

# **SERMON – 10/21/07**

## *Christianity's Family Tree: Presbyterianism*

In November, 1992 I turned twenty-five years old (wow... that sure seems like a long time ago!).

- I was in my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of graduate school... attending Drew Theological School in Madison, NJ...
  - Although technically one's 3<sup>rd</sup> year of seminary should be one's last year of seminary, for me it was more like an "intermission."
  - You see, I was one of only a handful of my seminary classmates who had gone from high school... to college... to grad school... right in a row.
  - The average age of my class was about 35!
  - I was in no rush to get "out into the real world"... for I knew I had a lifetime of ministry ahead of me.
  - I wanted to make sure I had done all I could to be trained adequately as a minister.
- So during what would have been my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of seminary, I took a year off... a year off from standard classroom learning, that is.
  - I decided to work full-time for a year in a local church... to become immersed in every aspect of being a local United Methodist pastor.
  - Madison UMC was my "training ground," and they did a fabulous job, I might add!
  - But I also took the year to complete an extended Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) course... it was here that I was trained to be a hospital chaplain.
  - You may wonder why I would do that, if my desire was to be in the local church... but I tell you without a shadow of a doubt, that I learned more about the practical aspects of being a pastor in that hospital, than I did in all my classroom courses combined!
- When I was 25 years old, I also applied for ordination in the United Methodist Church... a process that takes an entire year, and includes:
  - An in-depth psychological evaluation...

- Numerous Recommendations...
- And a rigorous interview with 10 other clergy... where they critique and question the 30 or so pages of written work I had to turn in on what I believed.
- **30 pages on my core beliefs!!!**
- (I passed my ordination interview, by the way... in case you were curious.)
- I tell you all this because in today's sermon, as we continue our series on CHRISTIANITY'S FAMILY TREE... we get to meet the remarkable Mr. John Calvin...
  - In 1536, John Calvin, at the age of 25, had written the first edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion... 456 pages long!
  - One could say it was 456 pages of his core beliefs... but that would be like saying "the ocean has a few water molecules in it"... it doesn't really even come close to the magnitude of what it truly is.
  - Calvin intended it to be an elementary manual for those who wanted to know something about the evangelical faith...
  - Contemporary theologian Brian McLaren has said that it was "a subversive move to counter the religious hierarchies of his time."
  - Again, that's just scratching the surface.
  - Others have claimed that it's a monumental work that stands among the greatest works of Christian theology and Western literature.
  - By 1559, Calvin had expanded The Institutes 3 times... and it eventually grew to be 1,800 pages long!

Welcome to the fourth installment in our series... and today we have the pleasure of getting to know the PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH...

- The goal of this series is not to "prove" we're the "right church"... but instead, it's to open our hearts to learn from our fellow brothers and sisters in faith...
  - To learn not only how The Church developed over the years...
  - But also to see how they can teach us to be better Christians... better followers of Jesus!

- Once again I'd like to give credit to Pastor Adam Hamilton's study series which has informed & inspired me in my study.
- In case you're just joining us, allow me to give you a very quick summary of how we got here...
  - In the first few centuries after Jesus, there were no distinctions among Christians... we were all "People of the Way."
  - By the end of the first millennium, however, Christians in the Eastern parts of the Roman Empire... and Christians in the Western parts split... forming two separate churches: The Eastern Orthodox Church & the Roman Catholic Church.
  - Those distinctions continued for another 500 years or so, until a man named Martin Luther came along.
  - Luther was a Catholic priest who became disillusioned as he saw many abuses in the church that were counter to the gospel... so in 1517, the writing of his 95 theses sparked what became known as The Protestant Reformation.
  - Luther was protesting where the Church had gone, and thought it was badly out of line with what the New Testament taught Christianity should look like...
  - Luther said if the NT forbids a particular Church practice, then we should throw it out.
  - Later Reformers came and took it one step further... saying if the NT doesn't highlight a specific practice, it can't be made mandatory for the Church!
- Over the centuries, Christian leaders who disagreed with one another on minor points of doctrine formed their own churches or denominations.
  - The result was a seemingly endless line of disputes and disagreements (often about small matters of theology) that led to the splintering & fracturing of the Christian church into thousands of Protestant denominations... and as many as 35,000 independent non-denominational churches in the US alone!
  - Most early reformers agreed with Luther's essential claims, but many felt that he had not gone far enough in calling for reform of or separation from Catholic practice.

- John Calvin, born in 1509, was 8 years old when Luther posted his 95 Theses on the doors of the Castle Church at Wittenberg...
  - Calvin studied law in Paris, where he had a conversion experience...
  - In his mid-20's he left Paris for Basel, Switzerland, where he became an avowed Protestant seeking the reform of the church.
  - It was here, in Switzerland, where he finished his first edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*... a systematic theology of the Protestant reformation.
  - (On a side note, Calvin had to make a deal with an Italian bookbinder to have his *Institutes* bound with a romance novel cover, in order for it to be smuggled into France! How's that for having a passion for the gospel!)
- John Calvin and his protégé John Knox were among the second wave of reformers, and their efforts resulted in the formation of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.
  - Knox played a key role in forming the Church of Scotland, which Presbyterians view as their “mother church”...
  - But Calvin is seen as the theological father of both the Presbyterian & Reformed traditions.
- Two weeks ago, when we were examining Lutheranism, I showed you this slide of what the Lutheran church might see as the history of the Christian faith... how it developed over history...
  - Luther saw himself as trying to bring the Catholicism back in line with the apostolic tradition... or what the New Testament taught Christianity should be like.
  - Now let me show you how Presbyterians understand what was happening in the Reformation...
  - They understand that Luther was on the right track, but felt he didn't go far enough in bringing about reform for the church...
  - And so while they value Luther and all he did, Presbyterians see themselves as helping to bring the church back even closer in line with the apostolic tradition.
  - (And if the truth be known, almost every church that's formed since then has felt as though they were doing the same thing – bringing the church more in line with the apostolic tradition!)

