

# The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

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## **Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done, On Earth as In Heaven.** **The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on The Lord's Prayer** **The Gospel according to Matthew 6:7-13**

**The Fourth Sunday of Easter    April 25, 2010**

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When Jesus teaches the people to pray, "Pray then in this way," he begins with the simplest phrase: "Our Father in heaven." Biblical scholars are virtually unanimous that when Jesus taught in his native Aramaic language he taught them to pray, "Abba." "Abba" is a child's word for father. This is basic: a child cries out to a parent for food or comfort or care, and Jesus invites us to pray with exactly such effortlessness: "Abba." In a world not famous for caring for its children, where deep comfort is scarce, where starvation is widespread and hunger only a day away, Jesus insisted that there is One who does care and will comfort and will feed like a parent looking after a child. Against the emptiness of human existence Jesus places a face, a parent's face and invites us to pray with the trust of children, "Abba," "Our Father." This is basic prayer, spoken out of basic need and basic trust.

Very quickly the Lord's Prayer shifts to advanced prayer. If "Prayer 101" is to pray "Our Father," Prayer 501 is to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven." If prayer is as natural as a child calling out to a parent in the dark, this prayer is as unnatural as surrendering our lives, our wants and wishes and wills, to Another. We readily cry out in our need but we do not so readily give up what we want. This is advanced prayer. It takes time and experience and maturity to learn to pray "your kingdom come, your will be done," and it does not come easily if it happens at all. It's really quite simple: we want what we want; we pray for our will to be done; we may even pray for the coming of our own little mini-kingdoms.

This is not merely advanced prayer; it is also truth in advertising. Jesus makes it clear that our prayer asks for God's Kingdom and God's will. In the cause of "Truth in Advertising" the Federal Trade Commission insists, "Advertising must be truthful and non-deceptive."<sup>1</sup> The goal of following Jesus the Christ of God has to do with God's Kingdom and God's will, not ours. Whatever else we may hear in the worship service, whatever else we may say here, the Lord's Prayer makes it clear: it's not our Kingdom and it's not our will that will be done.

This sort of truth in advertising is out of fashion in church life these days. The trend of our times slopes toward the market-driven church that establishes what people

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<sup>1</sup> From a Federal Trade Commission website: <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/business/adv/bus35.shtm>

want from a church by market surveys and focus groups and then designs a church to give people what they want. It makes sense, doesn't it?

A few years ago we learned how to speak about user-friendly computers. The personal computer industry has been generated from programmers' ability to make their machines so simple that all one has to do is point to a picture and click a mouse, and the magic happens. Wouldn't it be great if life were so simple, if faith were only so simple? Nowadays people speak of user-friendly religion and user-friendly churches.

For some people, God is a problem. God seems so serious and demanding and so very large. So trim God down to something more familiar and accessible, something smaller. Of this impulse to conjure up a user-friendly God, Leander Keck of Yale Divinity School has said that God, "having been reduced to the Great Enabler, now has little to do except warrant our causes and help us fulfill our aspirations."<sup>2</sup> Keck says the first question of the old Westminster Shorter Catechism has been stood on its head. If Presbyterians once asked "What is the chief end of human life?" and answered, "Our chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever," they now might respond that God's chief end is "to glorify us and to be useful to us indefinitely."<sup>3</sup>

User-friendly religion invites people to church by giving them what they want. Marketing strategies provide the church with its mission. The only thing wrong with this is that it simply is not true. Truth in advertising, the Federal Trade Commission insists, "must be truthful and non-deceptive." Rick Warren says it bluntly: "It's not about you." It's not about what you want. Christian faith is about God's Kingdom and God's will being done. That is the truth.

