

FIRST PRESS

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 52

FRIDAY, DEC. 19, 2014

From the Pastor's Pen . . .

It is already December! There are only seven days left until the After Christmas Sales begin and about ten days until the Valentine's Day Candy comes out on the shelves. As the years go by so quickly it is yet another reminder of how short our time is on this earth. It seems like just a week ago that my wife and I ate our last "childless" Valentine's Day dinner together!

Moses confesses in Psalm 90 the brevity of our lives: **"The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away."**

As the year ends, it provides us a good opportunity to evaluate how we have spent and stewarded our time, talents, energies, and money over the last year. Do you look back upon the past year with satisfaction knowing that you have labored and given to worthy and eternal endeavors? Or do you look back on the year now past and see that it was simply frittered

away? God's word teaches us that everything we have is a gift from Him (Psa. 24.1, I Cor. 10.26), so ask yourself "have I used what I have been given for His glory?"

For many of us, when we look back on the year (or years), we can be filled with regret and sorrow for how we have spent so much of our resources, time, and efforts on worthless stuff. For people filled with regret and sorrow, there is great hope in the gospel.

Christ came to save sinners, even sinners who have not been faithful with their possessions, time, and abilities. If, at the end of this year, you see your own failings, look to God in faith in repentance, consider the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of unfaithful sinners, and plead for mercy from God for Christ's sake.

It was Christ, after all, "who though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor so that we by His poverty might become rich." Now that's better than any "New Year's Resolution!"

Westminster Shorter Catechism Meditation

The Second Commandment is one of the longest and concerns the way we worship God.

Q52. *What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment?*

A52. The reasons annexed to the second commandment are, God's sovereignty over us, his propriety in us, and the zeal he hath to his own worship.

It's a common perception in American culture that everyone has to come to God his or her own way: Some people come to God through the church or through other "organized religions," while other people come to know and worship God through personal reflection, the outdoors, or other devices. This is not a recent idea at all; it was Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) who wrote, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church / I keep it, staying at Home..."

The Second Commandment confronts sinful man with the necessary truth that we cannot come to God any other way than what He de-

crees in His Word. In this 52nd Catechism question, the divines give us a few reasons *why* we can and may only come to God through His appointed means and manner.

First, God is King. We may live in a republic, but the ruler of this universe is a King, and all people are His subjects. In His Kingdom, God alone gives Laws and *tells us* what pleases Him. That's not very American, is it?

Second, God is our master. God has purchased *us* - His people - with a price, namely the blood of Jesus Christ. Because He owns us, we must guard our hearts to worship and come to Him properly and not merely in a way that seems right to us or popular in society.

Third, God cares very much how He is worshiped. Worship is the most important thing we can do; it is the very thing for which we were *created*. God cares so much about His worship that He created us for the sole purpose of worshipping and enjoying Him.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Dec. 21, 9 a.m.

Sunday School in the Pastor's Study: Num. 15, "Strike the Tents, Start the Grumbling"

Dec. 21, 10 a.m.

Morning Worship: Matt. 1.18-25, "He Will Save His People From their Sins"

Dec. 21, 4 p.m.

Sunday Night Study: Psalm 11, "Crumbling Foundations"

Dec. 28, 10 a.m.

Morning Worship

Jan. 3, 9 a.m.

Church decoration take down party



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The Mission of the Church: *equipping the saints*

We have often discussed here the mission of the church. Many people have a skewed or defective understanding of what the mission of the church precisely *is*. **The church's mission is precisely to “gather and perfect the saints.”** That means the church is to proclaim the gospel (i.e. **evangelism**) as well as to promote the growth of the people of God in grace (i.e. **discipleship, sanctification**): that God's people in the church are becoming more like their Saviour day by day through the church's ministry.

A part of the “perfecting” work of the church is to train all Christians to do ministry themselves. It's easy to succumb to the temptation to think that the people who do ministry are the church “staff” or the “elders” or the “officers” or the “super spiritual.” But, if we consider what the Bible says on the matter, we clearly see that ministry is something that *all God's people* are called to do.

Ephesians 4.11-13 makes it clear that all Christians are to do ministry, not just those called to be officers or to full-time vocational ministry: **“And he (Christ) gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”**

So you see, God's word teaches that far from it being the exclusive task of some elite group of Christians, **Christ calls all His people to be serious about and zealous for ministry and to partake in the privilege of doing God's work in whatever community He has placed us.**



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The risen, ascended, and reigning Christ has given various gifts - in the form of people - to His church for the purpose of training and teaching, and helping the saints to be ready and “equipped” for ministry, service to their King: “apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.” With the close of the Apostolic Age, we no longer have the apostles with us, but we do have their writings, which are essential to faithful ministry.

Particularly today in our context we benefit from the “shepherds” (another word for elder) and “teachers” (a function of an elder) who labor here among us here at FPC Winona.

If we hope this congregation to survive for another century, we must all be committed to the work of ministry to which Christ calls all His saints. **Each of us must be serious about being equipped for ministry.** To that end, the Session makes available a number of Bible Studies. But we cannot simply be so busy about getting “equipped for ministry” (or fretting about not being well-enough equipped), we must actually **do the work of ministry.** There is, of course, a holy balance!

One way that we as a congregation may be faithful to our King's command to do the work of ministry is by participating in *Child Evangelism Fellowship*, a ministry to school-aged children and their parents. **We must as a congregation and individuals must be prayerfully considering how we can carry out our privileged duty of doing ministry in the name of Christ in our community.**

Sermon Snapshot: “The Son of God Comes”

We are nearing the end of our very brief survey of Old Testament prophecies of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. There are literally hundreds upon hundreds of prophecies and promises in the Old Testament in which God commits Himself to and makes known the ministry and mission of the Messiah. Last Lord's Day in Luke 1.26-38, we considered one of the final prophecies of the Old Covenant in which God's messenger announces to Mary that she will be *the woman* who will bear the long-expected child who will not only *crush the head of the serpent* (Gen. 3.15), but also fulfill every promise of God.

The angel appears to the teenager Mary, and tells her of the greatness of God's favor upon her and what God is going to do through her. The Angel's words are essentially a summary of millennia of Hebrew prophecy and the declaration that *all* of those prophecies would be fulfilled not by a succession of holy individuals, but through one Child, the Son who will soon be conceived within her womb.

The child, as you know, is miraculously conceived; Mary is the only virgin in the history of mankind to give birth! What

God does in sending His Son is far and away beyond any of His people's expectations.

The Hebrews at Jesus' own time thought that the messiah that they needed and that God would send would be a king who would kick out their foreign rulers and re-establish the Hebrew Commonwealth. Our expectations for God are quite often far too low (and our opinion of ourselves is quite often too high)!

But God's purpose and love for His people was so much greater. Instead of simply raising up a man from among them to rule them as a mighty prince, God Himself came to them in the Person of the Son.

The Hebrews not only failed to recognize the greatness of God's commitment to them, but also neglected to consider the greatness of their own need of God's salvation. They wanted and expected Messiah would be a mere political ruler who could fix their troubles. Instead, mankind needed God Himself to come as man and conquer sin and death on behalf of mankind, because mankind is powerless. So God, faithful to His word, paid our ransom with His own blood.

