



LOVE · SCRIPTURE · UNITY · DISCERNMENT · MISSION

Shepherds' Message to North Central

The following is adapted from the North Central elders' message to the congregation on Sunday, October 6, 2019. Throughout the service, each elder spoke to a specific congregational value and/or emphasis over the last 2 or 3 years. Their desire was to re-affirm and encourage the congregation toward a greater embodiment of these ideals.

CALL TO WORSHIP *JOHN WILKINS*

Good morning and welcome to our congregation of disciples of Jesus Christ. God has called us together to worship him in spirit and in truth. We worship an awesome God; a God that created the universe beyond our comprehension and yet a loving God that knows every hair on our head, cares about every burden and every care in our lives. Indeed the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the great I Am, is worthy of our praise. And it is our desire to do that this morning.

Our Heavenly Father, we do come before you this morning praising you as our creator and the one who sustains all of creation. And yet as all powerful as you are, you care about every hair on our head, every burden that we carry and we bow down in humble gratitude for that love. We worship you as our loving God and we pray that our worship to you this morning, every prayer, every song, every spoken word and every heart here this morning would be pleasing in your sight. We thank you for sending your Son, and it is in his name we offer this prayer to you. Amen.

This is a special day in that each of our six elders will be speaking briefly to you about topics relevant to the gender role topic that has engaged our congregation for the past five years. I will be back up here in just a few minutes to talk about the preeminence of love.

THE PREEMINENCE OF LOVE *JOHN WILKINS*

Love God and love people. Jesus says that “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:40) Preeminence is the fact of surpassing all others. Jesus said that love surpasses, that it is preeminent over all other commandments.

1 Corinthians 13 is perhaps the greatest collection of words ever penned by the apostle Paul, concludes with these words: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

*“And now these three remain:
faith, hope and love. But the
greatest of these is love.”*

Love is far more than a nice feeling. It is a disposition that leads us to action. Love is something that should be at the core of everything we are as Christians. Last year, Marvin and I facilitated a class here in the auditorium drawing from Don McLaughlin's book, *Love First*. Steve and Russ conducted a parallel class in one of the upstairs classrooms. Why did we place such an emphasis on this topic? We worship a God of love; and so it is vital that we place the highest emphasis on loving our God with every fiber of our being and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Scripture repeatedly calls us to grow in our depth of love. Love is crucial, for the quality of both our life in community and also for our influence in the world. We as Christians look forward to spending eternity in the presence of a loving God, but while we are on this earth, it is our mission to be heaven on earth to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to our neighbors.

A few years ago several couples here went on a trip to Rome with Tim Woodroof, whom most of us know as he served as our interim minister prior to Steve Kenney. One of the places we visited was St. Peter's Basilica in The Vatican. I had very high expectations of what this iconic place would be like, but as I went inside, I literally gasped at the grandeur of this structure. The architecture, the engineering, the craftsmanship, the art, the massive scale of it were mind-boggling. Why would the Roman church build such a lavishly expensive structure? Tim explained that the intent was to show non-believers what Heaven would be like. Step inside here, this is what heaven will be like. And, if that is true, I sure want to go there. Sign me up! The church in that time and place had a preeminence of acquiring

and displaying wealth; a disastrous strategy as it turned out for Rome as it led to the Protestant Reformation which tragically resulted in millions of Europeans losing their lives in the resulting wars. I think we would all agree that there is a much better and more biblically sound strategy to bring unbelievers to Christ.

Heaven may well be something like this grand basilica. But the defining characteristic of Heaven is not gold and silver, not priceless art and not grand architecture. It is love. Perfect love as Paul described it in his Corinthian letter. And we as Christians must strive to get as close to that as we possibly can with the help of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, that is a part of our transformation in the image of Christ. When non-believers see how Christians respond to persecution of any kind, to things in the culture contrary to our beliefs, we don't condemn, we love. I'm afraid that over the past few decades in our own country, Christians have chosen to draw battle lines over issues rather than seeking to love first and then influence change from a position of love. The battle cry, "Love the sinner and hate the sin," is not a theologically sound strategy for influencing cultural change. A better battle cry would be: love our neighbors and hate our own sin. What the church needs is to return to a strategy of a preeminence of love. Any other strategy will not succeed. We must love first.

