

**Christ Community Covenant Church**  
**Teaching Church--Bold in Truth**  
**Pastor Mike Brown - July 8, 2012**

Introduction

Good morning. Today we are going to continue with the values of 4Cs; so, we will begin to talk about what it means to be a teaching church, to be bold in truth and abounding in grace. I promise you that this will be a sermon in two parts. I'm going to break the modern rules of preaching and leave you hanging a bit...but then that is what Jesus did; He asked many, many more questions than He answered, often leaving His followers to ponder.

This week we continue to focus on the values of 4Cs. Today's "stone" is that we value ourselves as a teaching church. For us at 4Cs, teaching means being bold in truth and abounding in grace. The Apostle John says it this way (John 1:17):

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

In the context of talking about truth and grace, I'd like to share with you the recent experience of my ordination by the ECC, which took place two weeks ago at the Covenant's Annual Meeting in Irvine, California. Let me say that today's celebration is as much for Linda as for me. She endured the additional workload ordination imposed on me as well as the weeks of travel associated with it. This celebration is yours, as well. Your prayers and encouraging words sustained me and your tithes funded me. You have participated in my growth as a pastor. I really hope you feel that this event is your celebration, too.

Here is a very small part of the service (video clip).

My Ordination Journey

That was 5 minutes of a two hour and fifteen minute worship service; Linda attended as did Gil and Rhoda Friesen (Gil is on the Covenant National Executive Board), and Cress and Susannah Hart. I wish I could give you a sense of the high worship that occurred during that service. Sixty-seven of us were ordained or commissioned; there were robes, as you saw, high prayers, scripture, important vows--more than you just saw--singing by over 1000 voices. It was wondrous, indeed. Perhaps I can give you some sense of it here.

Let's start with this question: What does it mean to be ordained by a church? Well, ordination is one of those areas of theology that is not well agreed upon by churches. First off, there is no clear precedence for it in the Bible. Yes, there are numerous examples in the Old and New Testament of people being called by God and appointed for service; for example, Joshua replacing Moses. In most of these cases, the ones chosen were prayed over by the laying on of hands, but other than that there is no clear-cut ordination process laid out in the Bible.

It wasn't until the AD 400s that the formal practice of ordination began to appear with the common feature among the varied practices prayer with the laying on of hands. Through the subsequent centuries ordination has come to mean one of a couple of things for the pastor: either a functional difference--the ordained pastor performs a different role in the church from those not ordained, or an ontological difference--the ordained pastor is a different type of being than those not ordained and stands as a mediator between the congregation and God.

I believe with the Covenant church that those ordained are only functionally different; I do not stand between you and God. However, in some sense I am representative for you. This is where the robe and stole come into play. I'm sure there is a varied reaction to seeing the pastor in these vestments; let me explain them. Job says this:

I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. (Job 29:14)

Isaiah says:

I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness. (Isaiah 61:10)

This is sometimes referred to as Christ's robe of righteousness that we each wear. It is impractical that we all wear robes, so the pastor wears one symbolic of Christ's robe of righteousness for all His people.

Similarly, the stole represents our being yoked with Christ; recall that Jesus invites us all to be yoked with Him:

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. (Matthew 11:29-30)

Again, it would be impractical for each of us to wear a stole, so, I wear this stole to represent the yoke of Christ which we have all put on.

As to the ordination itself, Jesus makes it clear that there will be under-shepherds appointed by Him (Matthew 10:6; John 21:15-17); and Paul clearly states that some are called to special ministry for the equipping of the saints (Ephesians 4:11-13). The Bible clearly has some character qualifications for these under-shepherds, but beyond those the Church has often disagreed on how to discern whether one is actually called by God into the role of under-shepherd. Here is the Covenant's discernment process:

In addition to my own prayer and discernment, I have been examined by:

- You, this congregation (informally);
- The 4Cs Council;
- An initial ministry licensure interview with 7 Covenant pastors;
- A pre-ordination interview with 14 Covenant pastors within our conference;
- A second pre-ordination interview with 3 pastors at the national level;
- A vote of affirmation by the pastors within the Midwest Conference;
- A vote of affirmation by the ECC's Ministerial Association; and
- A vote of affirmation by the delegates, people like you, at the ECC's Annual Meeting, which is the Covenant's highest governing body.

And yet there is more. One must be trained for the office; the disciples followed Jesus, Timothy learned under Paul. Various denominations have their own training and education requirements; here is what the ECC requires:

#### Experience

- 2 years in this position (a period of vocational discernment);
- 1 year with a pastor mentor (Dave Scherrer, John Martz, and Monty Newton); and
- Attending various ECC functions.

#### Education

- 60 hours of graduate credit (for Word and Service...MDiv or equivalent for Word and Sacrament)
  - Includes 5 classes focused on the Evangelical Covenant Church and 4 classes in theology and church history.

