

Living By Yesterday's Truths

From the series: Good News Then and Now

Text: Acts 21:21; Mark 2:22

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

After a month's hiatus I pick up again a series I initiated in the month of August. That was probably since many of you were not here for the first four messages and then we left off the series in September, which means those who were here have very little recollection of what we were attempting to accomplish. So, let me run through briefly my purpose and what we have pointed to thus far.

The title is GOOD NEWS THEN AND NOW, by which I want to say that the Gospel or the good news of God's revelation and grace that appeared in Jesus Christ was Good News in its initial expression and as it has been in every age since, so it is now Good News. But, in order for that to be true, the formulation of that Good News has had to develop in ever-new expression. In order for the good news to be understood as good news, the Church has had to find fresh formulations in the ever-changing landscape of history's unfolding.

Christ Community is bringing the grace of God to new and fresh expression in an intentional manner not happening in many places and we are doing it because we believe we have in the Christian tradition a treasure which it is incumbent upon us to translate into the idiom of our day so that it can address us and our generation with its gracious, redeeming truth as it has generations for 2000 years.

We have a very special opportunity in November when Bishop John Shelby Spong, Episcopal Bishop of New Jersey, will be with us for a weekend dealing with his bold and prophetic claim that Christianity must change or die. Bishop Spong is controversial; prophets always are. And his book, which I will begin to discuss Wednesday evening, is a challenging address to the Christian Church, is criticized widely and rejected by most. But we will hear him because what he is calling for has been going on here for a long time.

We are on the threshold of Century 21, the third millennium, and we will remember as we always do at the end of October the Reformation of the Church in the 16th century. What better time to think seriously about the need for

reformation anew, for at the heart of that significant event in the Church in the 16th century was the conviction that the Church must be re-formed according to the Word of God and always be being reformed. That word *reformed* has become a name, a label, but in its emergence it was a verb, an action word that spoke of the ongoing necessity of re-forming the Church.

In the 16th century, I suspect the need to ongoing reformation was affirmed in light of the recognition that the Church becomes stagnant and even decadent in its institutional life. The thrust of that call to ongoing reformation was thus the need for inward renewal, the Church's forms and structures to be open to fresh words of the Spirit and the renewal of spiritual life.

What was probably not in view was the need for reformation, reformulation of the messages and content of the faith, a fresh translation of the Gospel because the world would drastically change: the understanding of reality, the physical universe and a transformation of human consciousness.

That, however, is what faced the Church as it moved into the modern age and the last two centuries have been a period of great conflict within the Church as it has tried to come to terms with a transformation in human consciousness and thinking. My study of the 18th and 19th centuries has focused on Protestantism, and particularly Protestant Liberalism, but it has been true of the Roman Catholic Church, as well, that, as has been said, the story of Liberal Protestantism can be seen as a series of salvage operations, attempts to show how one can still believe in Jesus Christ and not violate the ideals of intellectual integrity.

The reason the battle has raged especially in the Protestant Church is that there has not been the hierarchical, authoritarian structures in place to shut down dissent. And the reason the battle has raged in the *Liberal* Protestant Church is that the conservative evangelical Church still adheres to the orthodoxy of the 17th century; that is, to this day churches in the conservative Protestant tradition operate, as does the Roman Catholic Church, with a medieval mind-set and with a faith understanding that has not faced up to and dealt with the questions which the modern world has put to the orthodox understanding of Christian faith.

Let me review for a moment. This series began by pointing to the severe crisis that arose in the early Apostolic Church because the expected imminent return of Jesus Christ to judge the world and bring the present age to an end did not occur. Rather, as we read in II Peter 3, the mockers who made sport of those early believers asked, "Where is the day of his appearance? Everything seems to be going on as it has since Creation."

Rather than the end of the age, history was continuing. Now, how were those, who saw the last of the Apostles die and Jesus not coming, to understand what the meaning of the Gospel was?

But, as we noted in the second sermon, eventually, after several centuries and severe conflict, there was established the orthodox faith. Orthodox means right opinion or right thinking. In the emergence of early Catholic tradition there was achieved an agreed-upon doctrinal formulation, including the two natures of Jesus Christ - truly God, truly human – and the doctrine of the Trinity. In the meantime, the Church moved from persecuted minority to being the established religion of the Empire.