While First Corinthians 13 may be the greatest chapter in the Bible, John 3:16 is the most quoted verse. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And verse 17 says that "God did not send Jesus into this world to condemn it, but to save it through Jesus." As Jesus came into first century Judea there was much to condemn just like there would be today if Jesus were walking the streets of any of our cities, but what did Jesus do? Jesus's condemnation could have been swift. He could have summoned legions of angels to quickly wipe out the Roman occupation and the religious rulers of that day. But instead, he adopted a strategy of love. Jesus comforted the sick, he healed the crippled and made the blind see. And, of course, he demonstrated the greatest act of love in human history; he willingly died on the cross for the sins of unworthy people like all of us.

"God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn it, but to save it through Jesus."

Non-believers are watching us in how we conduct ourselves in the name of Christ. Non-believers are not longing for the preeminence of wealth, they are not longing for the preeminence of being right on every social issue. Non-believers are desperate to find a better way of life and we are The Way. As a church, we must embrace love first. We must embrace the preeminence of love.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS *LARUE BENNETT*

*"God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world."
(Galatians 6:14)*

*"For I determined among you to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."
(1 Corinthians 2:2)*

*"The message of the cross is foolish to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."
(1 Corinthians 1:18)*

It's good to set priorities - to determine what is important in our lives and act on them. Sometimes we may ask what is the most important - just because we want to do the least possible to reach our goal. But in a positive sense, we should consider all the options, then focus on what is the most important.

The apostle Paul has given us instructions on many different doctrines, but he continually pointed to one foundational thing, the Cross of Christ - the centrality of the Cross.

Interesting, our English word for cross came from the Latin word *cruce*, which is a root word for *crucial* - that which is the most important, the central issue. This means

"For I determined among you to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

we don't get bogged down in lesser issues, but emphasize in our lives the true heart of our faith. The Cross is the crucial message of the gospel, so important that Paul could say that he boasted or gloried only in the Cross, and that he was determined to know nothing but Jesus and Him crucified. The Cross is so crucial because it demonstrates God's perfect love and perfect justice. It is still true in our day to say that the Cross is foolish to the lost, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

When we come together around the table of our Lord, we focus on His death on the Cross, His burial, and His resurrection in a beautiful way. All other issues fade when we understand and live in the glory of the Cross.

To follow the model of self-sacrifice that our Lord gave us, we should determine to live our lives as a living sacrifice to Him and one another. We should recognize that our own self-sacrifice and mutual submission, characterizes our lives as a cross-shaped people. This is also a powerful demonstration for the world to see God at work. In ancient 2nd Century Rome, the emperor Hadrian sent out a spy on the Christians. He returned with this immortal message: "Behold how they love one another!"

*“This the Power of the Cross
Christ became sin for us.*

I appreciate so much the lines in our great hymns which summarize the message of the Cross.

*Took the blame, bore the wrath
We stand forgiven at the Cross.”*

Think about these words:
In the Cross of Christ I glory
Towering o'er the wrecks of time.

All the light of sacred story
Gathers 'round its head sublime.

O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world
Has a wondrous attraction for me.
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.

This the Power of the Cross
Christ became sin for us.
Took the blame, bore the wrath
We stand forgiven at the Cross.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE *STEVE EVANS*

My task is to address the authority of scripture. This is a topic we as a body tend not to discuss because, if you want to know who takes scripture seriously, I would challenge you simply to look around. Your brothers and sisters are here precisely because they take scripture seriously and it has taken years of wrestling with this topic precisely because your elders here take scripture seriously.

