

BRAVEHEART
January 15, 2012 –I Samuel 17: 41-47
The Church of the Covenant

We Presbyterians come by our church wars honestly. I remember watching the film, starring Mel Gibson, *Braveheart*, and at some point I thought, "O my Lord, that's the way we Scottish Presbyterians battle in church battles!" You know, about every 4 or 5 years the Presbyterian Church, founded in Scotland, goes tooth and nail over some issue. We've been doing this for years --The Old School-New School controversies of the late 1800's, the divisions over the Civil War, the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversies of the 1920's, the Biblical Authority issues of the 1960's, the ordination issues of today. You know, its almost like Mel Gibson putting on his war kilt, sharpening up his broad axe, putting on his blue Celtic war paint and preparing for battle. When William Wallace, Scottish patriot, was finally captured by the English, when he stood up before King Edward he declaimed: "I could not be a traitor to Edward, for I was never his subject!" Sounds like a Presbyterian to me! Of course, poor William Wallace wound up hanged, drawn and quartered, meaning --he was partially strangled and hanged but still alive, eviscerated and his bowels burned before him, beheaded, cut into 4 pieces and his head placed on a pike and displayed on London Bridge. At least today we don't do that, we just question someone's biblical integrity and their faith in the Lord Jesus!

By the way, I'm only partially Scottish. I am also Swedish plus Heinz 57 other varieties. So when I tried on a kilt many years ago I decided looking at my knobby knees that I must have Swedish legs, but I hope I have a Scottish heart!

You know, its like we do things and say things that we really don't understand why we do them or say them. We're like a vast dysfunctional church family and our dysfunctionality is that we like to battle with one another. Every generation or so, William Wallace reemerges to do battle, only this is not with the English, this is with one another. We pass it from generation to generation like an alcoholic passes on his disease. I remember when I was serving in the very divisive, very contumacious, very willing to go to war, First Presbyterian Church in downtown Pittsburgh as their Interim Pastor, after they had run out of town the 10th or 11th pastor in a row, we contracted for a Phd. candidate to do a paper on the first Pastor of First Presbyterian Church. First problem --He was Scotch-Irish but the first elders in the church were English Anglicans. The Scotch Irish hate the English so this was not a marriage made in heaven. There were battles aplenty; the elders finally charging the pastor with being an agent of the Prince of Spain, treason. The last year and a half that the pastor preached, the session padlocked the doors of the church, and the pastor had to preach from the front steps of the church! There were several pastors attending the reading of this historic paper and we all looked at one another and nodded in understanding --the seeds of discord and dysfunction were planted early and often at old First Church, and they were living and reliving this unfortunate moment in their history, over and over and over again.

Just like the Presbyterian Church. Why is this?

Sometimes it is we don't understand the distinctives of being Presbyterian. Particularly people who come from hierarchical churches, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, non-denominational churches where the pastor is all but God, don't understand what it is to be Presbyterian. We don't have a Pope; we don't have a Bishop; we don't have a charismatic, iron-fisted mega church pastor. The Scots would shout out their battle cry --"*No Bishop! No King!*" No person tells me what to do. No man tells me what to think. The Highlands of Scotland produced people who were rabidly independent and subject to no man. William Wallace shouts at King Edward --I was never treasonous to you because I

