

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 15, 2009**

THE CHURCH JESUS IS BUILDING

Matthew 16:13-18

INTRODUCTION: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE CHURCH

Officials in the Russian Orthodox Church were surprised last year to discover that one of their church buildings had disappeared. I suspect “surprised” is a bit of an understatement. The 200-year-old building had not been used for a decade, but the Russian Orthodox Church was experiencing a period of growth. So church leaders were considering reopening this particular church. But when they went to check it out, they discovered the building wasn’t there.

No, it had not been destroyed in a fire. It was not the victim of a natural disaster. What happened, it seems, is that some enterprising individuals from a nearby village had taken the church building apart, brick by brick, and sold the bricks to a businessman. For each brick, they received one ruble – which is about four cents.

This church building did not go from being a building to not being a building in a single moment in time or as the result of a single event. Instead, the bricks were chiseled out one by one by lots of people.

That is symbolic of what can and does happen too often in too many churches. The church, as you know, is not simply a place. It is not just a building made of bricks or stone. I love this place of worship, but take away this building, and the church remains. Why? Because the church is a spiritual fellowship or family made of “living stones,” as Peter points out in 1 Peter 2:5. If you are a follower of Christ, if you know Him as Savior and Lord of your life, you are one of those living stones.

But too often, some living stones – some believers – chisel themselves out and separate themselves from the church Jesus is building. There may be lots of reasons for this. We know the church has lots of flaws, because it is made up of flawed people. If you don’t have any flaws, you’re not going to fit in here! We are all flawed. We are all flawed sinners. But in Jesus we are redeemed sinners.

James Emery White wrote recently (*Serious Times* Update, Vol. 4, No. 22) that if there is a theme to our day, it is that “it’s all about me.” The technical term, as he notes, is narcissism, which is an obsession with oneself. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was the character who, when he saw his reflection in the water, became so enamored with himself that he devoted the rest of his life to his own reflection. One historian, Christopher Lasch, has gone so far as to call our culture “the culture of narcissism,” saying narcissism is our new religion.

Though it ought to be antithetical to our faith and life as Christ’s followers, White says that spiritual narcissism has invaded our thinking and, too often, our life in the church, so that *my*

needs and *my desires* become the center of our attention. You've probably heard people say, "I want to go where I'm fed" or "My needs aren't being met here." Too many people walk out of a worship service and say, "I didn't get anything out of it," as if worship is primarily about what we *get* rather than what we *give* to God. Maybe you have said something like this. This spiritual narcissism, says White, can have devastating results. It can weaken and even kill a church, as living stones choose to do their own thing, go their own way, and chisel themselves out from the church. It can cause us to lose sight of our God-given purpose. It can paralyze our mission and mute our voice in the world.

I think White is right, and I urge you to guard against spiritual narcissism – or any form of narcissism – in your life. Jesus is building *His* church. Not mine. Not yours. Not ours. *His*. This church belongs to the Lord Jesus. And He calls each of us to be living stones, fully devoted to Him and connected to Him and to one another in love.

PETER'S CONFESSION OF FAITH

In Matthew 16, when Peter made his great confession at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah, the Son of God in flesh and blood, Jesus affirmed him. He said "You've got it, Peter." He blessed Peter and said that He would build His church on the solid rock foundation of this faith in Him. We stand in solidarity with Peter, the other disciples, and the church over the last 2,000 years when we affirm our faith in Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God and the Savior of sinners. And, like Peter, we are blessed that God Himself has opened our eyes and our hearts to see and embrace the truth about who Jesus is and what He did for us. My friend, if you know Jesus today, and I pray that everyone in this place knows Him in a personal and saving way, you are more blessed than you have even imagined. Take time today to let this truth soak into your life.

As we look ahead to Faith Promise Sunday next Sunday, when we will dedicate our 2010 Faith Promises, I want to talk with you today about the church Jesus is building – specifically, the kind of church I think Jesus wants to build here at Faith. Today and next Sunday I want to draw your attention to four particular characteristics of the church Jesus wants us to be as a congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

1. REFORMED

First, we are Reformed in our theology. What does that mean? The word "Reformed" comes from the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, when men like Martin Luther and John Calvin were grieved by serious errors in the doctrine and practice of the Roman Catholic Church, and sought to reform the church according to the Word of God. Their reforms set in motion a spiritual revolution which has spread to every continent.

