

## The Message for Sunday, July 18, 2010

**Title:** “The Supremacy of Christ”

**Scripture:** Colossians 1:15-20

**I. Sinking...** Shortly before midnight, Thomas Andrews (1873-1912) was rudely awakened by a messenger. He was being summoned to the deck by Captain Edward J. Smith (1850-1912). The ship had hit something; and since Thomas had been instrumental in its building, Captain Smith wanted him to assess the damage.

It was apparent that the first five of the ship’s watertight compartments were flooding. Thomas knew that if only four flooded, the ship was doomed. He then told the Captain that the ship might have no more than one hour afloat. Thomas then began racing through the halls, searching staterooms to alert people to put on their life belts and get to a life boat. The last reported sighting of Thomas was of him throwing the deck chairs into the ocean so that *Titanic’s* passengers might have some kind of flotation device.

**II. Feeling like Thomas...** Ever since my parents took the family to the drive-in movie to see the 1953 version of “Titanic,” I have been intrigued by the fate of that ship. (“Titanic” was directed by Jean Negulesco, produced and co-written by Charles Brackett, and distributed by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, starring Clifton Webb and Barbara Stanwyck, released on 16 August, 1953.) From time to time, I let my mind fall back into “random select” and ask myself what must have been going through the minds of people like Thomas Andrews. Thomas had been the shipbuilder in charge of the plans for the *Titanic*. He had overseen every detail of this magnificent superliner. Every effort was made to include the latest technology, the most experienced engineers, and extensive safety features.

It was the company’s policy for a team to accompany each of their ships on its maiden voyage. Thomas Andrews was head of the team. What could he have been thinking shortly after midnight while standing on the deck talking to Captain Smith? We will never know. But, that does not stop me from pondering. And, I will tell you why.

Thomas was only thirty-seven when he died; but, he had been working with the Harland and Wolff ship building company since he apprenticed with them at the age of sixteen. He had devoted over one-half of his life to the trade. What was it like for Thomas to know that he was about to see the passion of his life slip into its icy grave?

For the last several years, I have been feeling a little like Thomas. I feel as though I am standing on the deck of a sinking ship and am relatively helpless to do anything about it.

It is not that this church is doing poorly. As a matter of fact, we are doing quite well, not only as a Methodist Church but as a mainline Protestant congregation. However, with possible exceptions in some African nations and in Korea, the church as a whole is not doing well.

We can probably point to a number of “mega churches” that are strong and still bringing in people; but the church in America is declining at an alarming rate. Some commentators state that the church in parts of Europe is “terminal.”

Like Thomas Andrews, I became “apprenticed” to my profession when I was still in my teens. The Church is my passion; I have given it a little better than two-thirds of my life; and I have the full intention of giving it the rest of my life. Just because I will retire one day does not mean I will cease to be involved in a local church. And yet, I stand on the deck and see something for which I have undying love tragically slipping away.

**III. Religious vs. Christian...** As you can imagine, this has driven a lot of my devotional, study and prayer time for the past few years. Within the past few months, I feel as though I was given a kind of revelation. It did not bring me peace; but it did cause something of a rejuvenation in what the revelation brought.

It finally dawned on me that one of the great threats to The Church today is that we have become more about being religious than being Christian. Let me say that again. I believe that one of the greatest threats facing The Church today is that we have become more about being merely religious than being specifically Christian.

After I had that special revelation, I ran across a new book by Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola. Dr. Sweet is an ordained United Methodist who is professor of Evangelism at Drew University. (E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Drew Theological School in Madison, New Jersey; and Visiting Distinguished Professor at George Fox University in Portland, Oregon.) In 2007, Dr. Sweet was voted #8 on the list of the fifty most influential Christian leaders in America. He was the featured speaker at our last Annual Conference. Frank Viola is a Christian author and speaker.