But for our purposes today, let me simply say that the core content of the faith, the orthodox faith, was established and maintained through the centuries to the 16th century and the Reformation, which broke the unity of the Western Church and from which emerged Protestantism. In that renewal movement there was a fresh return to scripture and a fresh understanding of the grace of God, but really no break from the orthodox Christian faith. The structure of the Church was shaken, but orthodoxy remained as did the authoritarian character of the Church. The authoritarian center of the Roman Catholic Church was the teaching office of the Church whose head was the Pope, while the fledgling Protestants claimed their authority in the Bible. But in both cases, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches claimed a divinely revealed faith with, in the case of Rome, infallible dogma and, in the case of the Reformers, an infallible Bible, guaranteeing the truth of revelation.

And then the world changed - changed radically, and the modern world was born. The modern era in Western Civilization began with the scientific revolution in the 17th century. A mere listing of the names: Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton, tell the story. Francis Bacon formulated the scientific method of empirical investigation and John Locke's philosophical writing on human reason set the course for the modern understanding of critical thinking. The 18th century is the century of Enlightenment and the philosopher of the Enlightenment par excellence was Immanuel Kant, who understood the Enlightenment as the human movement toward emancipation from the "tutelage" of medieval times; it was the human coming of age.

It was Friedrich Schleiermacher who, studying Kant, was convinced that, for there to be a future for religion and for theology, including Christian theology, it would be necessary to discover a new foundation on which to stand. No longer would it suffice to cite Church dogma or scripture, for the authoritarian claim of both had been undercut by the critical thinking that arose with the scientific revolution.

In *Friedrich Schleiermacher, Pioneer of Modern Theology*, in the series, *The Making of Modern Theology*, Keith W. Clements describes Schleiermacher's context, The Enlightenment, thus:

Schleiermacher was born into the world of the Enlightenment ..., that period of European thought and culture occupying roughly the whole of the eighteenth century and, with the latter half of the preceding century,

comprising what is often called the "Age of Reason." As the name implies, it was the period when the innate and universal endowments of human thought were adjudged to be capable of providing men with whatever knowledge of nature, morality, and religion was necessary for his welfare. It marked the beginnings in Europe of the exile of orthodox Christian theology towards the periphery of intellectual and social life, as both the credibility of, and necessity for, supernaturally inspired doctrines were challenged by rational, anti-dogmatic modes of thought. (P. 8f)

Schleiermacher proved to be the greatest Protestant theologian between Calvin and Barth. He is called the Father of Modern Theology and he set the course for Protestant Liberal theology for the next century, and still today he is not without influence. In 1797 in a work entitled *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers*, he claimed no external authority either in Church or scripture, but claimed rather that religion was rooted in the human person in the feeling of absolute dependence. With this understanding of the foundation of religion and, in his case, Christian faith, Schleiermacher gave new expression to the faith without claiming any external authority. He established a new ground of authority in the human experience of dependence, developed a new method for doing theology, and re-imagined the Christian faith, giving it fresh expression. For Schleiermacher, the feeling of absolute dependence was the experience of God, the gracious ground of all being.

But there was a second stage in the movement to modernity, that being the rise of historical consciousness. A century after Schleiermacher gave his "speeches" (1797), another German theologian-philosopher-historian, Ernst Troeltsch, came to grips with the use of historical thinking and its implication for faith – religious faith in general and Christian faith in particular.

In his *History Sacred and Profane* (1964), Alan Richardson describes this second stage in the revolution to the modern:

We should never forget that it was one and the same movement of critical inquiry which first culminated in the seventeenth-century scientific achievement and later in the emergence of the fully developed historical critical method of the nineteenth century. The critical faculty, once awakened, could not rest satisfied with the successful exploration of the realm of nature; it was bound to go on from there to the critical investigation of the more intractable region of human nature, and when the idea of development was fully understood, to seek to understand scientifically how, in fact, man and his institutions have come to be what they are. Since the nineteenth century it has been an axiom of Western thinking that men and their institutions cannot be understood apart from their history, or that to know what a thing is, it is necessary to give an account of its past. This is part, at least, and a very important part, of the meaning of the statement that we nowadays live in an historically-minded

age. The historical revolution in human thinking, which was accomplished in the nineteenth century, is just as important as the scientific revolution of two centuries earlier. But they are not two separate revolutions; they are aspects of the one great transitional movement from medieval to the modern way of looking at things.

That statement by Richardson points to the movement from the medieval to the modern world and I cannot stress too emphatically what a revolution that entailed.

Ernst Troeltsch believed that transition took place in the Enlightenment of the late 17th and 18th centuries, not in the Reformation. The Reformers were pre-modern, still medieval in their way of thinking and their approach to the past. The critical element in the modern period is the rise and dominance of critical thinking, that is, the use of human reason to ask questions, to probe, to investigate and not simply to take for granted what appears on the surface or what some witness claims.

