

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Gospel Politics”
Acts 5:17-32
Second Sunday after Easter
April 11, 2010

Last Sunday, we gathered around Luke’s story of Jesus’ resurrection. It is a story which does not end at the tomb, but continues on after Jesus’ ascension into heaven. And among the quartet of gospel writers, it is Luke alone who tells the story of how Jesus’ resurrection continued to be lived by a community of disciples filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

These disciples kept up Jesus’ work of teaching and healing, and, like Jesus, they encountered opposition from those who perceived that their authority was being threatened. We read of this in Luke’s sequel to his gospel, the book of Acts. We pick up the story at Acts 5:17.

Those who compiled the lectionary, that is, the three-year cycle of Scripture passages which are read on Sundays in churches around the world, certainly did not know that when April 11, 2010, rolled around, the worshipers at Davidson College Presbyterian Church in Davidson, North Carolina, in the United States of America, would be skirled into worship by a kilted bagpiper and a procession of banners marking our Reformed-Presbyterian heritage.

The compilers of the lectionary didn’t know when they opted for a reading from the 5th chapter of Acts for the Second Sunday of Easter that our worship service would look and sound like this. Even so, they could not have chosen a more fitting text than this one which places Peter and the other apostles passionately proclaiming to the officialdom before whom they stood, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

In a sense, this scene is a template upon which many of the historical situations which led to the writing of the 9 confessional documents of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that these banners represent might be superimposed.

Take the Scots Confession of 1560. John Knox and five other men wrote this document in haste in just four days, but it was sacrifice and suffering over many years which had brought them to the Confession’s composition. Knox himself had been captured and held as a galley slave, chained to an oar in a French ship for 19 months, half naked and often near death. Believing that the welfare of both the nation and the church hung in the balance, they wrote at the close of the Scots Confession, “Arise, O Lord, and let thine enemies be confounded; let them flee from thy presence that hate thy godly Name. Give thy servants strength to speak thy Word with boldness, and let all nations cleave to the true knowledge of thee. Amen.” (1)

It sounds much like Peter’s “We must obey God rather than any human authority,” doesn’t it?

Or take the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. Frederick the Elector, the sponsor of the document, was accused of heresy and directed by those in political authority to turn from his Reformed expression of the Christian faith on penalty of banishment. He is said to have found strength as the first question of his beloved catechism echoed in his mind: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” And the answer came: “That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” (2)

In this answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, do you not hear echoes of Peter’s “We must obey God rather than any human authority”?

And then there are two of the 20th century documents: the Barmen Declaration which challenged the idolatry of the German state church in giving an ultimate commitment to the state rather than to God, and the Belhar Confession—not represented by a banner, but perhaps to be one day, as the General Assembly of the PCUSA considers its inclusion in the Book of Confessions when it meets in Minneapolis this summer—forged in the mid 1980’s in opposition to the South African government policy of apartheid and the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa’s declaration that apartheid was God’s divine will for the entire country. (3) In these two more recent instances where the dominant religious institution of the day bent its theology in service to sin, the Holy Spirit could not be contained but rather filled a remnant of Christians with insight and courage so that they might raise a fist of protest to officialdom saying, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

In the book of Acts, the church is powered by passion for the Risen Christ and led by the Holy Spirit. As Walter Brueggemann has written, “in the book of Acts, the church is a restless, transformative agent at work for the emancipation and well-being in the world,” and “is portrayed as bold and daring in its enactment of a healed world.” (4)

In the context of our own present day, in a week in which nearly every day has brought new revelations about the way that prelates pushed terrible abuses under the ecclesiastical rug rationalizing that what they were doing was “for the good of the church,” this scene in Acts 5 and Peter’s statement come as a much needed critique and corrective word, perhaps even a “call to restlessness,” if you will, not only to the Roman Catholic church but to any institutional church, including our own, that is constantly being tempted to define itself according to the conventional dysfunctions of the society in which we exist. (5)

Now certainly there must be at least a couple of words of caution to any of us who would adopt Peter’s words as our own. The first is to acknowledge that great evil has been done by people who believed that they were being obedient to God rather than to human authority—Eric Rudolph’s bombing of the Atlanta Olympics, Scott Roeder’s murder of Dr. George Tiller as Dr. Tiller handed out bulletins and his wife sang in the choir in their Lutheran church in Wichita last year, and during the past few weeks, the coming to light of the plot to kill police officers in hopes of sparking an anti-government uprising formulated by Hutaree, a self-styled Christian militia in Michigan. (6) Extreme, uncritical adoption of “We must obey God rather than any human authority” is sin and not faithfulness. This is why we give third graders Bibles and teach them that one of the principles which ought to guide Christians every day of our lives is that we read Scripture in the light of the witness of Scripture, we read our Confessions in the light of the

witness of Scripture, and we test our decisions, individual and corporate, by holding them prayerfully in the light of the witness of Scripture.

The second word of caution is that we must recognize that rarely is the line between God and human authority drawn so sharply in the present as it is in hindsight. (7) Luke wrote the story of Peter's and the other apostles' standing up to authority with the aid of hindsight. We tell the stories of John Knox and Barmen with the aid of hindsight. Thus, it is helpful to recall the words of Karl Barth who was the chief author of Barmen. Speaking after the war, he said, "Even it was not a total resistance against totalitarian National Socialism...It was only a partial resistance...In proportion to its task, the church has sufficient reason to be ashamed that it did not do more; yet in comparison with those other groups and institutions it has no reason to be ashamed; it accomplished far more than all the rest." (8) Rarely is the line between allegiance to God and allegiance to human authority so sharply drawn, and thus we must be truthful and gentle and merciful with one another when we claim "We must obey God rather than human authority."

It is important to state words of caution, but in the end perhaps not all that important. At least not for American Presbyterians in the year of our Lord 2010. Maintaining caution is generally not our greatest challenge, either as individuals or as a church. We have the caution base pretty well covered. *Our* greatest challenge is to hear our own good news that we proclaim at Easter and to believe it and to live it. (9) *Our* greatest challenge is holding up a politics to the world that is governed by resurrection and forgiveness, not by blame and guilt. (10) This is our challenge, and it is indeed a formidable one.

Which is the reason that I'm grateful for the Scripture that guides us and the ancestors who have preceded us and a church which is always seeking to be reformed and the Holy Spirit which still has the power to stir us to be a restless, transformative agent, making us bold as we join the Risen Christ in the healing of the world.

If a worship service like today is merely an occasion to look back in nostalgia on a colorful heritage, then I say to heck with it. However, if a worship service like this one moves us even a half-step closer to believing the good news of the gospel and to being so filled with the Spirit that we are empowered to say with conviction, "We must obey God rather than any human authority," and to act accordingly, then I say, "Thanks be to God!"

1. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 79-95.
2. *Ibid.*, 107.
3. Eunice T. McGarrah, "A Study of the The Belhar Confession and Its Accompanying Letter," published by the Office of Theology and Worship, General Assembly Council, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
4. Walter Brueggemann, www.theolog.org, April 9, 2007.
5. *Ibid.*
6. See Leonard Pitts, Jr., "An Evil With Many Masters," *The Miami Herald*, April 7, 2010.
7. Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 109.
8. Quoted by Jack Rogers in *Presbyterian Creeds*, 191.
9. Brueggemann.
10. Stanley Hauerwas, "Embodied Memory," *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, Easter 1996, 24.