Theologian David Wells writes:

The fact is that while we may be able to market the church, we cannot market Christ, the gospel, Christian character, or meaning in life. . . . Neither Christ nor his truth can be marketed by appealing to consumer interest, because the premise of all marketing is that the consumer's need is sovereign, that the consumer is always right, and that is what the gospel insists cannot be the case.<sup>4</sup>

In this week's **The New Yorker** magazine a couple of cartoon characters are in a drug store examining a product named "Energx, as seen on TV." Reading the label one says to the other, "The active ingredient is marketing."<sup>5</sup> These Sundays in the season of Easter we celebrate that "the active ingredient" of our faith is nothing less than the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

On this Sunday we ordain and install Elders and Deacons to office in the Church of Jesus Christ. I chose to preach this particular petition of the Lord's Prayer because so often people are quite amazed to discover the Presbyterian Church's particular theology of leadership. People sometimes ask me when we get to vote in order to tell our elders what to say or do at presbytery or general assembly. Elders will sometimes wonder why we can't have a congregational meeting to help decide some knotty problem. And each year in Officers Training Class elders- and deacons-elect are surprised to discover their task is not

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<sup>2</sup> Leander E. Keck, **The Church Confident** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Keck, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> David F. Wells, **God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams** (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 79-80. Wells, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Smaller, **The New Yorker**, April 26, 2010, p. 36.

to represent the views or wishes or wills of the congregation but nothing less than the mind of Christ, or, as **The Book of Order** puts it, “Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ” (G—4.0300d).

On the last night of his life Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). That is the fulfillment of the Lord’s Prayer and that is the goal to which the Presbyterian Church asks its elders and deacons and ministers of the Word to strive for: “yet, not my will be yours be done.”

Elders and deacons represent the will of Christ. This would sound perfectly grandiose except that seeking the mind of Christ comes from a particular orientation. As we ordain and install officers we ask them how they intend to orientate themselves to seeking the mind of Christ. We ask:

a. Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

(Do you trust Christ to guide you and do you recognize that the church is his church before it’s your church?)

b. Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?

(Do you hear the Word of Christ addressing his church through the Scriptures?)

c. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?

(Do you receive confessions of the Reformed tradition as a “reliable” interpretation of God’s will and Kingdom?)

d. Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?

(G—14.0207)

(Will Christ, Scripture and the confessions of the Church command your obedience or will you be obedient to what works in the market or to what you learned from your company or in your service or to what is in style this year or what everyone else is saying?)

Listening to this hallmark of Presbyterian theology please do not assume that we arrogantly think we know what God’s will is or what Christ’s will is for the church. Our only claim is that we know where to look: in the Scriptures, in the confessions, and in fellowship with Christ. And we know that no one knows alone. **The Book of Order** makes it clear: we “*seek together* to find and represent the will of Christ.” *Together* we study the Scriptures and confessions, *together* we pray for the knowledge of Christ’s will for the church, *together* we deliberate and seek to discern the will of God.

This is Advanced Prayer, Prayer 501 where we place our wants and wills to the side and pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done.” It is challenging to pray this way, for some of us it takes a lifetime, but we come here every Sunday to practice in worship and to rehearse and each Sunday we pray “your kingdom come, your will be

done.” We try to get the words right and pray that the words will set our hearts right to the will of God.

Sometimes we misunderstand the situation: that we believe in Jesus Christ and then we pray the Lord’s Prayer; that we come to desire God’s will and then we pray, “your will be done.” It is quite the opposite, said Origen, the great theologian of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. We learn to trust in Christ by praying the Lord’s Prayer; we learn to desire God’s will by praying, “your will be done.”

The problem of praying for our own will to be done or our own little mini-kingdom to come is that we never get anything better. Thomas Traherne, the 17<sup>th</sup> century English theologian and poet wrote that our own human wills and wants are small and paltry but that Christian faith causes us to want like a God. God’s will for us so vastly more extravagant than anything we might dream or desire. Praying for God’s will to be done does not surrender what we hope for but asks for so much more.

We might pray for an enjoyable weekend or a refreshing vacation, but God’s will means to give us a whole world to play in, a Kingdom.

We might pray for an end to pain and a healing restoration, but God’s will is to resurrect us to vast healing and a final wholeness.

We might pray about difficulties at work or we might pray for work to do, but God means to enlist us—our wills, our hearts and minds and souls and strength—in the great work we pray for saying, “your kingdom come, your will be done.”

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