### What Ordination Means to Me

So, here I am as an ordained pastor of the Evangelical Covenant Church charged, as Paul said, to preach only Christ and Him crucified. (1 Corinthians 1:23, 2:2)

I did not expect the emotional response of the event. In the six years I have been working toward it, it seemed like a box that I should check; I didn't push too hard to obtain the qualifications. I've obtained pilot licenses to fly large airplanes, I've gotten bachelor and master's degrees, completed a graduate certificate program, received awards from companies I've worked for...I thought it would be just another achievement along those lines...and I couldn't have been more wrong.

Here are a few responses I had during the Saturday morning business meeting and the Sunday service:

- Confidence--The long process culminated in a vote by the meeting delegates affirming my call to the office of pastor. Standing in front of hundreds of people just like you who voted to affirm me drove home the importance of the long discernment process and gave me great comfort that so many have been involved besides just me and God.
- Awe--I really like high worship. I like grand cathedrals--the high ceilings, stained glass, and purposeful detail--and I like robes. Some worry about the money spent on such things saying it could be better spend on ministry; however, God's own design for His tabernacle and Temples were not cheap. Also, Jesus so appreciated Mary pouring the expensive oil over His head while the disciples worried about the wasted money that could be used for the poor that He said, "Wherever the gospel is preached this event will be told of" (Mark 14:1-9). At the ordination service I experienced awe at the holiness of God that I often miss during the low-church services.
- Humility--Standing on that stage it dawned on me that I was joining the line of priests going back more than 4000 years to the first priest of God mentioned in Genesis 14, that mysterious man, Melchizedek, carrying through the Levitical priests, and through 2000 years of Christian pastors.
- Responsibility--Listen to the charge given me as inscribed in the Bible we each received (read inscription). It is work of great responsibility and consequence; in biblical history it did not go well for those who falsely claimed to speak for God or who poorly shepherded God's flock.
- Gratitude and Grief--Sunday afternoon after the service we were standing on the Huntington Beach pier. There were thousands of people on the beach and millions in the LA Basin. Jesus' words echoed through my mind: "The gate is narrow that leads to life and few will find it; the gate is wide that leads to destruction and many will find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). I felt overwhelming gratitude for my salvation and grief for the lost.
- Community--Having been examined by pastors and prayed for by pastors, I understood that I was not alone; there are others with whom I can share the burden of this mantle, others who are similarly called and who understand the weight of it.

### Titles of the Office

Let me end the story of my ordination by telling you a little about what it means to me. First, with ordination comes the title of Reverend. It comes from the Latin, meaning *worthy of being revered*. Reverend Mike? Reverend Brown? Reverend is a nice word, but it is too stiff for me; doesn't seem to fit well, and I don't like the connotation of your reverence to me. It feels too unapproachable. Pastor comes from the Latin, meaning *to feed*. It should invoke the memory of Jesus' words to Peter, "Feed my sheep." It also connotes the shepherd image used by God. I like it a lot more than Reverend. The word I like the most is the old English word, curate, from the Latin, meaning *to care or cure* and when applied to a pastor it means one who cares for souls. I think that is me.

However, many people care for souls. There are medical, social, philanthropic, and all manner of other organizations staffed by very caring people, many of whom would care for a soul better than I, as we usually define care. But a Curate cares for souls *in Christ*, which is different. Paul says this:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren (*Romans 8:28-29*).

A Curate cares for souls with God's purpose for them: to conform the soul into the likeness of Christ.

It is fashionable today for the church, like ancient Israel did (1 Samuel 8), to clamor for a leader in the likeness of a secular business leader. Well, I am not the church CEO, COO, CFO, or CIO. I am not a professional project or ministry leader or manager. I am a Curate, and while I may manage projects or ministries or accomplish some executive functions, my calling cannot be reduced to that. Those functions lie largely with you, as you are called and gifted for ministry to the body (Ephesians 4:12).

As a Curate, the only ministry I have is the care of your souls, the only tool I have is my very being. I must be about the work of deepening my relationship with Christ so that through the power of the Holy Spirit I am increasingly united with Jesus, in love, (the two become one) and He leads me into oneness with our Father. How else can I cooperate with the Spirit, as Jesus did, to participate with Him in the care of your souls? How else can I invite you and encourage you and guide you along the narrow way unless I am also intentionally on the journey? So, whether I am Reverend, Pastor, or Curate Mike; whenever I am running ministries, doing administrative work, preaching, teaching, comforting, or visiting in hospitals...for me it is always about the work of caring for your soul *in Christ*. And I must be about it out of relationship with Christ and doing it the way of Christ, in truth and grace.