On a flight out of Denver Monday I was already mulling the flow of this talk, when the pilot said something profound. As we were taking off to proceed west over the Rockies, the pilot made the customary announcement that we might experience some choppiness. It is an announcement I barely recalled. But after the first bout of bounce, the pilot came back on and said that more was to come. Then he said that the plane was fully competent to handle such turbulence - and much worse - but we passengers are not. The only way we can handle turbulence is if we are buckled in, and in so becoming one with the plane's integrity.

And that is the thought I could not get out of my head. It echoes Ephesians 4 and the idea of being tossed about. The application to this is if we are going to thrive in periods of turbulence then we need to be buckled into the word, partakers in its integrity, and we need not to mull about the plane potentially even looking for the exits.

About 30 years ago NT Wright published notes on a lecture about the authority of scripture. I will reflect a few of the points here and borrow liberally.

First, Wright notes that there is no shortage of so-called scriptural churches, but that the more that a particular tribe insists that it is based on the Bible, the more fissiparous those churches tend to become; those churches split into more and more little groups, each thinking that only they have got biblical truth right.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light."

Wright argues that we need to recapture that authority originates with and rests with God. This is stated clearly in Genesis 1:3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light."

God Said. It was. That is authority.

Matthew 28:18-20 reminds us that the Father's authority was given to Christ, and he in turn sent people on a mission; from this we receive the commission directly from Jesus to act as his ambassadors on the earth.

In several letters Paul reminds us that authority was likewise delegated to apostles. 2 Corinthians 13:10 and 1 Thessalonians 4:2.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews echoes Paul's instruction to the Ephesians elders, where the flock was committed into their care, by telling us in Hebrews 13:17 to Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over the flock as those who must give an account.

So Wright challenges us to regain the vision that authority rests with squarely with God, and that God has throughout history vested his authority in people, including in his Son.

*“As the Father sent me, even
so I send you.”*

Again and again, in the biblical story, we see that God acts through human agents anointed and equipped by the Holy Spirit. The New Testament gives us a

strong theology of an authoritative Holy Spirit. Jesus' people are to be the anointed ones through whom God still works authoritatively in the world.

God's authority vested in scripture is designed to liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free. That's what God is in the business of doing. When we use a shorthand phrase like 'authority of scripture' that is what we ought to be meaning.

The Bible, then, is designed to function through human beings, through the church, through people who, living still by the Spirit, have their life molded by this Spirit-inspired book. What for?

Well, as Jesus said in Matthew 28 and likewise in John 20, “As the Father sent me, even so I send you.” He sends the church into the world. Into his agenda for the church. We as Jesus' people are given an authority with which the church can authentically speak God's words of judgement and mercy to the world.

Authority in the church means that we, with scripture in its hand and heart, are to speak and act for God in his world. It is not simply that we may say, in the church, 'Are we allowed to do this or that?' 'Where are the lines drawn for our behavior?' Or, 'Must we believe the following seventeen doctrines if we are to be really sound?'

God wants the church to lift up its eyes and see the field ripe for harvest, and to go out, armed with the authority of scripture; not just to get its own life right within a Christian ghetto, but to use the authority of scripture to declare to the world authoritatively that Jesus is Lord. The phrase 'authority of scripture', therefore, is a sort of shorthand for the fact that the creator and covenantal God uses this book as his means of equipping and calling the church for these tasks.

Why should we view authority like this?

Because God wants to catch human beings up in the work that he is doing (see Acts 1 and Matthew 28). He wants us to be involved in his work. And as we are involved, so we ourselves are being remade.

Again and again, we find that, as we submit to scripture, as we wrestle with the bits that don't make sense, and as we hang through to a new sense that we haven't thought of or seen before, God breathes into our nostrils his own breath—the breath of life. And we become living beings—a church recreated in his image, more fully as he intended.

Here, too, we discover the authority of the Bible at work: God's own authority, exercised not to give true information about wholeness but to give wholeness itself. It judges and remakes our thoughts and intentions, the imaginations and recollections of men, women and children. The Bible is the book of renewal, the book of tears and laughter; the book through which God resonates with our pain and joy, and enables us to resonate with his pain and joy. This is the really powerful authority of the Bible.

