



The Mustard Seed

News, Thoughts & Teaching from
First Presbyterian Church, Opelika (EPC)

February 2010

Dear Church Family,

One of my favorite books of all time is *Pilgrim's Progress*. I do believe that every believer owes him or herself the favor of reading the Modern English version of this classic and illustrative allegory of the faith. Maybe you know the back story: the main character is Christian, who represents, you guessed it, Christians. The book traces his journey to the Celestial City (heaven) – it is a picture of the believer's life and journey in faith.

In one scene, Christian is taken into the house of a man named Interpreter, who proceeds to show Christian a series of visions designed to give him insight into his own Christian journey. For one of the visions, Interpreter leads Pilgrim into a room where there is a fire burning next to the wall. The interesting thing is that next to the fire, there is a man throwing water onto the flame in an attempt to extinguish it. Even still, the fire rages hot and high – the more water the man threw on it, the higher it burned.

After Christian is confounded by this mysterious picture, Interpreter takes him behind the wall. There, out of sight, was a man holding a jar filled with oil which he was regularly sprinkling through the wall onto the fire. Now it makes sense – this previously unseen work is the reason that the fire burns hot and high in spite of the water.

You probably get the meaning of the picture, which Interpreter goes on to explain. The fire is the work of grace in the heart of the believer. The one throwing water on the fire is the Devil. And yet Christ is there, subtly, out of sight, fueling the fire such that it being extinguished is nothing short of an impossibility. In the words of Interpreter, "In that you saw the man standing behind the wall to keep the fire burning, that is meant to teach you that it is hard for those tempted to see how this work of grace is continued in the soul."

Do you know that this is a picture of the work of grace that God has begun in your heart out of the abundance of his sovereign mercy and love? Do you know that the fire burns hot and high, even as the water is poured on? Do you remember the promise of Isaiah 42:3 – *a faintly burning wick He will not put out?* Do you see that even when it is imperceptible, God in Christ supports our weakness and frailty, and that as long as he does, we will not be extinguished?

It is a picture of Romans 3:16 that ought to set our hearts ablaze - the promise depends not on our works but on grace – unmerited favor – oil from another source - and because it does, it is guaranteed.

Scott



Bread for the Way

The following is the January 13th blog entry from Donald Miller, a popular author/speaker. It is a response to the Pat Robertson comments about the reasons for the Haiti earthquake. **DISCLAIMER:** This is not a 'carte-blanche' endorsement of all things Donald Miller, or even of all things in his response. It is here to, hopefully, cause you to think about how you respond to crazy things people say in the name of Christ.

Back in the day, the comment [Pat Robertson](#) made regarding Haiti would have infuriated me. Robertson essentially blamed the devastation that took place in Haiti on the idea that, generations ago, people in Haiti sold their souls to the Devil and are now paying for it. I'm reminded of a similar comment made in a debate on CNN, in which yet another religious figure blamed the devastation in New Orleans following Katrina on the debauchery that took place in that town. Luckily, or perhaps providentially, Tony Campolo was also on the show and pointed out that the French Quarter was fine, that it was low-income minorities who were devastated, and then asked his fellow guest point blank whether God was angry with low-income minorities. The other guest really didn't know what to say. Any answer would have painted him a loon.

Regardless, Robertson's comments further divide people of faith from, well, people of faith. I don't want to debate the theological ramifications of Robertson's statements, I only want to point out some perspectives that ease my anger, and instead, cause me to pity him. I consider this a more mature response than I would have had a few years ago. Here are a few perspectives that, hopefully, will keep you from throwing a stapler through a wall:

- **Many controlling personalities are drawn to the idea of a severe, vengeance oriented God.** Robertson must have read a book about Haiti at one point, but it lacked civility to cite that book and espouse an absurd theological idea on television, without context for both. It was reactionary, and came off as a manifestation of his personality, not his theology. Regardless, it was sadly irresponsible for him to make such a devastatingly shocking statement in the context of great hurt. Can you imagine giving the eulogy at a funeral and starting out by saying "before I tell you about God's grace, let me make it clear that little Johnny deserved to die because he stole candy from a store." There is something wrong with a person who would do this. These people are often, themselves, controlling. They are wired to build empires, and in order to build empires you have to get people to do what you say, and if you have God standing behind you threatening hurt and pain, you can motivate people. I've heard pastors pray and call other men cowards, get angry from the pulpit, yell, belittle other Christian pastors who don't agree with them, fire people who will not submit to them, surround themselves with yes men and so on. Sadly, they never point the finger at themselves. It's always YOU or THEM who are the sinners. When they need God's grace, they usually confess to studying too hard or caring too much. But compassion comes when you realize, and it doesn't take long to see it, that this person is afraid that if he gives anybody else a free will, they will use it against them. Their mantra is: *If I don't control people, they won't love me.* Psychologists see control as a response to a perceived threat. Picture an adult with an inner twelve-year old saying "I'll hurt you before you hurt me. I'm tough. I say tough things. Don't mess with me again." In religion, these leaders often project their way of seeing the world onto God. Please forgive me for painting Robertson with a sweeping brush. It's not always true of controlling people, and there are often good reasons to be harsh and to take action (for instance, when somebody really is trying to control you!) It's just that this is one of the understandings that has helped me respond to controlling people with more compassion. Theologically, what we all deserve is death, and Christ paid that for us. We live in the New Testament, not the old. Lets spread God's unconditional love.

- **Another truth that gives me a more grounded perspective on Pat Robertson is that he really doesn't represent most conservatives.** I come from a politically and religiously conservative family, and many, many of my friends are very conservative, and all of them would be in shock at Robertson's statements. The media would have Robertson represent all Christians, or perhaps all conservatives, but the idea is absurd. It's also important to let people know we think it's absurd. So here is what the Devil is really going to try to get you to do: Hate other people. Those conservatives, those Christians, those whoever...I think we'd be wise to watch out for that, and stop it at the point where it starts.