Together, Frank Viola and Leonard Sweet have penned a book entitled *Jesus Manifesto*. (Thomas Nelson [Nashville], 2010) I read the book; but, here is what drove me to read it. There was an article in the most recent *United Methodist Reporter* that had an interview with Dr. Sweet. (Mallory McCall, “Q&A: Restoring the Supremacy of Jesus,” *The United Methodist Reporter*, July 9, 2010, Section B, pp. 1-2B)

Here is the quote that stirred my interest: “We’ve been trying to do every kind of church imaginable.... We’ve been trying to do every kind of church under the sun, but what if we were what the church is intended to be—the body of Christ living his resurrection, presence and power on this planet?”

He then goes on to say, “I think we went down a lot of very interesting rabbit holes, and each one was kind of fun and interesting to explore, but in going down those we lost sight of the journey we’re really on, which is to follow Christ.”

And then, finally, I want to give you one more statement from the article. The writer asked this question: “What has replaced Jesus as the focus of many churches?”

Dr. Sweet answered, “Success—defined by a consumer culture.” He defines success as the “ABC’s: attendance, buildings, cash. The biblical image for this is ‘bigger barns.’ We all want bigger barns.” (*Ibid.*, p. 2B)

**IV. The message to Colossae...** The biblical book of Ecclesiastes says that “there is nothing new under the sun.” (“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.” Ecclesiastes 1:9) There is nothing new about the

problem Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola have unearthed. Paul addresses this exact problem in his letter to the Church at Colossae.

Almost exactly two years ago, I embarked on a little adventure to the site of the ancient city of Colossae. After traveling alone on a small mini-bus from Pamukkale, Turkey, to the city of Denizli, I found a slightly smaller, un-air conditioned bus headed to the nearby town of Honaz. Colossae is on the way.

I got off at the foot of the hill where the ancient city used to stand and spent several hours walking around before I chose a rock to use as a chair; and there I sat as I read and re-read Paul's entire letter to the church there.

As far as we know, Paul never visited Colossae. It would not have even "been on his radar" had not Epaphras gone to the trouble to find Paul. Epaphras heard Paul preach in Ephesus. That prompted him to return to his native Colossae and preach the Gospel. As a result, a church was founded there. But, the church in Colossae ran into a problem. Apparently, false teachers had somehow invaded the congregation and were preaching doctrines that were contrary to the Gospel Epaphras had presented. As a result, Epaphras had traveled forth to find Paul.

We can only imagine his odyssey. He probably traveled to Ephesus only to find that Paul had left for Macedonia and ultimately Jerusalem. Then, he discovered that Paul had been arrested and had requested, as a Roman citizen, his right to trial before Caesar. When Epaphras finally caught up with Paul, he was in prison in Rome. In Rome, Epaphras convinced Paul to write the Church at Colossae and address their confusion about the Gospel. What Paul did was not only address their confusion, but also compose some of the most grand writing about the supremacy of Christ in the entire New Testament.

In his letter, Paul addressed the Colossians' tendency to allow pagan elements to creep into their worship. He said that there was no reason to worship anything or anyone in creation but Christ because Christ is supreme over all creation. After all, everything was created through Him and for Him; and the universe is sustained by Him. He went on to say that God had chosen for His complete being to dwell in Christ.

Finally, Paul said that Christ is the master of all heavenly (angelic) forces and is the head of The Church; and it is Christ alone who is the mediator between God and humanity.

**V. Similarities...** In the past ten years or so, I have constantly been reminded that the culture to which Paul first preached the Gospel, and the culture of contemporary America are shockingly similar. What was going on in Colossae could easily have been written about thousands of churches of all denominations right here in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Listen to something Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola have to say: "The person of Jesus has become increasingly politically incorrect and is being replaced by the language of 'justice,' ... 'values,' and 'leadership principles.'" They go on to say, "The world likes Jesus; they just don't like the church. But increasingly, the church likes the church, yet it doesn't like Jesus." (Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto*, Thomas Nelson [Nashville], 2010, p. xviii)

These two guys are not opposed to justice, values, leadership, even missions. What they are trying to say is that we have tried to read Jesus back into our agendas, rather than letting our agendas grow out of Christ dwelling in us. Or, to put it more bluntly: We come up with great humanitarian ideas and try to justify them with religious principles rather than letting Christ dwell in us, and from that letting Christ drive what comes next. (This is my interpretation of what I read in *Jesus Manifesto*.)