Critical thinking is simply the way we think and act in our everyday life; it is the common sense view of the world and a common sense understanding of the past. An important ingredient in historical consciousness is the scientific understanding of reality, the understanding that nature works by natural laws and regular processes. The historian now begins to assume that the past is to be understood as one understands the present.

This is where the rub comes in: Christian doctrine is based on supernatural intervention, miracles and events that contravene the regularity of nature. The biblical story conceives of a three-story universe and God dipping into our history from time to time. Now all of that supernatural framework was being called in question.

In an excellent portrayal of the crisis of faith and history, Van A. Harvey, in his work, *The Historian and the Believer*, begins thus:

Out of the mists of the nineteenth century, there arise again and again spectral figures that refuse to be exorcised. This is particularly true of Protestant theology. Schleiermacher, Strauss, Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, Ritschl - all continue to stalk the present because they identified and analyzed so profoundly issues that still bedevil us. Yet their presence is embarrassing because the various solutions they proposed now seem so patently dated and, in some cases, comic, that we feel justified in dismissing their work or ignoring them entirely. But just at the most important junctures of our own intellectual enterprises, we are disturbed to discover that we are wrestling with the same old issues, that the same questions have returned again in only a slightly different guise. With that realization, the possibility suggests itself in the back of our minds that the answers once proposed may not be so fantastic as we had so smugly

assumed. We find ourselves rethinking the thoughts of those whose conclusions we look upon with disdain. This is always painful.

The writings of Ernst Troeltsch, particularly, evoke this discomfiture. The issue with which he wrestled throughout the greater part of his life was the significance of the historical-critical method for traditional Christian belief and theology. He discerned that the development of this method constituted one of the great advances in human thought; indeed, that it presupposed a revolution in the consciousness of Western man. To be sure, Western culture, in contrast to many others, has always been characterized by a sense of history. But only in the nineteenth century did this manifest itself in a sustained and critical attempt to recover the past by means of the patient analysis of evidence and the insistence on the impartiality and truthfulness of the historian. The distinctions between history and nature, fact and myth; expressions like the growth of language and the development of the state; the tendency to evaluate events in terms of their origins; the awareness of the relativity of one's own norms of thought and valuation; all these, Troeltsch saw, are but the by-products of a change in thought so profound that our period deserves to be put alongside those of previous cultural epochs as a unique type.

This revolution in consciousness found its formal expression in the creation of a new science, history. Underlying this new science was an almost Promethean will-to-truth. The aim of the historian, it was declared, was to "tell what really happened." The magic noun was "fact," and the honorific adjective was "scientific." Description, impartiality, and objectivity were the ideals, and the rhetorical phrase and the value judgment were looked upon with disdain. This drive to recover "the facts as they really happened" has, with some justice, been criticized of late, but it should not be forgotten how revolutionary this will-to-truth was or how reactionary the forces were that needed to be overcome. Only when the question "What really happened?" was consistently and radically posed, did it become clear how much of what was previously accepted as fact was, in truth, fiction; how so many long-trusted witnesses were actually credulous spinners of tales and legends. Indeed, it can be argued, all reliable historiography rests on some such distinction as "whether or not something actually happened; whether it happened in the way it is told or in some other way ...," as August Wilhelm Schlegel wrote in his review of the Grimm brothers' *Old German Songs*, and it is difficult to quarrel with him and still account for the concepts of myth, legend, and fairy tale that constitute so much of the mental furniture of our age.

This will-to-truth became attached to a method, and the presuppositions of that method, Troeltsch concluded, were basically incompatible with traditional Christian faith, based as it ultimately is on a supernaturalistic metaphysics. This incompatibility was most clearly seen, he thought, in the

realm of Biblical criticism. The problem was not, as so many theologians then believed, that the Biblical critics emerged from their libraries with results disturbing to believers, but that the method itself, which led to those results, was based on assumptions quite irreconcilable with traditional belief. If the theologian regards the Scriptures as supernaturally inspired, the historian must assume that the Bible is intelligible only in terms of its historical context and is subject to the same principles of interpretation and criticism that are applied to other ancient literature. If the theologian believes that the events of the Bible are the results of the supernatural intervention of God, the historian regards such an explanation as a hindrance to true historical understanding. If the theologian believes that the events upon which Christendom rests are unique, the historian assumes that those events, like all events, are analogous to those in the present and that it is only on this assumption that statements about them can be assessed at all. If the theologian believes on faith that certain events occurred, the historian regards all historical claims as having only a greater or lesser degree of probability, and he regards the attachment of faith to these claims as a corruption of historical judgment.