The word "Reformed" may or may not be a big deal to you. There are millions of Christians in the world who do not embrace the term. But it is an important term and a vital part of our identity as a church. In the Reformed tradition we are the spiritual descendants of Saint Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and the Puritans of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Maybe the best way to describe what it means to be Reformed in theology is by using *the Five Solas*. *Sola* is a Latin word which means “alone” or “only.” The Five Solas of Reformed theology are:

1. The Bible Alone: We believe the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, unerring in all it teaches, authoritative, and (as it says in The Westminster Confession of Faith) “the final and only infallible rule of faith and life.” We look to the Bible alone as it reveals the heart and character of God, along with His purposes and directives for our lives, as the final authority on what we are to believe and how we are to live.

Not the Bible plus the church’s teachings or traditions. Not the Bible plus the pronouncements or creeds of church councils. Not the Bible plus our own experience. We look to the Bible alone as our final authority in all matters of faith and life. *Sola Scripturas*.

2. Grace Alone: Second, we believe that salvation is by grace alone, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:8. From beginning to end, salvation is a gift from God – a gift of His amazing grace. There is nothing you can do to earn it. There is nothing you can do to achieve it. There is nothing you can contribute to it. There is nothing you *need* to do and nothing you *can* do to make it happen. It is all a gift. All you can do is receive it. Which leads us to the third Sola.

3. Faith Alone: The way God’s gift of salvation is received is by faith alone in the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross for us. We are saved by grace alone *through faith alone* in the person and work of Jesus our Savior. And faith itself is a gift from God. You can’t manufacture faith. You can’t make yourself believe something you don’t believe. Try it, and you’ll see that I’m right. Faith is a gift we are given. It is not something we contribute to the work of Christ on our behalf.

4. Christ Alone: Fourth is Christ alone. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. There is no other Savior but Jesus. Peter was right: Jesus (and Jesus alone) is the Christ. He (and He alone) is the promised Messiah. He (and He alone) is the incarnate Son of God. He (and He alone) is the Savior of the world. After the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus, after the Holy Spirit was given to the church on the Day of Pentecost, Peter would declare that salvation is found in no one else but Jesus, and there is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved (Acts 4:12). Our politically correct and pluralistic world doesn’t want to hear it and doesn’t want to believe it, but Jesus is not one of many ways to God. He is not one among many roads to heaven. He is *the only way* (John 14:6). To those who object that the claims of Christianity are too narrow and they exclude too many people because we say there is only one way, I would point out that the really amazing thing is not that there are not many different paths to God (and so it really doesn’t matter what you believe or which religion you follow). The truly amazing thing is that there is *any way* for sinful, fallen, flawed, selfish human beings to be in a right relationship with the God of the universe. But there is a way. It is found in Christ alone. That is the fourth Sola.

5. To God Alone Be the Glory: The fifth Sola of Reformed theology is *Soli Deo Gloria*. To God alone be the glory. In the beauty and vastness of the world He has made, to God

alone be the glory. In all of His acts in History, to God alone be the glory. In the unfolding of His plan for our salvation, to God alone be the glory. In His sovereign rule over all nations and people, to God alone be the glory. In His election of us to be His people, to God alone be the glory. In His protection of His people and provision for His church throughout the centuries, in times of prosperity and times of persecution, to God alone be the glory. In His call to us to be His missionary servants and ambassadors, to God alone be the glory. In life and in death, in sorrow and in joy, to God alone be the glory.

As the psalm writer said in Psalm 115:

Not to us, O LORD, not to us
but to Your name be the glory
because of Your love and faithfulness.

Not to us, but to Him.

Paul says it this way at the end of Romans 11:

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever! Amen.
(Romans 11:36)

The Bible alone. Grace alone. Faith alone. Jesus Christ alone. To God alone be the glory. These are the Five Solas of Reformed theology which constitute a huge part of who we are and what we believe as a church. Reformed theology has always emphasized the biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty over all of creation and in every area of life, along with the doctrines of God's grace in salvation which, when we look at them in proper perspective, will bring comfort and joy to our hearts, knowing that we are secure in God's love for us.

