching which prohibits homosexual practice of any kind in the lives of God's people.

The passage we read earlier from Matthew 16 was the Scripture text used by two of the preachers at the General Assembly. Before I close, I want you to notice what Jesus said in verse 18 after Peter had made his confession of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus said: "I will build my church."

He did not say: "You will build my church."

He did not say: "Pastors will build the church."

He did not say: "Missionaries will build the church."

He did not say: "General Assemblies or denominations will build the church."

He did not say: "Seeker-sensitive programs or outstanding music ministries will build the church."

He said: "I will build my church." It is Christ who builds the church, and the church He is building is not ours, it is His. He may use all of us and all of the things I mentioned in building His church, but He is the One who builds the church. He is the One on whom we depend for the life and strength and health and vitality of the church. He is both the builder of the church and its foundation. He is your foundation and mine, in all the trials and troubles and temptations we encounter in life. He is our firm foundation.

Can I tell you about something that happened to me last week? The day before we came home from Colorado, Mary Sue and I went on a two-hour, guided horseback ride in Rocky Mountain National Park. Near the end of the ride, we actually crossed the Colorado River on horseback. (At this point, I should tell you, the river was only about 20 feet wide and about three feet deep.) At one point earlier in the ride, as we were going down a steep hill on a trail in the park, I nearly fell off my horse (Pilgrim) when my saddle – which was not tied down securely enough – slipped and shifted 90 degrees from the back of the horse to its side, leaving me hanging onto the reins for dear life in a horizontal position, trying vainly to get back up on Pilgrim's back. Fortunately for me, cameras were not permitted on the ride, so no pictures of me in this precarious position are going to turn up on YouTube or anywhere else on the internet! The point of this is

that my foundation on the horse – the foundation of the saddle on which I sat and rested my weight – was not secure.

Jesus is our secure foundation. Jesus is our firm foundation. He is both the builder and the sure foundation of this church. He is the builder and the sure foundation of the EPC. He is the builder and the sure foundation of His church, which transcends denominations.

And He is the secure foundation on which to build your life and faith. Not even the gates of hell or the powers of death will prevail against Him and the church He is building. Nothing can separate us from His love.

I don't know exactly what the future holds for you, for this church, or for the EPC. But I know this: Jesus is building His church and He is the sure and secure foundation for our lives.

Lord, let it be so to the glory of Your name. Amen.