Troeltsch poured scorn on those of his contemporaries who attacked the historical method as a manifestation of unbelief while employing something like it to vindicate the truth of their own views. The method, he claimed, did not grow from an abstract theory, nor could one ignore the cumulative significance of its extraordinary results. "Whoever lends it a finger must give it a hand." Nor could the critical method be regarded as a neutral thing. It could not be appropriated by the church with only a bit of patchwork here and there on the seamless garment of belief. "Once the historical method is applied to Biblical science and church history," he wrote, "it is a leaven that alters everything and, finally, bursts apart the entire structure of theological methods employed until the present." Christianity must, therefore, build its religious thought upon it or else be consigned to the limbo of those countless other antiquated forms of religious belief that were unable to make their own accommodation to the *Zeitgeist*.

Actually, Troeltsch believed the church had no real option, because it is impossible even to think without the new assumptions. They have already penetrated to the deepest levels of Western man's consciousness. They are a part of the furniture of his mind. Therefore, one must be willing to see the matter through to its final consequences, to let burn what must burn, hoping that a new synthesis might emerge on the other side, a synthesis all the stronger for having been purged by the fire. Troeltsch himself tried to do this and, if his efforts now appear dated and relative to his own time, that only seems, ironically enough, to vindicate his thesis; namely, that the expressions of the human spirit - its language, art, philosophy, and

religion -are intelligible only in terms of their time, that man is immersed in history like a fish in water, that man's failure to transcend history only reveals that he is a creature whose thought is something less than absolute.

The application of the principles of historical criticism to the Bible in the nineteenth century was a traumatic event in the history of Protestantism. It is true, as Emanuel Hirsch has pointed out, that Biblical criticism had been practiced in a modest way since the beginnings of the Reformation. Luther himself was a shrewd critic. But it was only in the third decade of the nineteenth century that it was possible to subject the Scriptures to rigorous analysis without dogmatic presuppositions and limitations. The attempt to do so naturally aroused the hostility of theologians and the ecclesiastical authorities. Did not the entire enterprise rest on unbelieving presuppositions? (Pp. 3-6)

What developed fully as historical consciousness was already anticipated in Schleiermacher. Troeltsch was a century later and during that 18th century there was great ferment as theologians struggled to preserve a safe place for faith in Jesus Christ amidst the rising tide of scepticism about the biblical witness. Historical critical study of the scripture was now being engaged in with great vigor. In 1835 David Friedrich Strauss published his *Life of Jesus*, which was a bombshell. His treatment of the scriptural source was revolutionary in that he treated the Bible as any other literary work, asking questions about who wrote, why, to whom, etc., and he totally undercut the supernatural character of scripture.

There were sharp reactions and condemnation of his work, but the battle was on and there was excess on the side of the new critics and defensiveness and fearful over-reaction on the part of conservative scholars.

By the end of the 19th century, Ernst Troeltsch was the leading dogmatician in Europe and he took up the struggle, similar to Schleiermacher a hundred years earlier, but now in a new climate of opinion, one marked by historical thinking. He wrote,

So I began like Schleiermacher by establishing the peculiar independence of religion by means of the psychology of religion, by showing that every attempt to derive religion from other basic activities (of the human consciousness) has failed. Only I did this on the basis of a psychology which is different from Schleiermacher's and in the front against different opponents - not moralists and rationalists, but modern positivists and those who see religion as an illusion. (*Zth K*, VIII, p. 28)

Troeltsch recognized the need, as had Schleiermacher, to find a way to continue to believe and have a genuine religious experience in terms of present human understanding and experience. He wanted to be both Christian and intellectually

honest and to this purpose he gave his life. Near the end of his life he wrote of his deep and vivid realisation of the clash between historical reflection and the determination of standards of truth and value.

“The problem thus arising presented itself to me at a very early age ... I was inspired by ... the interest in reaching a vital and effective religious position, which could alone furnish my life with a center of reference for all practical questions and could alone give meaning and purpose to reflection upon the things of this world. This need of mine led me to theology and philosophy, which I devoured with an equally passionate interest. I soon discovered, however, that the historical studies, which had so largely formed me, and the theology and philosophy in which I was now immersed, stood in sharp opposition, indeed even in conflict, with one another. I was confronted upon the one hand, with the perpetual flux of the historian's data, and the distrustful attitude of the historical critic towards conventional traditions, the real events of the past being, in his view, discoverable only as a reward of ceaseless toil, and then only with approximate accuracy. And, upon the other hand, I perceived the impulse in men towards a definite practical standpoint - the eagerness of the trusting soul to receive the divine revelation and to obey the divine commands. It was largely out of this conflict, which was no hypothetical one, but a fact of my own practical experience, that my entire theoretical standpoint took its rise. (*Christian Thought*. London, 1923, pp. 4-6)

There you have the driving force for the large undertaking which would characterize Troeltsch's life passion and work. His was an authentic struggle to be intellectually honest, attuned to the best thinking of his time, and to find a place to stand that would enable a vital religious experience and provide a foundation for values.

