

SERMON TITLE- "Confession Of Faith- A New Way Of Living"

TEXT- 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Today we close off 3 sermons which are focused on some distinctive aspects of our CoF. Last week I was in Winnipeg serving on the Seminary committee. One of our jobs was to interview a new professor for our seminary. He was not trained in our schools and so one of the things he had to be grilled on was how he responded to our CoF. It was very informative in the context of our sermon series.

Never having studied our CoF before, under this kind of scrutiny at least, his comments were interesting. He remarked that it seemed to be heavily focused on our behaviour compared to the CoF of his current denomination.

When we began this series we pointed out that in the 4th century the church shifted how it wrote its confessions. The shift was from a narrative to a propositional description.

The other shift was away from any discussion of lifestyle. In the first 3 centuries lifestyle dominated the literature of the church. At times it became very legalistic.

One of the very earliest post NT Christian writings is called the "Didache". It was an instructional guide for the church. Watch how it begins and look at the contrast with the Apostle's Creed

The Didache- The Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations.

Chapter 1. The Two Ways and the First Commandment. There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways. The way of life, then, is this: First, you shall love God who made you; second, love your neighbor as yourself, and do not do to another what you would not want done to you. And of these sayings the teaching is this: Bless those who curse you, and pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you. For what reward is there for loving those who love you? Do not the Gentiles do the same? But love those who hate you, and you shall not have an enemy. Abstain from fleshly and worldly

lusts. If someone strikes your right cheek, turn to him the other also, and you shall be perfect . . .

Apostles Creed [early version 215 AD]

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died, and was buried;

he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;

he ascended into heaven,

he is seated at the right hand of the Father,

and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting. AMEN.

Given the topic last week, it is interesting to note that The Didache begins with the Matthew 5 instruction of not striking our enemies. That is where the early church began its theology.

But for today I want to focus back on a change that took place as the focus of CoFs shifted from living to statements of belief.

The change is quite dramatic. Suddenly the focus was on belief- especially the belief in forgiveness. Sin obviously still existed but as long as you had a way of paying for your sin the message seemed to be that as long as you believed the right thing everything would be OK.

Clearly everyone recognized that there is a problem with this shift. James had already spoken about it

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good!

Even the demons believe that—and shudder. James 2:18-19

With the Reformation this whole debate opened up again. In the Catholic system the way to deal with sin was to ask for forgiveness and accept the restitution the church offered. Luther objected. We don't go to the church and a priest for forgiveness, we simply go to God and are forgiven. We are saved by grace alone was the cry of the Reformation.

But what happens next? Does that mean that we can do anything and ask for forgiveness and then it is all, OK? No one really believed that but it seems to follow from the idea of grace alone.

Luther did have a very big problem with the Book of James. He called it the "straw epistle" because in his view it sends us back to legalism.

Not everyone agreed with Luther and our tradition was among those who protested that for those who become followers of Jesus a new way of living had to be the result.

The Problem- Sorting Out Faith And Works

Real problems like this usually have a "on the one hand" and "on the other hand" aspect to them. The problem of the new way of living is a good example of this.

On the one hand the Bible is very clear that salvation is a gift of grace. Grace is unmerited favour. We don't earn grace. That was Martin Luther's great faith discovery. He would not get into heaven by following all kinds of challenging rules. Martin Luther was the champion of faith alone.

On the other hand, it follows that those who have been transformed by the gift of salvation will be transformed. It also is very clear from the Biblical teaching that we continue to be people called to act by the ethics of the Kingdom. Many of those who opposed Luther claimed that he was ignoring the ethical aspects of the Gospel. It seems that grace alone is not the whole story.

The Anabaptists were among those concerned that lifestyle was being ignored. And so the churches of the Anabaptist tradition actually wrote about what this new way of living was supposed to look like- into their CoFs. And that is what our CoF reflects.

ICOMB CoF- People of a New Way of Life

By God's grace the Holy Spirit calls people to a new way of life through conversion, discipleship and ongoing renewal.

