

## STATE OF THE CHURCH 2009

Acts 24:14

Douglas Wilson

Christ Church - Moscow, ID

A.D. December 28, 2008

### INTRODUCTION:

As we consider God's ongoing kindnesses to us as a congregation, we need to be sure to grasp more than just the "facts." We need also to have a biblical paradigm for processing those facts—otherwise we will radically misinterpret what is happening to us.

### THE TEXT:

*"But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets"* (Acts 24:14).

### SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

In this place, the apostle Paul is giving a defense of his behavior before the Roman governor Felix. I want to draw our attention to one phrase that Paul uses in passing. He says that he is a follower of the Way, which *they* call a heresy. A better translation here would be *sect*.

In the early uses of the term in Scripture, the connotations of the word emphasized the distinctiveness of the group, and its separation from the mainliners. As the early history of the Church unfolded, the word came to include the damnable doctrines that "heretics" would use in order to bring about that kind of separation (2 Pet. 2:1). Certain men want to draw off disciples after themselves (Acts 20: 29-30), and what better way to do this than to emphasize "your distinctives"?

### SECTS AND CHURCHES:

Assuming basic orthodoxy, and an absence of false teaching, we can still have a problem with sectarianism. There is a fundamental difference between the concept of a sect and the concept of a church. The sect has tighter discipline, and is of necessity smaller. In fact, in many cases, the *point* is to stay small (and pure). The church has a tendency to take people as they come, and work with them there. The church therefore functions more as a people, while a sect functions more like a volunteer organization or a military unit.

### KEEPING US HONEST:

A sect has a natural tendency to veer into various kinds of perfectionism, and the first thing you know, folks are being excommunicated for taking the pastor's parking spot. A church has a natural tendency to give up on the demands of Christian discipleship that baptism confers, and the first thing you know, they are ordaining homosexuals. Sects struggle with rigorism; churches struggle with laxity. But as you have been reminded many times, God draws straight with crooked lines. God uses "heresies" or "sects" in order to establish who is actually approved by Him (1 Cor. 11:19). One of the ways He does this is by allowing the challenge of a rigorist group with fruitcake theology apparently living at a higher level of moral discipline than is present in an orthodox church. God is not above using a wingnut group as a goad.

### IDEAS AND CHILDREN:

Sects tend to cluster around rules and ideologies. A church, a people, are defined by generations, by children. In order to police his boundaries properly, sects usually have to limit their membership to those who voluntarily joined them as adults. In a church, people grow up in the church, and cannot remember a time when it was not "their" church. In a sect, everything depends on what you know. In a church, everything depends on who you know. When a sect is not around the bend, what you need to know is the gospel. When a church is not around the bend, who you know is Jesus . . . and the God of your parents. But obviously, temptations to gross sin are present no matter which way you go.

## THE HALFWAY COVENANT:

When the New England Puritans settled here in America, one of their great desires was to establish a pure church, and it has to be said that they began with a strong sectarian bias. They had a very clear set of criteria to determine who was converted (and who could therefore come to the Lord's Supper). But they also baptized infants, which meant that children growing up in the church felt that they had some stake in it, even if they were not converted. They grew up, got married, and started having kids, without ever being admitted to the Table. But they believed the truth of the Christian faith, and they wanted to have their children baptized. Now, do you baptize the children of folks who are not communicant members because they haven't been "converted," but who have never been excommunicated? They are willing to make a statement before the congregation that they believe in the truth of the gospel, will bring their kids up in the faith, and so on. The Halfway Covenant said *okay*, and reveals as few other things could, the tension between sects and churches.

Without using either term pejoratively here, baptist theology tends to be sectarian, and paedobaptist theology creates all the pressures that a church undergoes. And paedocommunion takes all those pressures, calls, and raises them ten.

## CHRIST CHURCH:

We have been practicing infant baptism for about sixteen years now. We have a congregation with many hundreds of members. Stated in bald terms, this means that children I baptized as infants are now old enough to drive drunk, use drugs, get pregnant, get somebody pregnant, refuse to do their schoolwork, run away from home, and so on. They get old enough to meltdown at some point. They are also old enough to be honoring their parents, learning a trade, progressing well in their studies, and so on. This is what the great majority are doing. But in the early years of our congregation, we didn't have to deal with *any* of this—this was because we were much more like a sect than a church, and secondly, ninety percent of the children were under three feet tall. When children grow up in a church, as the next generation grows up in a people, it can create very interesting pastoral problems. Churches have to deal with the problem of generational faithfulness.

As we are dealing with this stage in our congregational sanctification, keep certain principles in mind. The first is that while we do not want to be on a sectarian hair trigger for discipline, we *do* practice church discipline, and this discipline must include the next generation growing up in our midst. Secondly, be aware of the fact that God is not mocked, and that a man reaps what he sows. This is no less true within his household than it is out in his barley field. Many times it is not possible to address the spiritual needs of a troubled young covenant member without addressing the state of the family. Third, the sowing is often visible to others at the time of sowing, but some just won't listen. And fourth, be grateful that the church, even with all these troubles, is a profound engine of social and cultural change. When we contend with our enemies in the gate, we want our *sons* to stand there with us, and not just random volunteers.

We have spent a good bit of time considering the applications of the prophet's words to his original audience, to the Israelites in the northern kingdom of Israel. Lord willing, we will spend two weeks considering how those words may legitimately be applied to us as Americans. This is not a topical sermon so much as it is a topical application.



Published by: Canon Press • P.O. Box 8729 • 205 E. 5th St. • Moscow, ID 83843 • 800-488-2034  
www.canonpress.org • orders@canonpress.org • Fax 208-882-1568