- **I've also found that the more I trust in Christ's redemption to be sufficient, the less overtly religious I am.** And, quite honestly, the more suspect overtly religious people become to me. When I'm with somebody who talks zealously about faith, about Jesus, about the Bible, after a while, I find myself wondering whether or not their faith is strong at all. For instance, if I were with somebody who kept talking about how much they loved their wife, going on loudly and profusely, intuitively I would wonder whether or not they were struggling in their marriage. I would wonder whether they were trying to convince *me* they loved their wife, or if they were trying to convince *themselves.* (cont...)

(Now that I think of it, though, some of my favorite people talk about how much they love their wives, but these are less public proclamations and more sighs of appreciation.) Faith in Christ, for me, is similar. It's intimate. I'm more comfortable giving quiet prayers, intimate prayers. Often alone, in fact. I speak of faith the way I speak of personal matters. Of course there is a time for proclamations, but that's the key, isn't it? There's a time. Anyway, I love that the New Testament is mostly intimate letters written to small groups of people who met in homes. I like the quiet authenticity of our faith. Robertson's loudness and shock-jock verbiage seems strange and oddly uncompassionate. It felt like he was trying to tell us how tough he was, not how compassionate God is.

An appropriate response to Haiti: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.."

An appropriate response to Pat Robertson: "You seem angry and tired. Christ loves you. He is not impressed with your religious posturing. He really loves you. You don't have to hide behind anything anymore. The good news really is that good."

Taken from www.donmilleris.com

Tea with Jacky



Saturday, February 6th.

Fellowship Hall: 10:00 AM

A Southerner by birth and choice, Jacky was born in Memphis and raised in Richmond. She is a graduate from the University of Virginia and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Desiring to serve Christ and his Church, Jacky has been the director of Women in Ministry for the EPC since 2005. In that role she works to train, equip and support women leaders throughout the EPC.



All women and their guests are invited. Reservations must be made by Wednesday, 2/3. \$5 at door, \$2 for students.

Opportunities

Restoration Pastoral Counseling Scholarships:

The goal of RPC is to offer affordable, competent counseling to all who desire it, regardless of ability to pay. Are you able to help extend this ministry of FPC deeper into the community? \$200 provides 1 month of counseling to an individual/couple. If you are willing to support the scholarship fund, contact Jerry Schwarzauer through the church office, 745-3421.

Doctrines of Grace Study:

College and graduate students are currently studying the doctrines of grace and their practical implications in the life of a believer. Sundays, 9:30 AM, Upstairs Classroom #3.

Christian Life & Witness Classes:

Put on by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, these 4 week classes run all during February around the area. If you're interested, go to http://www.billygraham.org/wgc_auburn.asp

Want to learn more about FPC and/or to become a member? The next FPC Profiles class begins March 21st.

Contact scott@firstpresopelika.org if you're interested.

Home Groups - 2/3, 6 PM
contact the church office to join
a group. 745-3421



The post-college - young couples group has split
into 2 groups -

1. married w/kids

(contact scott@firstpresopelika.org);

2. all others

(ginger@firstpresopelika.org)



A Good Read — A space to be turned on to instructive, edifying books for your own growth...all of which can be found in your church library.

66 Love Letters

by Larry Crabb

Written as an ongoing dialogue between the author and God about the 66 books of the Bible, Crabb uses first person for both voices, taking to the nth degree the common idea that the Bible is a love letter from God. The author's persona progressively learns deeper truths about God's love from each letter, or book, of the Bible. Through the voice of God, Crabb takes on today's culture and Christian subculture. The book addresses much for what skeptics ask but will serve Christians who have ignored or conveniently overlooked the arc of the Bible story and chosen a chirpy version of Christianity that Crabb calls good enough Christianity. His psychological and biblical perspective and decades of experience give the otherwise presumptuous attempt at voicing God credibility.

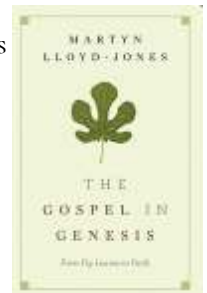
(from the Publisher)



The Gospel In Genesis

by Martyn Lloyd-Jones

If you've ever asked, "Why am I the way that I am? Why is life so hard? Is there any hope?" you'll find answers in Martyn Lloyd-Jones's study of Genesis. In this series of never-before-published sermons, beloved teacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones walks readers through the early chapters of Genesis. The Gospel in Genesis starts with the fall of man and ends with the call of Abram as it examines portions of chapters 3-12. Along the way Lloyd-Jones talks of serpents and sin, of the Word of God and the Babel of man. But the destination of The Gospel in Genesis is clear: readers will be moved from fig leaves in the garden to faith in the gospel.



Gilead

by Marilynne Robinson

The narrator of this novel is John Ames, 76, a preacher who has lived almost all of his life in Gilead, Iowa. He is writing a letter to his almost seven-year-old son, the blessing of his second marriage. It is a summing-up, an apologia, a consideration of his life. Robinson takes the story away from being simply the reminiscences of one man and moves it into the realm of a meditation on fathers and children, particularly sons, on faith, and on the imperfectability of man. This novel won the Pulitzer Prize.



Recommended Web Sites & Blogs

www.epcwomeninministry.org

The official site of our denomination's Women in Ministry, it is full of resources and valuable. It is a must-visit for our women.

www.monergism.com

This is a great site for resources of all kinds – from sermons to books to articles and more, all from dependable and reliable authors and sources.

www.worldmag.com

World Magazine has a good reputation as a news & current events magazine that operates off of a Biblical, Christian worldview. The website is a good resource as well.