

Will Your Children Have Faith

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 28, 1988, the 14th Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12; Psalm 121; Ephesians 6:10-20; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23.

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

King David was dieing. As he drew his last breath his foremost concern was that his son, Solomon, might share his faith in the living Lord. He beckoned Solomon to come close and he whispered, "Keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in God's ways and keeping God's statutes..."

In our Epistle Lesson St Paul tells us to "put on the whole armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." Echoes of that charge are found in the baptismal rite of our church where parents renounce the wiles of the devil and all the forces of evil that draw us away from God.

In our Gospel lesson Jesus distinguishes between human commandments and traditions which are not binding on us, and the commandments of God which are. One of the tasks of Christian education in the church is to examine all our traditions in the light of the Word of God so that we might not leave the commandment of God, and hold fast human tradition.

Each of these Scripture lessons says something to me about the importance of Christian education in the home and church. One of the greatest challenges the church faces today is the challenge of Christian education. I'd encourage you to read an article written by Thomas Gillespie, President of Princeton Seminary, which appeared in the July 18th issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook*. He notes the steady decline in the membership of the Presbyterian Church over the past 25 years. Some say the membership has declined because people are turned off by controversial social stands the church has taken. Others say that we're losing members to the more conservative independent churches. But Gillespie offers evidence that we're declining because we're no longer

fulfilling the vows taken by parents and congregation at the baptism of infants, to nurture the faith of the "children of the covenant". The chief cause of our membership decline as a denomination, he says, is our inability over the past quarter century to transmit our faith to our own children.

That got me thinking about this particular church. We have huge Sunday school classes for kids from kindergarten up to the teen-age years, then we see a dwindling off. The second and third grade classes last year were so big that we're moving to a larger room this year. But when we get to senior highs there's a precipitous decline. Last year I counted some 40 high-school young people who were baptized in this church yet only three or four participated on a regular basis in the life and work of the church. Last year I sat down with as many of them as I could to encourage them to participate in a confirmation class but only two responded.

On an average Sunday about 1/3 of our members attend the worship service. That's nothing to brag about but it isn't too bad when you consider the number of elderly people who are unable to attend. One third of all our members attend but only about one tenth of the teenaged children of the covenant attend. And I confess that rarely do I take them into account when I'm preparing a sermon. How few are the illustrations and applications that focus on teenagers. This is frightful when we consider statistics I heard last week that 86% of adult active church members made a commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior *by the time they were 16 years old.* It's not impossible to be converted after the age of 16 but statistics show that the percentages are not in our favor.

We're failing our teen-age young people just at the age when they're contending against so many forces that threaten to destroy them spiritually. And so often they contend with these temptations and forces

without the spiritual armor which the church is able to provide.

This isn't the fault of Sunday School teachers. It isn't the fault of parents who want to be good parents. As Paul said, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood", but against a host of forces that are working against us. To be a parent in the twentieth century is to be anxious and often bewildered.

The fact is that the church, as a whole, simply hasn't brought to bear the tremendous resources God has given us to meet the challenge of youth. As a denomination we've failed to keep our high-school young people. At synod school this year I heard someone say that the Presbyterian church hasn't had a nationwide youth and college ministry since the old Westminster youth fellowships went out about 25 years ago. Presbyterian churches, on the whole, aren't known for their youth ministries. I believe we should be!

Our teen-aged and college aged young people don't, for the most part, end up going to other churches. They end up without any commitment to Christ through the church. Gillespie writes, "that the youth of our church have been reared and educated in a cultural milieu that encourages them to believe that knowledge and morality are thoroughly conditioned by history and culture and that values are self-generated." That means no one can credibly claim to know ~~the~~ truth about anything or to know right and wrong. "In such an environment," he writes, "it is at least understandable why a growing number of our young people find it difficult, if not impossible, to believe in the one we confess to be the truth and commit themselves to a particular religious community, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)."

Traditionally the Presbyterian church has supported public schools and I hope we continue to do so. I'm proud of the fact that members of our

church serve on the Oxford School board and many of you are public school teachers. I'm also proud of the fact that I've been asked to serve as the president of the Bart-Colerain Parent-Teachers Organization. I believe in public education. But for too long the main line churches have depended on public schools to do what the church should do. John Westerhoff pointed out this summer at the Pittsburgh School of Religion that most public schools were basically Protestant parochial schools up until about 25 years ago.

When I was in high school the state of Delaware required religious opening exercises. The reading of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, was mandatory. We all recited the Lord's Prayer.

When I was in fifth grade a Jewish class-mate was excused for the day to attend religious services. Our teacher explained, in her absence, that we must respect Jewish people because Jesus was a Jew and that the main difference between Jews and us was that they don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah as we do. "As we do?" There was an implicit understanding that we were all Christians except for a few obstinate or deluded hold-outs.

I played on the Newark High School football team. Before every game we'd kneel in the locker room and our assistant coach, Cliff Browning, would lead us in prayer asking that we might be good sportsmen, play our best and be spared injury "through Jesus Christ our Lord." I grew up in a Protestant culture that supported the main line churches whose youth programs at that time were bursting with activity.

Those days are gone forever and we can't turn back the clock. The Church can no longer depend upon a Protestant Establishment to do our work for us. The fact is that the church depended on the public schools to do what God has called the church to do and we're paying the price for it

now. Dr. John McKay of Princeton used to say, "Let the church be the church." One of the greatest tasks of the church is to nurture our people, young and old, to know, love and trust Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. One of the greatest tasks of the church is to nurture our young people so that they will grow up having a private and a public faith in Christ within the fellowship of the church.

I believe that children still need to hear and learn the stories from the Bible and that's not going to happen unless it happens in our homes and in our Sunday Schools and worship services. I want to encourage both parents and children to attend Sunday School and to worship regularly and come to the Lord's Table together. Dr. Westerhoff has said, "As a young parent, I accepted the liberal position on child-rearing which told me that my children were not to *share* my life of faith; they were only to *observe* it. I thought all that mattered was that / pray, worship, study, and perform good deeds. Now it troubles me that while I was doing all those religious acts, I was ignoring my children."

Will our children have faith in Christ? ~~Following the promises that God has made concerning the children of believers~~ I believe our children will have faith if ~~we, as a church and as individuals,~~ AS a Church and as individuals, have faith and are faithful. ~~We can trust and hope that~~ Both we and our children will have Christian faith when we join with others in a worshiping, learning, witnessing Christian community of faith.

Amen

Let us pray: Gracious God, bless the Christian Education that takes place in your church and in this one in particular; for the choirs, the youth groups, the Sunday school classes, the informal Bible studies that take place in homes. May we all be instructed in your word to know and obey your Son our Lord. Let your truth be manifest from generation to generation, and all the families of the earth rejoice in your mercy; through Jesus Christ the Saviour of the World. AMEN.