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their

deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Ephesians 4:11-16

THE UNITY OF BELIEVERS *RUSS PALMER*

As we read the New Testament, we understand that the unity of believers is of great importance. At the end of the passion dialogue in John chapter 17, our Lord prays that all of those who follow him would be one as He is one with the Father. The apostle Paul writes in the Ephesian epistle that we should “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” There are many other passages as well.

As we have dealt with the question of gender roles in our public assemblies over the past few years, we have also encountered the same issues as other believers have who have dealt with this. Namely, that sincere, Bible-believing Christians can come to different conclusions about how the New Testament passages that speak to these issues apply to us in the 21st century. The most pertinent New Testament scriptures speaking of the role of men and women in public worship are in 1 Corinthians 11; 1 Corinthians 14; and 1 Timothy 2. We are aware of what these scriptures say. We believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God. We also understand that it was written in a different language to a different culture two millennia ago. We have taken a long time with this in the hope that we would come to an agreement on how we should interpret these scriptures today. However, over time it has become evident that we do not agree about how to interpret and apply these scriptures. We also believe this probably reflects our congregation as a whole: that we do not agree.

*“make every effort to maintain
the unity of the Spirit in the
bond of peace.”*

We are left then with the pertinent question: “What do we do with our disagreement as elders and as members of this congregation?”

Our choices are simple: to divide and find those who agree with us, or find a way to be together in the face of our disagreement over important matters. We believe that the scriptural issues over which we disagree are important, but we also believe that there exist more important over-arching issues. These are love of each other and the call to unity. As we reflect on the New Testament, we see significant disagreement among groups in the church at that time, especially the culture clash of believers of Jewish and Gentile heritage. They are never instructed to separate and form a new congregation due to these differences.

They are instructed to honor each other and submit to one another; to test the spirits; to “weigh what is said” and find a way to be together and to do God’s work in this world.

So, we understand that our decisions will be displeasing to many. Some will think we have gone too far. Some will think we have not gone nearly far enough. We understand that there is disagreement but that all are sincerely following our Lord and trying to understand his word and apply it appropriately.

Our decision then is to indeed strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This begins with understanding our commonalities. We are all sinners in need of a Savior; that is, we have common sinfulness. And, we all have a common salvation. It is through the sacrifice and work of Jesus Christ that are saved and have our hope in His love. We are all indwelt by the same Holy Spirit that God promised to believers. Those things that bind us together are greater than the understandings that separate us.

So, we ask of you the congregation to go with us and to love and tolerate your fellow believers even though you disagree with them. We ask you to come to rely on the love of God for his people and his grace even though we may be wrong in our interpretation of how to apply the words of these ancient, true documents to our modern practice. We as elders understand that we are fallible. However, we trust in God. Salvation of humankind and the grace of our Lord were His ideas and reveal His character. We believe that if we can maintain unity despite disagreement that this will be a testimony to the world of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, our Lord said, “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples; if you love one another.” John 13:35

I wish you to reflect on Ephesians 2: 14-22 as we close. May God bless the reading of his Word:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which

he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Thanks be unto God for his Word.

THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

PAUL COLLINS

The process by which we ultimately came to our decisions was by using communal discernment. This is a concept that's not really well known in the churches of Christ. Historically we've been much more individualistic in our approach to discerning God's will.

*“For the word of God is living
and active and sharper than
any two-edged sword.”*

However it is a discipline that was practiced in the early church, for instance during the so-called “Jerusalem conference” in Acts 15. I believe that central to the practice

of communal discernment is the acknowledgment of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Bible as written long ago does not speak specifically to every single situation that we will encounter in life. However, we believe the Holy Spirit can help us as Christians to address any and every situation. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.”

I believe the Holy Spirit makes it alive and grants us the ability to apply the Word anew throughout time, consistent with how God wants us to live and work today. So, understanding the Spirit's desire for us is communal discernment. We tried to listen to the Spirit within each of you in 2018 when we were regularly discussing this topic throughout the congregation. And, the elders have sought to understand what the Spirit wants us to do in this situation.