was never subject to you! What makes us Presbyterian as well is the statement in the Book or Order that declares: *"Jesus Christ alone is Lord of conscience."* That means *"Jesus is Lord"* and no one else is. This means no church, no General Assembly, no Presbytery, no pastor, can tell me what to think. No one can bind my conscience except the Lord Jesus Christ. Our authority is not a king, a Pope or a bishop; our authority is the Word of God. The Bible is what is authoritative for a Presbyterian, not what any man or church declares. We have an extensive *Book of Confessions* which lays out what the Presbyterian Church officially believes; I have studied it for years and find it to be amazingly faithful to scripture; there are parts I might disagree with here or there (but that just makes me a Presbyterian). So it is never correct to say the Presbyterian Church doesn't believe correctly and biblically on all matters of faith and life. We believe staunchly in the Jesus revealed in scripture. What it is correct to say is that all Presbyterians will never agree on everything in all matters of faith and life. Because we have no Pope to speak *ex cathedra* to us and tell us what to believe. Because as Presbyterians we don't have to believe anything the church says, or follow anything the church proclaims. In 2006 the Presbyterian Church formalized in the *Peace Unity and Purity* report the idea of "scrupling"; that means as a Presbyterian if we believe from our reading of scripture that something the church says or something the church does doesn't fit with scripture we can "scruple it" and say "I don't believe it" and "I won't follow it." That's what makes it messy—you read the scripture as authority and I read the scripture as authority but we may not always read it exactly the same. By the way, I'm glad I'm a Presbyterian and I'll take the mess from time to time. Because like William Wallace before me—I don't want a bishop and I don't want a king. I want freedom and I want Jesus and I want the Word of God. (This is what the Bible says vignette)

So if you want everyone to think the same and be the same, at least on the outside (because in hierarchical churches people disagree also; they're just not allowed to speak up and disagree), then you need to go into a hierarchical church; but if you are willing to have some messy disagreements over what we believe and what we do and want to maintain your freedom to think and do what you believe the Word of God bids you to think and do, then you'll want to remain in the Presbyterian Church.

Our scripture is about a battle of sorts. It is David versus Goliath. It is a shepherd boy who takes on a giant. And everyone tries to make David anxious; even his brothers put him down. The divisive issues of his day seem large and insurmountable; impossible to take on; impossible for there to be victory and unity for the people of God. David seems amazingly calm in the midst of all the hub-bub leading up to his encounter with Goliath. There is a little tiny line in the scripture that tells us his secret. It will help us today if we let it. To be sure we can start sharpening our battle axes; we can practice "Scotland the Brave" on our bagpipes; we can put on our blue Celtic war paint. But we know where it leads. It leads to churches divided; it leads to an inability to do mission or ministry. We know where it leads; we've seen the church carnage of the past iterations of church battles. We've watched friends become enemies and people leave the church before. And it is not pretty. And it is not Christ-honoring.

The little line that will help us if we allow it to is this: *"The battle is the Lord's" (1 Samuel 17: 47)* If the battle is not ours and it is the Lord's then we can relax; we can put down our battle axe and our broadsword; we can wipe off our war paint. We can trust in God to do a great work. We can be assured that when the battle is the Lord's then the victory is the Lord's. God is still on the throne. He doesn't need our help to defend the Bible. Truth wins always in the end. The Sovereign will of the Sovereign God is always victorious. It is always amazing to me that people of great faith as a church war seems to loom on the horizon seemingly forget that God is in charge, God wins ultimately, truth will out, Jesus will be vindicated, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Jesus as Lord, to the glory of God. The battle, whatever it may be, is not ours; the battle is the Lord's... Put down your battle axe, William Wallace. Put down your broadsword, Presbyterian Church, and for once, please, please, please...for the

Love of God, trust the Lord. What a new learning that would be! What a major breakthrough that would be for the Presbyterian Church family, as dysfunctional as it is, that I have come over the years to love. We do have a choice and the choice is this –we do battle or we allow the Lord to do battle.

I end by asking a question. I hope it is not offensive. But the question I ask is this –Was William Wallace really BRAVEHEART or is there someone else who really is BRAVEHEART? I end by reading to you the passage about Jesus from the second chapter of Philippians. It reads: *“Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, thought He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2: 5-11)*

The heart which beat within the Son of God is our BRAVEHEART. He fought the battle a particular way. And His heart humbled itself and it emptied itself and it took the form of a servant. There’s the battle. There’s the interior struggle of the human heart. Not to do battle with our brothers and sisters in Christ. But to take on the heart of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Because the battle is not ours; the battle is the Lord’s. May the BRAVEHEART of Jesus beat within all of us today. Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*