Conversion. Christian conversion begins with new birth and always involves a deliberate personal commitment. As

Christians we are called to turn from a broken relationship with God to a personal relationship with the true God from bondage of sin and past mistakes to freedom, forgiveness, and healing

Discipleship. In Christ salvation and ethics come together. As Christians we are called to turn from individualism to interdependence with others in the church to prove ourselves faithful to the life and teachings of Jesus in everyday life.

Renewal. The Holy Spirit indwells every believer, testifying that we are God's children, offering continual renewal and cleansing in order to empower for a life of witness and service.

Scripture references: Is. 43,1; Mark 8,34-38; John 1,12-13; 3,5-8; 14,15-16,26; Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 4,2; Col. 3,1-4; Tit. 3,3-7

So where does that take us? Our CoF indicates that we do NOT believe that James is a straw epistle and that the language of grace and forgiveness is in opposition to the Biblical commands that our actions are a reflection of what we believe.

We are to live differently.

Very few people, including Martin Luther, would argue with this principle. It just stands to reason that people who have been taken from one way of living to another would behave differently as a result.

The biggest stumbling block to this, however is that ideas don't just automatically translate into action. Just saying the right things doesn't make right living.

This is something that children quickly figure out. They figure it out in the sense that they discover that when one says the right things people are happy with you. So children start saying the things that people want to hear.

Jesus told a story that reflected this reality-

"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' "I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered. Matthew 21:28-31

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. Matthew 21:31-32

Jesus goes on to remind His listeners that while the first son said the right thing, in the end it was the son who said the wrong thing but did the right thing who had actually obeyed his father.

This was an indictment of the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees whose lives were full of words but whose actions did not reflect these words.

Jesus makes a big contrast between words and actions. His followers are to be people of action.

It is not a controversial way of thinking and actually like many easily accepted ideas it suffers from a very specific problem.

Defining The New Way Of Living

That problem is sorting out exactly how to talk about this new way of living. After all Jesus also was very hard on the Teachers and Pharisees who made up long lists of rules on how to live.

On the one hand what begins as faith can easily shift to a religion of rules and grace and faith are swamped by legalism.

On the other hand, the Bible is very clear that how we actually live is at the core of the Gospel.

Our CoF spells out 3 aspects of this new way of living, Conversion, Discipleship and Renewal.

We also believe that there is no tension between Paul and James. To demonstrate this we are going to look at this issue by beginning from Paul’s perspective.

Just to be very clear, while fewer Christian groups focused on turning the other cheek as a Kingdom ethic [story of Terry Noble and his Pentecostal father’s pacifism], the challenge of ethical living was a constant stream through church history. Often they are called “holiness movements”.

We begin with-

#1. Conversion

To the Corinthians Paul writes-

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

What is Paul saying here? We are new creations when we take up the challenge to follow Jesus. Something profoundly new has begun. When we decide to follow Jesus it marks a conversion.

Now there is something that does need to be noted. This conversion is something that actually takes place. In John 3 when Jesus talks about being born again, the implication is that a process takes place which is by “nature.” When someone is born, that birth is an actual event that happens to the born person.

Jesus tells us that when someone is born again something profoundly real takes place- a new creation has come.

Paul picks this up and states it as a spiritual “fact” that we are to understand. One may or may not see anything different on the outside- but inside something has changes.

In our world it might be compared to an uncharged battery that is now charged up. There is nothing different looking between an uncharged and a charged battery- but one is just a package of various metals and chemical- the other is a power source.

When we declare Jesus as Lord, the Bible tells us, a transformation takes place inside of our being- a new creation is born.

From the outside no one can tell any difference.

All evangelical Christians from Martin Luther forward understood the importance of conversion but there is another reality that also has gone alongside this- a reality that was no different in Biblical times than it is now. That reality is- for many people nothing seems to change. Life quickly reverts back to what it always was.

It is because this phenomenon was there from the beginning that James wrote what he did and Paul would keep reminding their readers that something was wrong. Charged batteries that don’t do anything are no more useful than dead batteries.