Admittedly, a confusing part of this for the elders is the fact that we still do not interpret what the Spirit is saying to us in exactly the same way. And for a long time, inability to find 100% total consensus delayed our moving forward in this particular issue. Ultimately, we decided to take an approach where if we had full consensus, or if only one interpreted differently, we could move forward on any item. If two or more differed, we decided that the Spirit had not clearly spoken to us as a communal group. While this may not seem perfect, it involved study and attentiveness to what the Spirit said to us, and to all our members whom we know also have the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Through this process we discerned that there were a number of ways in which women could, and should, be further involved in our weekly assemblies. So, in the very near future, we will move toward the further inclusion of women in the following aspects:

1) The reading of Scripture in our assemblies – While this has occurred with several of our youth already, we would expect a greater public usage of women in this role

2) The public offering of prayer – This may have occurred in many small groups settings already, but we have never done this in our worship services. As such, this will be new for us. But we will move toward it.

3) Helping with the distribution of communion elements – This is an item which we acknowledge has no scriptural basis for gender whatsoever and is a tradition of our churches based largely upon how our buildings are structured. Nevertheless, it is a part of our service today, and is an act of service that members provide to each other. As such, it should be represented by both male and female members.

4) The teaching of adult classes – While not part of the Sunday morning worship services per se, teaching of mixed gender adult classes is something that has traditionally been reserved for men in the churches of Christ. However, as part of our examination of this topic, we now want to involve both men and women in this important part of our communal life together.

Along with the changes I've just mentioned, there are elements of our corporate worship that we decided not to change, again based on the process of communal discernment

that I described: 1) delivering the weekly sermon,

2) making communion comments, and 3) leading worship. Not changing these items does not mean that discussion or study on these issues has ended; rather we decided that the Spirit has not clearly led us to change at this time.

“If you love me obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you.”

As we move forward on this at North Central, and look to our future, I am reminded of what Jesus told his disciples in John 14:15-18,

"If you love me, obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you. No, I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you."

We are not alone today as we try to understand how to work in this world – we have the Holy Spirit.

GOD'S CHURCH FOR HIS MISSION *MARVIN UTLEY*

We as elders were seeking to be guided by the Holy Spirit, to discern together what was best or of most importance. The Spirit did just that. Through this process we were guided back to those things of most importance to God and His mission.

We must always keep in mind that God has an always relevant purpose for his people, the called out, the Church. Believers have the privilege and honor of participating in this great mission of Love, for the sake of the world.

Christ provides clarity about this mission, in what we call the Great Commission, Matthew 28:16-20. We are to share the Gospel with others intentionally, giving those who are separated from Their Father, the opportunity to know Him. They will have a chance to discover the love He has for them, through the beautiful life, death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ.

A huge part of God's Mission is to transform us into the image of the greatest man to ever walk the face of the earth, God's lovely Son, Jesus the Christ. (Philippians 2:1-10). As we become like him we can have a profound impact and influence in this world.

Let's look at the impact of the gospel and how it changes

people into the likeness of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 1:2 - 10.

*“We always thank God for all
of you and continually
mention you in our prayers.”*

The message of the Gospel changes the hearts and minds of people.

Those once lost people now are able, through the Spirit to reach their full potential, being on mission for God, changing the communities they live in for the better. In the Thessalonian church we see unity and the bond of peace. The fruits of the spirit are being lived out. As a result, God the Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit are pleased. The apostle Paul is filled with pure joy, the new lives of these once lost people confirm that serving and suffering for Christ is worth it, because the mission of God is fulfilled in and through his people. It works!

Please understand that who we are today should not be who we are tomorrow. We do not believe that we have arrived or have it all figured out. Through our asking of the Spirit to guide us in our discernment we believe that we have to take very seriously our commitment expressed in North Central's mission statement - We exist to glorify God by fostering transformed lives into the image of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the world.

Please continue to be in prayer for our church, for your brothers and sisters in Christ.