Troeltsch was convinced that theology must always seek to relate itself positively to the rational knowledge of the day - not uncritically, but in dialogue and critique. In an introduction to Ernst Troeltsch -*Writings on Theology and Religion*, Robert Morgan writes,

The modern intellectual situation determines the form to be taken by theology. This is characterized by the intellectual revolution effected by modern science and critical history. Troeltsch's strenuous efforts to understand this modern intellectual and cultural situation led him into sustained work in the history of ideas, with special reference to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ... Troeltsch considered that the intellectual and cultural revolution of the eighteenth century requires that theology submit itself to a corresponding revolution in method. He was to characterize this as the transition from dogmatic to historical method.

What this meant was a break with the old supernaturalism which modern critical history had rendered impossible and a purely historical approach to the Bible and

Christian tradition, combined with a rational defense of the metaphysical basis of religion. (P. 7) I cannot do more within the confines of this sermon to detail the tremendous undertaking of the task in which Troeltsch engaged himself; but I hope to have given at least some sense of crisis of Christian faith as he understood it brought about by the emergence of human historical consciousness.

As I reflect on the learning, the passion and the dedication of a scholar like Ernst Troeltsch, whose motivation was to find a solid basis for the understanding of religious experience, its legitimacy and the critical role it plays in human life and community, I marvel that the conservative evangelical Protestant Church and the Roman Catholic Church have continued to steel themselves against the historical method which Troeltsch proposed and against the insights which the method has brought to light - the understanding of religion in general and the Christian religion in particular.

I have been immersed in the rise of modern thought and theological development of the 18th and 19th centuries over the past three months and I am beginning to get some sense of how we got to where we are. I have set before you two Christian theologians, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Ernst Troeltsch, both brilliant scholars and passionate believers, one writing 200 years ago and the other 100 years ago. Both were convinced the Church must find a basis for its faith and an understanding and expression of its faith in terms of the best intellectual understanding of its time. They have not been without impact, but primarily in the Liberal Protestant tradition.

In the Roman Catholic tradition those thinkers who sought to apply the historical method to dogma and scripture were silenced and in several instances removed from leadership and even excommunicated.

In the conservative Protestant tradition, which is my background and the background of many of you, Schleiermacher and Troeltsch might as well never have lived. Conservative Protestantism, and that includes not just the fundamentalist Church and Pentecostal churches, but much of the mainline Church as well, still resist what both Schleiermacher and Troeltsch believed to be necessary 200 and 100 years ago, respectively.

When I consider this, I understand why there has been a mass exodus of intelligent people from the Church and why the Church has little standing in the centers of learning in the world. I understand, too, why religious scholarship has moved out of Church-related institutions and seminaries and is finding place in secular institutions of the state and, even there, one is not always totally free to pursue disinterested scholarship.

Perhaps I should not be surprised. Jesus pleaded for the recognition that new wine demands new wineskins. That forms, structures, language and conceptuality

need to be open to change and transformation. The religious-political institutions had him killed.

Paul had a vision - a new insight that revolutionizes everything - the grace of God available to Jew and Gentile through faith in Jesus Christ – and arriving in Jerusalem he was warned by James that the Jewish Jesus people were disturbed by reports from the mission field that he was advocating dropping the Mosaic tradition. His life was in danger and finally, tried in Rome, he died a martyr.

There must be something about the human creature that resists the new and especially in the area of religion. I am learning that it is not really an intellectual understanding of religious truth that is desired, but a gut level experience, a stirring of the emotions, a confirmation of absolute truths received uncritically even though that is not how we live our lives generally or what we expect from our doctors when our health fails.

And so, I see congregations growing through praise music and worship as entertainment. I see Pentecostalism growing through the provision of deeply emotional experience. And I realize that there is a slim minority who value and seek religious experience which is congruent with thinking and critical understanding.

But I believe that slim minority is a critical piece of the puzzle for, historically, prior to the modern period, the Church was the womb of the arts and theology was the Queen of the Sciences. I wonder if we have not sold our birthright for a mess of pottage because we have failed to engage in the hard work of holding together faith and reason. That, as I see it, is the challenge before this community.

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