#### Bold in Truth

For those of you who have known me know that "truth" and "grace" is very important to me. I write letters to editors, challenge bloggers, take on professors, and speak truth to you, all doused with grace, I pray. Now in this role as Curate, given the heavy mantle of responsibility from God of being God's shepherd, truth--God's truth--is even more important to me. Because of this importance I was pleased when Dave asked me to preach on our value of being a teaching church, and God's Truth is what we seek to teach, and in truth we seek to offer God's grace.

#### Basic Problem

Let's be honest, we have a truth problem in this country. It seems we can no longer agree on much of anything. Politics, economics, education, science, morality, fashion, foreign policy...it seems we find more and more ways to disagree with each other. Some, perhaps most, even say there is no objective truth (a self-refuting statement).

If we are really honest, we will admit we have a perpetual truth problem within the Church. Most of what the New Testament writers wrote to the early churches was about truth and trying to help all of these new Christians know God's truth. Perhaps you know that our great creedal statements (Apostle's, Nicene, Athanasian, and Chalcedon) resulted from truth controversies (heresies) within the church.

"Truth," it seems, has often fractured the Church rather than united her. Frankly, the Christian ideal of one body with Christ as its head, one united (catholic) Church of Christ has not existed since the first few days of the mega-church Luke mentions in Acts 2.

Perhaps you are thinking that it shouldn't be so hard to know truth. Well, let's look at a few statements and take a crack at determining their truth:

- $2 + 2 = 4$ ;
- The Rockies are leading their division;

- God is three persons; each person is fully God; there is only one God (orthodox statement of the Trinity);
- The Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son (the *filioque* clause that caused the Great Schism, East-West church split of 1054);
- Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (Luther's assertion in 1517 that caused Catholic/Protestant split);
- It is wrong to baptize infants (caused denominational splits);
- Women must pray and prophesy with their heads covered (1 Corinthians 11:3; was Paul speaking in a cultural context?);
- Men can wear hats in church (1 Corinthians 11:4, 7).

I hope you get my point. If we in the church are not immune from the truth crisis, how can we be expected to speak boldly in truth to each other and to the world around us?

### What is Truth?

Let's start with the question that has driven me and continues to drive me: "What is truth?" It's an age-old question. Here is the story of famous questioner. In the gospel of John, Jesus is standing before Pilate accused by the Jewish leaders of making Himself out to be a king to rival Tiberius Caesar. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent and is desperately seeking a way to exonerate Him while not inciting the Jewish leaders. The exchange between Jesus and Pilate goes this way:

Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" (John 18:33-38).

From before Pilate and up to medieval times, people generally believed there was objective truth--truth that comes from beyond us--and that it could be known even if there were disagreements. Beginning some three hundred years ago during the Enlightenment period--or the Modern period--thinkers still believed in objective truth but did not believe we could know it outside of science. With the rise of Postmodernism over the last 50 years, thinkers came to believe there was no such thing as objective truth; everything is relative to our preferences and culture. One only has to repeat that last statement to see the folly; proclaiming there is no objective truth is itself a statement of objective truth.

All is not lost; there is a way forward. What I'm going to tell you comes directly out of my fifteen years of intentional pursuit of God's truth.

### Truth Defined

To unpack the idea of truth, let's start with the philosopher's definition of truth. It is quite simple: ***Truth is that which corresponds to reality.*** I say to you, "It is clear and sunny outside." You look outside and it is indeed clear and sunny, then I have spoken truth. If it is cloudy, I have not spoken truth. It seems so simple, right? Even in this small example we see the potential for problems. What if you look outside and see one small cloud. Is it indeed "clear"? You and I may then have to negotiate the meaning of "clear"--to 'define our terms', as Pastor Dave would say.

However, as we saw with some of our earlier questions, even defining our terms can leave us in disagreement. Some things we readily agree on and on other things we may disagree. Does that mean there is no objective truth? Absolutely not! (and that is a statement of objective truth).

So, what do we, as fallen people in a fallen world, do about truth?

### Two Causes of our Problems

At the risk of oversimplifying, I think the basic cause of our truth problem is not in the philosopher's definition, *Truth is that which corresponds to reality*, but that in large part that we misuse the definition. First, we want to define reality; we want to be "like God" just like Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:5). Second, once we have defined reality to our liking we reduce truth to a set of rules that we choose how to apply, and that we wield like a sword in the name of Christ.

The world defines reality by claiming the existence of false gods or no God. We are a little better than that; however, if we are honest we admit that we struggle with our own idols. What too often gets the Church is our reducing truth to a set of rules and then apply them rigidly, or not at all, based on our own theology or idol worship.

So, two problems: defining reality and reducing truth to only a set of rules.

### Conclusion

I told you that this was a two-part sermon and that I was going to leave you hanging. But, not really hanging; I'm going to give you homework: a verse on which to meditate throughout the week so that we might come together each having heard from the Holy Spirit on the matter of truth and grace.

### Offering

### Benediction

Recall Pilate's question, "What is truth?" He didn't know that Jesus had answered his question just the day before:

See John 14:6