- I think it's important for us to know a little about the distinctiveness of Calvin's theology, so here are his 5 main beliefs... that can be remembered by the acronym TULIP:
  - These 5 points don't represent everything in Calvinist theology, nor are they necessarily the most essential today... but they are an important distinctive.
  - It starts with a recognition that we humans are sinful creatures... **Total Depravity**... we can't rescue or save ourselves. This doesn't mean we are bad all the time, just that the image of God which humankind was created with, has been broken by sin.
  - The "U" stands for **Unconditional Election**... this is what has come to be known as predestination. (Let me say that not all Presbyterians fully embrace this today, others look to understand it in certain ways).
  - This belief states that God has chosen some, from the beginning of the world, to be saved. It has nothing to do with human merit, but is all from God's own will.
  - Next comes **Limited atonement**... Christ's death on the cross brought salvation for the elect, but not for those outside God's election.
  - The "I" in TULIP is **Irresistible Grace**... meaning that if you are one of the elect, you cannot refuse God's salvation... eventually God will win you over to the faith!
  - Finally, we come to the **Perseverance of the Saints**... (the Baptists call this "once saved, always saved")... it means that you may, over time, stray from the path of God, but if you're one of the elect, you will never stray outside of God's salvation!

One of the highlights of preaching this series has been the opportunity for me to get to meet some of my colleagues in ministry.

- A few weeks ago I got together with my good friend, Rev. Dan Chun, of First Presbyterian Church.
  - I'm actually in a Young Pastor's Accountability Group that Dan leads, so we have grown quite close.
  - Dan is also the president of Hawaiian Islands Ministries, the parent group that sponsors the annual "Honolulu Conferences".
- I asked him what it meant to be a Presbyterian Christian...

- He told me that it has been said that Presbyterians have “all things done decently and in order” (usually referring to administration!).
- They have a Book of Order that lays out their polity & structure... along with a Book of Confessions that outlines their theology & doctrine.
- Dan said it’s rumored that the United States Congress was fashioned on Presbyterian structure... in fact, 12 or 13 of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterian!
- The King of England even referred to American independence as the “Presbyterian Revolt.”
- Well, Dan and his congregation didn’t revolt... but they did make a dramatic about a year or so ago!
  - You may have heard about the church that bought a golf course? Well, this is it!
  - First Presbyterian, a vital & healthy congregation, outgrew their original location on Keeaumoku Street in Makiki...
  - They needed to find a new location, but the cost of land was so expensive (and so rare), they kept hitting dead ends.
  - Finally, it was through a dream that the leadership of “First Pres” eventually came to purchase Koolau Golf Course.
  - Nestled at the base of the Koolau Mountains, this property was truly a gift from God... and it’s their vision to share their facility with all of Hawaii’s churches!
  - This congregation of over 1,000 now worships in a converted ballroom every Sunday morning, as they seek to be faithful to the call of God in their community!
  - Even though they’re worshipping at a country club – the kind of a place normally associated with wealth & excess – First Pres has a heart for the poor.
  - That’s why they’ve partnered together with Compassion International to help eliminate poverty – starting with children!
  - On one side of their main hallway leading to the sanctuary, they have this giant Compassion Wall... showing the poverty wheel and how Compassion seeks to address the whole child (not just the economic aspect of his/her life).

- On the opposite wall, they have the actual pictures of children their congregation members sponsor.
  - It's quite inspiring to see, actually! For they are living out Jesus' call to care for the children.
- In case you're wondering about the name of this denomination... it comes from the Greek word "*presbuteros*," meaning "elders"... and it was founded on a concept of democratic rule.
  - Unlike United Methodist, Catholic, Orthodox or Episcopal churches, there are no bishops in the Presbyterian Church... they are instead organized & run by elders!
  - Dan told me that the staff, vision & budget of a local Presbyterian church are set by the Board of Elders...
  - Elders are the chosen as wise & mature Christians... and they are elected for life, but serve 3-year terms at a time (making sure to take a year off every 6 years).
  - First Presbyterian @ Koolau has 24 active elders at one time.
- One of the most significant hallmarks of Presbyterian theology that I discovered during my study was insight about the Sovereignty of God.
  - This is a way of saying that God is the absolute ruler, reigning over every aspect of creation...
  - And that nothing happens outside of the will of God. Nothing.
  - I asked Pastor Dan Chun to share a little bit more with us about how Presbyterians understand the sovereignty of God. Here's what he said:
    - The Sovereignty of God helps Presbyterians understand that "God's Will" will be done... in every aspect of their lives!
    - They believe wholeheartedly, in very real and concrete ways, the truth of Romans 8:28...
    - "*All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to (God's) purpose.*"
    - What would it mean for us, my friends, to have a similar understanding?

- How would our lives be different if we intentionally sought to serve the LORD, to live according to God's precepts, and to follow His will... as our Sovereign, our King?
- We may not understand everything that happens in our lives... but we will nevertheless trust God's heart!
- What a blessing to wake up every morning and say a simple prayer, asking God to use us somehow during the day to accomplish God's purposes.
- God will do amazing things through us, if only we'll listen & respond!
- Thanks be to God for our Presbyterian brothers and sisters... may they continue to be a faithful & fruitful branch on the family tree of Christianity! AMEN.