

Opinion or Convictions

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson on July 2, 1989 at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA, meeting at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 18:17-21; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; Matthew 16:13-18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In the last month I read something, someplace that stuck in my memory. I read that two men were admiring a medieval cathedral, whether in England or France I can't remember. They were admiring the flying buttresses supporting the outer walls and allowing the cathedral to soar heavenward. Inside the nave all the lines led their eyes upward to heaven and to God. It was a magnificent, awe-inspiring piece of architecture. Stone, glass, silver, wood, and gold bore witness to the skill of the medieval craftsmen who spent over a hundred years building this cathedral. Finally, one man turned to the other and commented, "This could never be built in the twentieth century." "Why not?", his friend responded. "When this cathedral was built, people had convictions. Today, people don't have convictions. They have opinions. Opinions don't build cathedrals. Convictions build cathedrals."

That got me thinking about the job that we have ahead of us... the job of building our sanctuary so that our church might again have a place to worship. I began to think of the difference between opinions and convictions. What did he mean when he said, "People don't have convictions today. We have opinions."

I. I looked up the two words in Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. The first definition of *opinion* is "a view, judgment, or appraisal formed in the mind about a particular matter." In other words, It's your view against my view. A couple weeks ago I took the boys to see *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. The boys thought it was great. I

thought it was great. Kay simply said, "Well, your entitled to your opinion." Opinions are very personal. Opinions can't be argued with. They're simply your own private point of view on any issue.

Now lots of people place the historic Christian faith in the realm of opinions and feelings rather than in the realm of facts. Religion is in the same category as your favorite color, it's in the realm of individual and personal taste. It's not in the realm of facts.

But the historic Christian faith refuses to be shoved into the realm of personal opinions. It was the conviction of the early Christians that God entered *history*, not just the sphere of religious experience. God entered history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It was their conviction ^{that} we can know God through Jesus. In Jesus we see that God eats and drinks with sinners and comes searching for his children like a shepherd looking for his lost sheep. Above all it was the conviction of the early church that we encounter God ~~above all~~ on the cross outside the city of Jerusalem being crucified between two thieves. On the cross, we see God, God's ^{very} self taking on the sins and grief and pain and misery and despair of the whole world. It was their conviction that in Christ and through Christ we know that God hears our cries, feels our pain and has come down to deliver us in Jesus Christ. Some laughed at these convictions, some thought these convictions were blasphemous. The very idea of encountering God in a ~~man~~ ^{crucified man} being crucified was outrageous. Far from being in the realm of mere personal opinions the historic Christian faith proclaims that the eternal destiny of every individual, regardless of personal opinions, will be finally judged by the Crucified and Risen Christ.

It's this faith upon which the Church of Christ is built. More than architects and bricks and mortar we need this faith, this conviction to

~~build a church against which the gates of hell will not prevail.~~

11. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who are people saying that I am." The disciples listed various opinions about Jesus. But Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." With that we're no longer in the realm of opinions. We've entered the sphere of convictions. And it's upon this conviction that Jesus said he would build his church. When Paul came to Thessalonica, he said, "Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Paul didn't come with a lecture on the nature of God. He didn't come to share various opinions about Christ. He came preaching the Good News with conviction. He was absolutely convinced of the truth and the power of the Gospel to ~~change, not only lives, but all of human history.~~

I looked up the word *conviction* in Webster's Dictionary. The first definition is *the act or process of convicting of a crime especially in a court of law*. At first I thought that didn't have much application to my sermon but then I thought of a question once raised by a minister in a sermon. He asked, "If you were accused in a court of law for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" If all of a sudden Christianity were outlawed in the United States, as it is in Saudi Arabia where Christians may not even meet in private to worship, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Or would your friends and neighbors say, "Please don't charge her with the crime of being a Christian. I never heard her once make any profession of faith in Christ as Lord and I never heard her say or do anything that could be construed as being uniquely Christian."

You see, simply being a good citizen is not evidence that you're a Christian. You don't have to be a Christian in order to be patriotic and law

abiding or kind. But would your Christian faith be expressed with such conviction that your neighbor could accuse you? "Yes, she's a Christian, alright. When my little girl was sick she came and placed her hands on my child and prayed to God in the name of Jesus. When my husband died she spoke to me of how Christ had seen her through the valley of the shadow of death. When my boy ran away from home with all my savings she told me a story Jesus told about a prodigal son. She gathered up clothes and food and gives it to the poor because, she said, the love of Christ led her to do it. *Even when she's out late on Saturday nights she has such convictions about worship* She has convictions about worshipping on Sunday and receiving Holy Communion *but she gets up and goes,* where, she says, through faith she feeds upon Christ crucified. She even told me once that if the government ever required her to do something contrary to the Word of Christ in Scripture she would have to obey Christ rather than the government." *She's a dangerous person."*

If you were accused of being a Christian would there be enough evidence to bring about a conviction?

Several years ago the Rev. Alan Boesak, the Black South African activist Reformed minister, was preaching in his church in South Africa. The church was packed. The civil authorities had banned Boesak from preaching because of his anti-apartheid views. But he decided to preach that morning in his own church in spite of the law. Armed soldiers surrounded the church. Several men, clothed in army fatigues and carrying automatic weapons, entered the church while Boesak was speaking. They walked down the aisle, the sound of their heavy boots echoing throughout the large sanctuary. They interrupted Boesak. "In the name of the government of South Africa, we are here to arrest you for defying the law. You must stop preaching and come with us."