So what’s missing? The answer is not mysterious. It is-

#2. Discipleship

When Jesus sent His followers out he gave them this instruction-

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. Matthew 28:19-20

As followers of Jesus we are to be people who “do” and teach others to “do” the things He told us to do. In the famous parable of the house built on the rock- the house on the rock represents those who put into practice what Jesus tells us to do-

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. Matthew 7:24-25

Is this different from what Paul says? Absolutely not. Paul explains it this way-

Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. Romans 8:12-13

So what does this mean? It means that even though we are new creations- we still are required to choose what we are going to do. We are like a battery which can choose to flip the switch to engage the new life that has been poured into us- and we can choose not to do so.

And it is not a single switch. The transformed life is a life of choices to do life according to the pattern of the Kingdom of God.

Again there will not likely be any person who reads the Bible that disputes what has been said so far but what happens next is where the controversy does hit the fan.

So what does a transformed lifestyle actually look like?

In the Matthew 5 passage Jesus talked about a specific behaviour- that of how we react when someone strikes us. It was easy to take this behaviour and focus on extreme examples such as when someone is trying to kill us.

But we talked about the fact that this misses the point entirely. The extreme example is only there to illustrate how we are to behave in the ordinary relationships of life.

But a changed lifestyle is not just about revenge when someone wrongs us- in fact a new way of living is supposed to enter every aspect of our lives.

As we read through the NT we find Paul addressing all kind of issues of life- when 2 people in the church are having a quarrel, how we parent our children, how we treat our parents, what we do with our money, even what we eat and drink.

Suddenly this new way of living starts to get very specific.

Growing up in a church that took the new way of living seriously, a list of guidelines and rules around what this new way of living was supposed to be became long and detailed.

Of course, the easiest targets were new things that came along. I am old enough to remember the first TVs that appeared in the scene. By default it was assumed that something like a TV was a big step down the road to calamity. As long as there were very few TVs the church had no problem making statements condemning this new medium. This condemnation became more and more problematic as TVs started to become normal.

But the rules were not limited to TV. A list of obvious evils wasn't hard to assemble. Drinking, dancing, smoking popped immediately to the top of any list.

It was hard to argue that anything good could come from any of these. Everyone agree to sign off on these “sins.”

It doesn't take much reflection for us to look back and conclude that something was seriously wrong with this process.

But what was it? That isn't as easy to shake out.

Today we don't do anything like that anymore. In fact we don't really know how to speak as a community when sin creeps in.

Let me be specific. I think there are 3 great evils at work in modern society- pornography, alcohol and gambling. These are destroying lives on a massive scale. All 3 are legal and all 3 are sins of spectrum.

What does that mean? it means that there is not a clear cut line when they become destructive.

When mentioned this to a fellow pastor he challenged me- “When is pornography ever, OK?” My answer was a question back, “When does a movie become OK and when is it pornographic?”

The line is not clear cut. Half of the magazines we have on our coffee tables would have been seen as porn 50 years ago.

I have made a provocative claim here but my intention is not to open up a debate about when each of these become evil as much as to say that as Kingdom people, we must find ways to wrestle through what a new way of living looks like in reference to issues like these.

Not only do we need to wrestle through what a new way of living looks like on an individual level- we also need to wrestle through what the standards of our community are.

As I was in my meetings last week, a key pastor and his church were wrestling through a very specific problem.

That church had been founded about 15 years ago and grew rapidly. In the process of writing out its community code they decided that no one who had been divorced should be in formal church leadership. At the time it wasn't a problem.

But it seems no one read their constitution and now some did and discovered a big problem. Some leaders in the church had been divorced and remarried. He now had a very painful dilemma on his hands.

I don't know what happened next but I do know that this was a terrible problem and the kind of problem that is not surprising for any community trying to work out what a new way of living is supposed to actually look like.

Is there a danger in legalism when we take on a new lifestyle?

The answer to that is a resounding “yes!” The history of the church is full of examples of Christian communities that have become very legalistic. The reality is that once those whose instinct is to make up rules are turned loose in any organization this instinct easily becomes oppressive. This took place during Jesus' time as the infamous Scribes and Pharisees became the morality police for their society.