With that in mind, I want to share with you what has been eating at my mind and heart for the past few years. I have spent so much time in my description that I will only take a few minutes to give these three perspectives.

**VI. I believe in The Church...** The first perspective I want to offer is this. I believe in The Church. I love The Church. I am a product of The Church. Further, I believe that The Church is of God. It will survive. It has survived the infightings, the excesses of its leaders and congregations, the declines, the misinterpretations of the Gospels, its assaults against those it perceived to be its enemies, and the assaults by other religions. But, The Church as it presently manifests itself may not be The Church that sees another century.

I agree with Sweet and Viola when they say that three things are present in every awakening in the history of the Christian church. The first of these is a rediscovery of the “living Word.” The Scriptures must have authority in our lives. The second of these is a rediscovery of the living Christ and His supremacy. And, the third of these is a “rediscovery of the living Spirit and the Spirit’s gifts and power to manifest Christ in the... culture.” (*Ibid.*, p. xix)

Before he became our Bishop, I once heard Dick Wills relate something that happened to him where he was pastor in Florida. He was asked by someone if the church he pastored believed in Jesus. It was not a sarcastic or satirical question. It was an honest question by someone seeking God.

What any surviving church will look like in the years to come will be for someone to look at the church and think first of Christ. The Church may have a strong mission program; it may involve hundreds of children and youth in its programming; it may have the prettiest sanctuary in town and the best music program in the county. But, when people think of that particular church, if they do not think first of Christ, then that church will probably not survive as a viable part of God’s Kingdom.

**VII. Everyone...** The second perspective I want to offer is this. In his letter to the Church in Colossae, Paul said that “Christ is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” Moreover, “...through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things” (Colossians 1:17-20).

When Paul made these wonderful affirmations about Christ, he was not referring just to the people in the Colossian congregation. It was not just the Colossian congregation being reconciled to Christ. He was referring to the entire world. If we believe that God created everyone, and that God loves everyone, then we should be as equally convinced that God wants everyone to lift up the name of Christ as savior.

**VIII. By faith...** The third perspective I want to offer is this. Halford Luccock was a Methodist pastor and professor at Yale Divinity School. He was one of the best-known preachers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He once said, “The Christian message is not an exhortation, [to] ‘Try to be good.’ [That’s] good advice, but there is no saving gospel in that.” (<http://www.worldofquotes.com/author/Halford-E.-Luccock/1/index.html>)

A recent Gallup poll indicated that eight out of ten Americans consider themselves “Christian, in one way or another.” What the poll discovered is that at least eight percent think they are being Christian but are actually not Christian at all. (<http://www.thinkchristian.net/index.php/2008/01/04/new-poll-is-american-church-in-decline/>) The implication was they think they are Christian because they try to act good.

How many times have I heard, “If anyone gets into heaven, that person will, because he was such a kind and gentle person.” I do not think there is anything more misunderstood in the Christian faith than how we get into heaven.

Writing to both the churches in Galatia (Galatians 2:15-21) and to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 2:8-9) Paul said we are saved by our faith in Jesus Christ and not by our good works. Good works are simply the fruit that drops from the tree that is rooted in Christ.

Once again, Sweet and Viola say that “the gospel that is so often preached today lacks a revelation of Jesus Christ.” And then they go on to say, “The contemporary gospel boils down to a fire insurance policy... or a performance-based religion.” (*Ibid.*, p. 170)

And then, they say this. “What Paul did is something that our modern gospel could never pull off. Only a recovery of the greatness, supremacy, sovereignty, brilliance, and ‘allness’ of Christ will lead us to restoration and... revival.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 170-171)

The Church God calls us to be is a church that is first, always, and last a church that lifts up not only the name of Jesus, but also a church in whom Jesus lives and gives meaning. I, for one, want to join the clarion call of Paul in lifting up Christ as my all in all. Amen.

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