

THE FALLEN CHURCH
Sermon series: “God on Trial –The Case for Christianity”
October 21, 2018 –2 Corinthians 4: 1-7
The Church of the Covenant

This sermon concludes my series “God on Trial –The Case for Christianity” and it focuses today on the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report that identified more than 300 clergy who sexually assaulted more than 1,000 young people going back more than thirty years ago. The world will see this report and condemn the church, not just part of it, but the whole church, and by pointing out the church’s fallen nature will refuse to believe in Jesus or in God. The church as it is imperfect and fallen and engages in things it ought not, is its own worst enemy in making its case for God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The world watches our actions, places us on trial if you will, and will or will not believe in Jesus on the basis of what they see. The world basically says: “I cannot believe in Jesus because the church is so messed up, it is so terribly fallen and filled with such sinful, imperfect people...Why would I want to be part of that?”

Some of you may remember the scandals associated with Television Preachers back in the 1980’s. There were moral lapses and financial scandals aplenty. I preached a very smug and self-satisfied sermon entitled, “What Put the Whammy on Jim and Tammy” way back then. You know, these TV evangelists were not the same as the local church; we Presbyterians were above all that. Yet, what I saw was that our society did not acknowledge the nice distinctions we might make like that. No, they tarred the entire church with the abuses done by a few. In the early 1980’s when Gallop would do a poll of the most highly regarded professions clergy were always in the top 3 or 4. But after those scandals, we were bumped down the list. And I noticed something else as well, that era opened a door of criticism and accusation into the entire church related to questioning church finances. It didn’t matter that we weren’t scandal-ridden TV Evangelists; people treated us as if we were. By the way, BEFORE this Grand Jury report was issued in a recent Gallop poll Clergy were only trusted by 41% of the American people, slightly above used car salesmen. So I can only imagine where we fall now were a poll to be conducted today. And my strong suspicion is that the world has radically changed for the church this summer –a ground shift of monumental proportions has occurred where a spirit of accusation will be poured out in relation to all these issues, and good churches and clergy will be tarred with the same broad brush as those who are not.

There are reasons why we are so careful about Child Protection Policies and Sexual Harassment Policies here at The Church of the Covenant. We will do everything that is state of the art and cutting edge to endeavor to make certain that children and people are safe. When you have to sign in now to enter the church it is annoying but necessary. When we install security cameras and new locking systems, when we spend lots and lots of time on procedures, when we have a security guard present on Sundays, when we require volunteers for Vacation Bible School, indeed anyone who works with children or youth, to have criminal background checks, it is all part of our hope and our prayer that ultimately God will protect us from anything bad or any spirit of accusation being poured out. One thing to note from the Grand Jury report is that once a zero tolerance policy was adopted in 2001 and proper policies and procedures were in place by the Catholic Church that there were very, very few such incidents. So we will do all in our power to have children be safe here at The Church of the Covenant. That is my promise to you.

But we are nevertheless still an imperfect church, filled with imperfect, flawed and fallen people. Just because we know Jesus doesn’t mean we are somehow perfect or better than the world. Our scripture for today from 2 Corinthians puts it this way: *“We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the*

transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.” (2 Corinthians 4: 7) We are earthen vessels, not perfect vessels. We are at best flawed vessels through whom God, for whatever reason that I cannot still figure out, chooses to use for His glory, and the glory of His Son Jesus, pour His Holy Spirit power, and effect the salvation of His world. As it says, “Let light shine out of darkness” (v. 6) --The glory of God shines out of the darkness in our hearts. Why does God choose to use imperfect people to have His transcendent power and light and glory poured out into His world? I don’t know. I don’t know why He chose me to be a pastor. I don’t know why He chose the men and women He is raising up to be our new Elders and Deacons today in the congregational meeting. I know I’m not perfect. I know that if we required perfection in our elected elders and deacons that the Nominating Committee today would be presenting a slate with no one on it. I think it can only be explained by the fact that God is all about grace and mercy. That God has sent the Son Jesus into the world to redeem an imperfect and fallen world through imperfect and fallen Christians. We are imperfect so we deserve none of the credit when everything is going well and right. We are imperfect so that when something is wrong we know to blame ourselves rather than the One true and living God. We have this ministry, as our scripture attests, “by the mercies of God” (v. 1) We don’t deserve to be called as pastors, elders and deacons. We haven’t earned the right to be a leader in the church. And, oh by the way, we will make mistakes and be imperfect but that is only to point to the One who is perfect and holy and gracious and merciful. The church is imperfect only to point out that the transcendent power belongs to God alone and not to us. So it is with great humility we approach ministry. I am humbled by the recent turn of events through the Grand Jury Report. I am humbled by the terrible things that happened to innocent children. I repent of my earlier smugness and any attitude that “It can’t happen here.” Because with a church filled with imperfect people and a society filled with much sexual sin and depravity, it is only God who can protect us; we really do just have this ministry by the mercies of God. It can be snatched away tomorrow. But there are other things we can do...

The Reformation noted that there are three “marks” or “notes” of the true church. This is particularly enumerated in the Scots Confession in our Book of Order in the Presbyterian Church. What constitutes the one, holy Apostolic Church? What is the real? What is the false?

The Reformation (and we desperately need another Reformation today!) came up with three things: 1) The true preaching of the Word of God; 2) The right administration of the sacraments; 3) ecclesiastical discipline rightly ministered. (The Scots Confession, Chapter XVIII, 3.18) Pastors, elders and deacons do not very much study the Word of God, do not read it devotionally, do not put it front and center to lead and guide them in the decisions they are to make as spiritual leaders in the church. What we DO disconnected from what we BELIEVE opens portals of mischief into the church. Elders and Deacons, make a commitment to study the Word of God and do ministry from its precepts. Second, the right administration of the sacraments. Repentance precedes relationship. Asking forgiveness of sin is the necessary precursor to receiving the sacrament. The 10 seconds we allow for Silent Personal Confession on a communion Sunday does not allow time to “discern the body” and our personal broken-ness in our sin and the ways in which our lack of forgiveness of others also breaks our spiritual relationship with Christ. Sin that is confessed and forgiven then will not break out into fallen action in the church. We drink communion in an “unworthy” manner when there is little or no confession or forgiveness in advance. When was the last time you spent time on a communion Sunday really identifying the fallen things in your life you need to repent of in order to receive the sacrament? Unresolved sin in our own life and in the church then opens portals of mischief into the church. To be serious about protecting our church is to be serious about repenting of our own sin in our own heart. Third, “discipline rightly ministered”. We don’t do discipline at all today. Discipline is not punishment; it is the hoped for restoration of a brother or sister in Christ who has fallen and their restoration in love in the name of Jesus. The world doesn’t understand this at all. On the one hand the world wants us to look the other

way where there is sin and not to hold people accountable and this non-accountability somehow is supposed to be loving. And then the world views that if someone has somehow fallen then they need to be punished. That's the secular law. In the church we cannot "look the other way" We cannot ignore things but must address them in love. To not have discipline rightly ministered in the church is to open a portal of mischief into the life of the church. So to the extent that I have looked the other way, and not called us to true repentance of our sin in advance of communion, nor asked leaders to lead from their knowledge and understanding of scripture, I humbly repent today and ask the Lord to be merciful to me a sinner, and ask the Lord to help us reconnect to the true marks of the church, which in the end is our only protection.

So in great humility today I ask the Lord to protect us, to have us have that internal Reformation in our church that will lead to our protection, to have us come to grips with what it means that we are just broken and earthen vessels, and to realize that the only reason there even is The Church of the Covenant, is the mercies of God. To this church you are ordained and installed in humility today. Amen and 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!*