

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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4/25/10

## **Covenant of Grace**

John 10:27

It was one of Jesus' many encounters with the religious authorities. John's gospel tells us that these authorities were divided in their view of Jesus. Some were trying to keep an open mind and were genuinely interested in understanding him better. Others were convinced that he was a dangerous threat to their society. But all of them were worried about the reports that Jesus was claiming the mantle of the messiah. This was the "hot button" issue of their time. A popular leader who can fool enough people into accepting him as the messiah may well incite rebellion, civil war, or a bloody crackdown by the Roman army of occupation.

The religious leaders decide that the time has come for Jesus to put his cards on the table. They say, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly (John 10:24)." They want Jesus to disclose himself in such a way that they can pass judgment on him according to their predetermined categories. Jesus tells the religious leaders that they are asking the wrong question. The truth is that he transcends all their categories. What matters is not the information they have about Jesus, but whether they are willing to reorient their lives to conform to what God is doing in the world. Jesus is the Shepherd who has come to lead people into a new covenant of grace that God is bringing into being. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice...and they follow me (John 10:27)." The real issue is whether these religious leaders can set aside their need to pass judgment so that they can follow Jesus into a covenant which will change the direction of their lives.

Living by the covenant of grace was the chief concern of the people who founded this church in 1835. They understood that the covenant begins with Jesus as the Good Shepherd who leads us through the dark places of our journeys and always provides for our deepest needs. Our part of this covenant is to listen to the voice of the Shepherd and follow where he leads us. The 1842 *Manual for the Members of Second Presbyterian Church* (now Westminster) sums up our covenant responsibility in these words:

We humbly and cheerfully devote ourselves to God in the everlasting covenant of His grace. We consecrate all our powers to his service and glory, and relying on the promised aid of the Holy Spirit we promise to walk...in obedience to God.

The first crisis of obedience came in response to the "hot button" in American society in 1835, the issue of slavery. For the members of Second Presbyterian obedience to God meant opposition to slavery. Most of them understood this to mean the immediate abolition of slavery. Two years after this congregation was formed, the abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah P. Lovejoy issued a call for an Illinois Anti-Slavery Society. There were 21 men from Springfield who were charter members of this society. Thirteen of these were members of Second Presbyterian.<sup>1</sup> But this kind of obedience was dangerous in 1837.

The month after the formation of the Anti-Slavery Society a mob gathered at the courthouse square to prevent an abolitionist sermon from being preached at a meeting of the Synod in Springfield. The mob threatened violence against the preacher if he went ahead with his sermon. Members of the

Synod including Lovejoy and members of Second Presbyterian faced down the mob and the sermon was delivered as planned. But a few days later, when the out-of-town Presbyterians had gone, angry Springfield citizens called a public meeting where they passed these resolutions:

Resolved: That the efforts of abolitionists in the community are neither necessary or useful.

Resolved: That as citizens of a free State and a peaceable community, we deprecate any attempt to sow discord among us, or to create an excitement as to abolition which can be productive of no good result.

Resolved: That in the opinion of this meeting the doctrine of immediate emancipation of slaves in this country (although promulgated by those who profess to be Christians), is at variance with Christianity, and its tendency is to breed contention, broils and mobs, and the leaders of those calling themselves abolitionists are designing, ambitious men, and dangerous members of society, and should be shunned by all good citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Three weeks later the connection between incendiary words and incendiary actions was confirmed. On November 7, Elijah Lovejoy was murdered while trying to protect his fourth printing press from an armed mob.<sup>3</sup> The people who founded this church understood that the covenant of grace could cost them everything they had. They also knew that the citizens of their own community had already passed judgment on them. The town had branded them as unchristian and people who should be shunned.

Perhaps the most impressive expression of obedience to the covenant of grace took place in 1840. Abiah Hale, wife of the newly installed pastor Albert Hale, organized the first social service agency in the history of Springfield. Her inspiration was the passage from Acts 9 which we read today. There we find Peter called to the bedside of a woman named Dorcas who had devoted her life to the service of others.

Dorcas performed a compelling ministry of compassion which made a tremendous difference in the community. The poor widows of the community who had received their clothing from Dorcas were bereft at her death. When Peter restores her to life the people know that God wants this ministry to continue.

Abiah Hale named the group the Dorcas Society. It was described in 1885 in these words:

This society which she planned and of which she was the leading spirit, was made up of women of all denominations, and served to bind them in a union of Christian love and labor. They visited the poor and sick, making garments and ministering to their other wants, and in all ways sought to benefit their souls. There were no common schools in those days. These women set up an industrial school for poor girls in which they might learn the rudiments...When Portuguese exiles from Madeira came to this city seeking an asylum from religious persecution, they were met by these sisters of mercy with speedy and abundant relief.<sup>4</sup>

Abiah Hale continued to direct this ministry even after her health failed and she was for some years confined to her home. Abiah understood that obedience to the covenant of grace was the only answer to those who had passed judgment on her church. She had learned to pay attention to the only voice that matters. "My sheep hear my voice...and they follow me (John 10:27)."

## Endnotes

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1. Ten were members of Second church before joining the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society. Three joined the church after becoming members of the Society.
2. Paul M. Angle, *Here I Have Lived: Lincoln's Springfield, 1828-1861*, pages 79-80. I am indebted to Bayard Catron for bringing this incident to my attention.
3. Bayard Catron, "The Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, Origins and Spread, 1824-1848."
4. D. S. Johnson, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sermon, 1885, from Clinton Conkling's *Historical Data*, Volume I, pages 166-167.