

**PASCAL'S WAGER**  
**August 21, 2011 – Ephesians 4: 11-16 – 8:30 and 943 only**  
**The Church of the Covenant**

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) is a 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher, mathematician, scientist and Christian mystic who is probably best known for his delightful little book, the *Pensees*. It is a grouping of “thoughts” on Christian faith and religion that is a classic of Christian devotional literature. He is also known for a statement about belief in God that is often referred to as “Pascal’s Wager”. He writes:

*“Belief is a wise wager. Granted that faith cannot be proved, what harm will come to you if you gamble on its truths and it proves false? If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation, that He (God) exists”. (The Pensees, Pascal, p. 76)*

Pascal’s point, as only someone who is both a mathematician and religious, is that we might as well believe in God –if God does exist we get to go to heaven –if He doesn’t then what did our belief harm? I always remember my philosophy professor, Dr. George Friedman, kvetching around about Pascal’s Wager. His response to it, and Dr. Friedman was a deeply religious Orthodox Jew, was that God would say this to Pascal when Pascal got to heaven. “So, Pascal, what’s this I hear you placing bets on me the Lord God Almighty? Go to hell!!!!!!” Hedging our bets where God is concerned doesn’t get one into heaven any more than trying to be a good person apart from God does. I think many people delude themselves where the Almighty is concerned; they think that by mere belief, “I merely believe in my head that God exists”, that this somehow gets them into heaven. No, there is a living relationship with a Living Lord Jesus that accomplishes this; there is living one’s life, every day, for HIM as His active discipline; there is studying Him and knowing Him through prayer and worship; there is serving HIM through mission and service in the life of the church. There are so many things that taken together grant eternal life...but hedging your bets, thinking in your mind that God exists, is not one of them...

That kind of person, hedging their bets on God, is placing a wager, to be sure. But it is a fool’s wager and one that will lead, not to life, but to death...every time...

People when they observe the church from the outside often come away disillusioned and unbelieving. They may say things such as, “I like the idea of Jesus...but the church is always squabbling, fighting, such an imperfect expression of God’s love. Hypocrites, all. I believe in Jesus, they may say, but, man o day, I don’t believe in the church.” That’s what the world says about us. I think there were some people after hearing last week’s sermon were wondering –“Was Stu trying to say something to me?” Just so you know I NEVER use a sermon to try to say something to someone that should be said to them personally and in the privacy of their living room. No, I am speaking about the controversies that seem to infect the Presbyterian Church every two to four years. People willing to go tooth and nail over some issue or theology or biblical viewpoint. Last week we sang “*They will know we are Christians by our love...*” but sometimes the world when they observe us don’t see our love, they see our arguments and our divisions and our controversies and our harsh language aimed at one another. And both sides in whatever is the argument du jure, by the way, are utterly convinced they are right. They will divide churches, split relationships with people who are friends, say heinous things about brothers and sisters when they should know better, and just generally behave in ways and say things that the Lord Jesus would never say or do. Blaise Pascal has another better quote that I like –He writes: “*Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction.*” Church fights, in the name of the Lord of Love, can be some of the meanest and nastiest fights ever.

Before coming to The Church of the Covenant I was in Pittsburgh Presbytery and served as Chair of Council during all the fights about churches leaving the denomination and whether they could or could not take their property with them and how supposedly some people really didn't believe in Jesus. It always hurt me personally and to the heart when someone would suggest that the church of which I am a part didn't believe in Jesus. For the record, I do and I love the Lord with all my heart, mind and strength and seek to serve Him and follow Him and His Holy Word. So there were two sides to this issue and the anger was building and the rhetoric heating up and I said that we could deal with these churches leaving in a Christ-honoring way; our task was not to "win" whatever that means; our task was to follow Jesus and to give Him glory in the things we said and did. I remember standing up on the floor of Pittsburgh Presbytery and saying that there would only be one headline in the Post-Gazette and that headline would be 'SEE HOW THESE CHRISTIANS LOVE ONE ANOTHER' But by our words and actions and how we treated one another, that would determine what picture was under the headline. We had a choice. Did we want a picture of angry Presbyterians protesting in front of a padlocked church building? Or did we want the picture being of the Christians on both sides of the issue to be sitting around a table, talking together, praying together and negotiating together? See how these Christians love one another. We had a choice. Would we honor Jesus...or not?

I want to share with you a spiritual insight from the scriptures how you can tell in the midst of a church controversy where the Spirit of Jesus is at work and where it is not. Our scripture from Ephesians speaks of "building up the Body of Christ" (Ephesians 4: 12) It concludes by saying when we are knit together in Christ the Body of Christ, the Church, "upbuilds itself in love" (Ephesians 4: 16) It also speaks of maturity in Christ, of not being tossed around by every wind of doctrine and by every church disagreement. We are to grow up as Christians, not be children. We are to grow up into "the stature of the fullness of Christ", we are to "grow up into Him in every way" (Ephesians 4: 15) We are to grow up. We are to be and become mature in Christ. We are to be like Jesus; we are to speak and handle ourselves in the midst of disagreements as He would do.

Maturity in Christ is all about "upbuilding". It is all about "edification". It is all about "encouragement in Christ". It builds up; it doesn't tear down. *Apollyon* (Revelation 9:11) is another name for the devil. It means "destroyer". It means an evil spirit at work tears down and destroys. It means, by contrast, that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, is the Spirit that builds up, that edifies and that encourages. We can spiritually discern what is REALLY going on in some situation by asking ourselves the simple question --what Spirit is at work? Who and what is tearing down? Who and what is seeking to upbuild itself in love? What is building up the Body of Christ and what is tearing it down?

May I say, Jesus always "BUILDS UP" and *never* tears us down...

To be sure we can share words with one another that may even seem to be critical, as long as they are shared "speaking the truth in love" as Ephesians says (v. 15) as long as our motive and intent is to build up and not to tear down and that is the Spirit at work in us as we share.

I conclude with this --It is "STU's WAGER" --THE WORLD WILL BELIEVE IN JESUS...(not when it places a bet on Him or merely says it believes in Him) but only WHEN THE CHURCH CHOOSES TO ACT LIKE JESUS... Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA  
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*