Boesak, who has often spoken of his fear and who has publicly

confessed that he isn't a very courageous person, responded in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. He found himself saying to the soldier, "You be quiet and listen to the Word of God! Who are you to enter God's house and interrupt the preaching of God's Holy Word?" And the *young* soldiers ^{became} remained quiet and sheepishly hung their heads and let him finish his sermon and waited until after the benediction to arrest him. Friends, the Church in South Africa is not being built on opinions about who Jesus is. They're not discussing in comfortable easy chairs while sipping ice-tea, various opinions about who Jesus is. ~~Jesus is Lord!~~ They have convictions, not opinions. ^{Jesus is Lord.} The church in South Africa of which Alan Boesak is a member is built on the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord of all of life and can't be compartmentalised into the realm of feelings and opinions and religious experiences.

Several weeks ago I took out of the library a book in a series by architect, David Macaulay, entitled, Cathedral: The Story of Its Construction. It tells about the building a french cathedral in the town of Chutreaus. I've always been fascinated by cathedrals. When Kay and I went to Great Britain the year after we were married she saw enough cathedrals to last her a life time. But not me. I remember standing for over an hour in the nave of York Minster, the seat of the archbishop of York, looking at the wall of stained glass which depicted the Biblical story of salvation. What a sensation to think of the generations of men and women who had worshipped the Risen Lord in that sanctuary and come to encounter the living God. So many of these medieval cathedrals are still places of worship and oases of faith in a secular world.

III In the Middle Ages, which we also call "the Age of Faith", the people of Europe were taught by the church that God was the most important force in

their lives. If they prospered, they thanked God for God's kindness. If they suffered, they begged for God's mercy. In the thirteenth century God was good to the people of France and especially to the people of Chutreaux. They had no wars to fight and the plague was gone. The weather was good for the farmers so there was plenty of food to eat, and business was good for the city's merchants. For these blessings and to help insure that God would continue to favor them, the city wished to thank God. The people began to dream of building God a new cathedral.

The final decision to build a new cathedral was made in the year 1252, after lightning struck and severely damaged the old cathedral. ~~The people of the city wanted to build the longest, widest, highest, and most beautiful cathedral in all of France.~~ The new cathedral would be built to the glory of God and it mattered little that it might take a hundred years to construct it.

It was conviction that built those medieval cathedrals, not opinions. It was above all the conviction that God, the God whom we know through Jesus Christ, is the most important force in all of life. Two hundred and fifty years ago people came to Oxford with that same conviction. The God whom we know in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, is the most important force in our lives. Nothing is more important than knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings. ^{It was that is a world changing, cultural influencing conviction.} These Scotch-Irish Presbyterians came with other Christian convictions as well. It was their conviction that the purpose of human life is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. ^{They dreamed that into their children.} It was their conviction that God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the church, which is his body. It was their conviction that the purpose of the church is to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of

humankind; to shelter, nurture and provide spiritual fellowship for the children of God; to maintain divine worship; to preserve the truth; to promote social righteousnesses; and to exhibit the Kingdom of heaven to the world.

It was their conviction that God alone is Lord of the conscience, and (to quote them) "hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word... in matters of faith or worship. That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, 'By their fruits ye shall know them'". It was their conviction that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners; that no church governing body ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority and that all their decisions should be founded upon the

revealed will of God in Holy Scripture. *These convictions were not to be shaped not only men personal lives, but the lives of this nation where independence we celebrate this week.*

Bricks and mortar and glass and oak did not build our church nor did fire destroy it. Convictions built our church. We can pile up bricks and mortar and glass and oak and gold and silver... but the church that Christ is building, that the gates of hell will never prevail against... will be built, above all, upon ^{the} convictions. As we anticipate the rebuilding of our sanctuary, let us be sure that our faith is a sure conviction and not simply a private opinion that we have relegated to a religious sphere of our lives. Let us be able to say with conviction to the risen Christ, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Finally... to rise under... walking between Christ and New Age or agnosticism or apathy... now comes a time to choose obedience or self because your conviction. I urge you to stop walking between two opinions and choose Christ... allow Christ to have the final word in your life... to shape a world your destiny.

Announcements

1. It's quite likely that the walls will have to come down, including the foundations. There will be some engineers with experience in historic restoration examining the walls just in case they might be saved.
2. Our offices are now at the Jefferis, across from the church, on 15 Second Street. We thank the Bailey Insurance Company for the use of their offices over the last month and we thank the Jefferis for the use of their house.
3. The chairperson of the property, worship and arts, and Christian education committees are investigating where to meet in the Fall when Sacred Heart goes back to their fall and winter schedule.

We will be having Sunday School (DV).

We will have worship.

4. The claims committee will be meeting with our lawyer this Thursday.
5. Our lawyer has told us, through the chairperson of the Claims Committee, Elaine Johnson, that there is absolutely no legal reason why we can't start putting the Christian Education building back into shape if it is structurally safe... at least one person putting in a bid for the clean up has said that we could be back in to the Christian Education building within about 4 or 5 months with heat and electricity and water.
6. I've talked with many people, both church building consultants and people who have gone through similar experiences. What they all say can be summed up in the words of one pastor, "Make your mistakes on paper, not in mortar".