Some people think "Reformed" is a bad word. It is not. Some people think it is an irrelevant word. It is not. It is not the only word that describes who we are or what we believe. And it may not be the most important word. I know, to some of you, what I've just said is probably heresy. But it is not. There are lots of sincere followers of Christ who don't consider themselves "Reformed." But they, too, are part of the church Jesus is building. While being Reformed is an important part of our heritage and identity, it is not the only thing that matters.

2. EVANGELICAL

In addition to being Reformed in our theology, the church Jesus is building is *evangelical* in its convictions and practice. "Evangelical" comes from the Greek *evangel* (or *evangelion*), which means "gospel" or "good news."

We stand with the apostle Paul, who said in Romans 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel (*evangel*), for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." The gospel – the message of God's saving, forgiving love shown in the life and death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ – is the power of God for salvation. It is the means God has chosen to

save broken, sinful people – rich, poor, young, old, weak, strong, regardless of race or sex or national origin – and to restore us to a right relationship with Him as our Lord and God and Heavenly Father.

As Evangelical Presbyterians (we'll have to wait until next Sunday to talk about the word *Presbyterian*), we are committed to the message of the gospel. We *believe* the gospel. We believe people need Jesus and are spiritually lost – eternally lost – apart from faith in Him. To be evangelical means to be committed to the gospel and engaged in sharing the message of the gospel with others.

Paul begins his letter to the Romans by saying he was “set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). We, too, have been set apart for the gospel. The church (*ekklesia* in Greek) is the people God has called out from the world to be His people and to carry out His mission in the world. What is our mission?

- To take the message of the gospel to lost people, and invite them to embrace the gospel and become followers of Christ.
- To share the saving love of Jesus with our neighbors, as we say in our church's mission statement.
- To be His witnesses right where we are and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

You believe that, don't you? We believe it but way too often too many of us don't do anything about it – except come to church and maybe give money to support missionaries (which is a good thing to do!). We are evangelical in name and evangelical in our beliefs. We believe Peter was right when he said that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah, the true Son of God. But way too often we are not evangelical in our actions. We fail to live up to our name in the course of daily life. We agree with Paul that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, but we rarely do anything about it. And so we rarely see the power unleashed.

CONCLUSION

There is more I want to say about being evangelical, but it's time for me to wrap this up. And there are still two more characteristics of the church Jesus is building in our midst that I want to bring to your attention. So we'll do that next Sunday.

Before I close, though, I want to say two things very quickly. The first is a story about two men on an airplane. One was reading a Christian book when his seat mate asked if he was a religious man. When he said he was, the two of them began to talk about religion. In the middle of the conversation, the Christian asked the other man, whose background was an Eastern religion: “Can you give me a one-line statement that captures the essence of your faith?”

“Yes,” the man said. “We are all part of the problem, and we are all part of the solution.”

As their conversation continued, the Christian said: “Would you like a one-line statement that captures the Christian faith?”

“Sure,” said the other man.

“We are all part of the problem, and there is only one man who is the solution. His name is Jesus.”

Friends, Jesus is what this world needs. Jesus is what America needs. Jesus is what our neighbors in Kingstowne and throughout northern Virginia need. He is the only solution there is. And the church is here to share the solution.

Lastly, what does all this talk about being Reformed and Evangelical have to do with our Faith Promises? First, we were reminded by Helen Franssell a few weeks ago that our giving is gospel giving. Our giving is a response to the gospel which has been proclaimed to us and has, by God’s grace, changed our lives. We give in response to the grace we have received in the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. To God alone be the glory! Second, our giving – *your* giving – provides needed financial resources to enable us to carry out our mission in Jesus’ name, to be the church Jesus wants us to be here in northern Virginia, and to do what Jesus wants us to do. It is as simple as that.

So I urge you to support the ministry of the gospel with your giving. And in your living each day. Let’s point people to the solution. And let’s make sure we don’t contribute to the disappearance of the church.

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