What is the solution? I think that the answer is actually very simple and elegant. The answer is that the Body of Christ needs all of

its members. It needs those whose instinct is to police behaviour but it also needs those whose instinct is to love and overlook.

On the one hand we are to be people who take Jesus' command to a new way of living seriously and who speak to it.

On the other hand we are to be people who do so from a place of compassion and care, knowing that all of us struggle with the application of this principle in our own lives.

Neither is optional.

Walking the road of compassion and discipleship is extremely challenging- but the walking of that road is THE way of the Kingdom.

And because it is so difficult something else is needed

Our CoF adds a 3rd piece-

#3. Renewal

Again Paul explains what this is all about- again in a well know passage-

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12:1-2

The constant need for renewal is vital. The Kingdom road takes energy. We are a new creation but we live in a world that does work according to the ethics of the Kingdom of God and we live in bodies that run on the basis of their own impulses.

For us to keep on the course of following Jesus the Bible reminds us that there is a constant need for renewal.

That renewal process is completely part of the Kingdom way. It involves the decision to live a life of discipline.

It involves the decision to make Kingdom community part of the rhythm of life.

It involves the decision to continuously allow for the recharging of our beings, by the Holy Spirit. We are beings that have become new creations. Just like a battery is transformed into far more than a mix of metal and chemicals when it is charged up by the work of the new creation- so we are far more than a collection of impulses

and desires. We are a new creation. But just like a battery that reality is part of a complex process- a process that involves constant renewal.

There is one more thing that occurred to me as I reflected on our CoF. Throughout the NT there is a constant reminder of the important of encouragement.

Encouragement

Typical of this is Paul's reminder to the Thessalonians-

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5:11

And that, I think, is how we end this aspect of how we face the challenge of living as Kingdom people.

NA CoF-Article 10 Discipleship

Following Jesus

We believe that Jesus calls people who have experienced the joy of new birth to follow Him as disciples. By calling His followers to take up the cross, Christ invites them to reject the godless values of the world and offer themselves to God in a life of service. The Holy Spirit, who lives in every Christian, empowers believers to overcome the acts and attitudes of the sinful nature. Filled with love and gratitude, disciples delight to obey God.

United in a Distinct Community

Christians enjoy fellowship with God and other believers. At baptism believers are joined to the local church, commit themselves to build up the body of Christ and witness to the good news of the Christian hope. In community members grow in maturity as they demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit, use their spiritual gifts and practice mutual accountability in the disciplines of the Christian life. Christians confess sin, repent and experience God's grace in the life of the Christian community.

Demonstrating True Faith

Jesus teaches that discipleship is the way of self-denial and promises blessing for those who suffer for righteousness. Disciples are to resist worldly values and systems, the sinful nature and the devil. Disciples give generously and reject materialism which makes a god out of wealth. Disciples treat others with compassion and gentleness and reject violence as a response to injustice. Disciples speak honestly to build others up and reject dishonest, vulgar, and careless talk; they seek to avoid lawsuits to resolve personal grievances, especially with other believers. Disciples maintain sexual purity and marital faithfulness and reject immoral premarital and extramarital relationships and all homosexual practices. To be a disciple means to be true to Jesus in everyday life.

Psalm 1; Psalm 119; Amos 5:24; Matthew 5-7; Matthew 18:15-20; Mark 8:34-38; John 8:31-32; John 13:34-35; John 15:14-15; Acts 2:41-47; Romans 1:24-32; Romans 8:1-30; Romans 12; I Corinthians 6:9-11; I Corinthians 11:1; I Corinthians 12:1-13; II Corinthians 8-9; Galatians 2:20; Galatians 5:16-26; Galatians 6:1-2; Ephesians 4:11-12, 15-16; Ephesians 5:1, 18; Philippians 2:6-8; Colossians 3:1-17; I Thessalonians 4:3-8; I Thessalonians 5:17; I Timothy 1:9-11; I Timothy 2:1-8; I Timothy 4:6-8; II Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 12:1-3; Hebrews 13:4-5; James 1:22-27; James 4:7; I Peter 2:20-25; I Peter 3:15; I Peter 5:8-9; I John 1:3;