

The Old Paths

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Date: 01 January 2000

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[0 : 0 0] I take my text this morning from the book of Jeremiah, chapter 6. Jeremiah chapter 6 and words you will find in verse 16.

Thus saith the Lord, stand ye in the ways and see, and then these words, and ask for the old paths. Where is the good way and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.

Ask for the old paths. Where is the good way and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.

On Tuesday of this week, it will be exactly 150 years since that great and notable event which we call the disruption.

That great and notable event that brought the free church into existence as a separate denomination. Our disruption forefathers, those who came out, as we say at that time, did not think of themselves as separating primarily from the national church.

[1 : 1 5] They were not seeing themselves primarily as breaking up the church in Scotland. They saw themselves primarily as separating from the state, from the state connection.

They actually believed passionately in a church-state connection. But they were not prepared, in the interests of that connection, to tolerate interference by the civil authorities in the spiritual affairs of Christ's church.

In the true spirit of their covenanting forebears, they were contending for the crown rights of their Redeemer. Now, it is not with the principles, those particular principles, the principles affecting the relationship between church and state, that I wish to deal this morning.

Rather, I wish to look back with you at what were the strengths of the disruption church, and to stress what should be our great concerns today.

Church history is of very great importance. Church history is of very good.

[3 : 0 7] And that we walk in them. The good way is in them. And in walking in them, we will find rest for our souls. What are the old paths to which we should look back, to for which we should ask, and in which we should walk?

I wish this morning to mention three. And the first of them is the path of reformed doctrine. Reformed doctrine. The disruption church was in the great reformation tradition.

At the time of the reformation, and in the succeeding century, there were produced a number of confessions. They were really formulations of biblical teaching.

They put in systematic form the teaching of the Bible. There were a number of confessions. There were a number of confessions. And the one which became best known in our island is that which is called the Westminster Confession of Faith.

It is called that because it was drawn up by a group of divines who met in Westminster. The church was wedded to and wholeheartedly committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

[4 : 31] Sadly, before the end of the century, the Free Church Assembly passed what it called a declaratory act that weakened, that diminished the church's adherence and commitment to that confession.

That was in the year 1892. That was in the year 1892, and it led in the following year, 1893, to a secession from the church and to the forming of the Free Presbyterian Church.

But in the years following, very soon after the great crisis that overtook the church in 1900, the Free Church repealed that declaratory act.

And the Free Church today, and ever since then, has been unreservedly committed to the doctrine of the Westminster Confession. Every minister in the Free Church today, every elder in the church, every deacon in the church, has publicly vowed his unreserved acceptance of the whole doctrine of the Westminster Confession.

We hold unswervingly to the teaching of that confession. Of course we do. But the question I want to ask is, do we, the members and adherents of the Free Church, throughout our church today, do we value that teaching?

[5 : 55] Do we appreciate it? Do we love it as we ought? And would we be prepared, again, if the need arose, earnestly to contend for it?

It is, after all, but the teaching of the Bible, a formulation of biblical teaching. It expresses the teaching of the Bible.

What, then, basically is the doctrine of the Westminster Confession? Let me try and sum it up under three heads.

First of all, this, the authority of Scripture. The authority of Scripture. This book, from beginning to end, is the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

All that we believe, all that we practice, we believe is derived from this book. Our thinking, our reasoning, is to be subject entirely to the Word of God.

[6 : 57] This book is a revelation from God himself. We can say that what the Bible says, God says. That is basic to our position.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. It is God-breathed. God has written all the Bible, and he so controlled them, he so directed them, that what they wrote is the very Word of God himself.

It is simply without. Why, then? It is sometimes asked, do we remain separate today, as a separate denomination? After all, the patronage controversy, which gave rise to the free church 150 years ago, is no longer with us.

Patronage is no longer in the Scottish church. The reason why we remain separate is this, that in the third quarter of the last century, the church, the professing Christian church in the Western world, to a very large extent, abandoned its belief in an infallible Bible.

There arose a rationalistic movement. As far as it affected theology, it is called modernism. It rejected the supernatural. It denied, it questioned, and it denied many of the historical facts of Scripture, and many of the great doctrines of the Word of God.

[8 : 26] And the church in our land today is still affected, still suffering from some of the ill effects of that devil-inspired activity.

There can be no question whatsoever of our uniting with any church that does not accept, without question, without reserve, the total inerrancy and reliability of Scripture.

That's the, first of all, then, the authority of Scripture. And what else does our confession teach? We're trying to sum up what is basically its teaching. First of all, the authority of Scripture, and secondly, this, the centrality of Christ.

The centrality of Christ. Jesus Christ is the divine Son. He is very God of very God. He is God the Son, the eternal Son.

We, who are sinners, need a divine Savior. Only a divine Savior can save us. But he became man. At a point in time he became man, and he remains forevermore God and man.

[9 : 38] Two natures and one person. Our confession recognizes and tries to set forth the glory of his person as it is presented to us in Scripture.

The incarnate Son of God died at the cross of Calvary, and that death was a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

He died to pay sin's penalty. He died in the sinner's room and stead. He died as the sinner's substitute. He died the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

Apart from the shedding of the blood of Christ, there is no forgiveness. There is no salvation. He is the propitiation for sin. It is his death that turns away the wrath of God from the sinner.

He rose again the third day. He rose literally and physically. He ascended back to heaven. He will come again in person into this world at the end of the age to be the judge of all.

[10 : 47] And the central position of Christ is so clearly recognized in our confession. In all things, he must have the preeminence.

We are saved. We are put into our right relationship with God, not through any works of our own, but simply through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is through faith alone. We must simply believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ and we will be justified, put right with God, the centrality of Christ.

What are basically the teachings of our confession, the authority of scripture, the centrality of Christ, and thirdly, I must say this, the sovereignty of God.

The sovereignty of God. There are many churches, evangelical churches, that would agree with all that I've been saying so far. Yet they do not accept the high doctrine of divine sovereignty that is set before us in our Westminster confession.

[12 : 00] They are, to a greater or to a lesser extent, affected by the teachings of a 16th century Dutch Protestant theologian by the name of Arminius.

They are Arminians. We, in the free church, are Calvinists. Arminianism dishonors God in that it seeks to rob him of the glory that is his by giving to man himself some part to play in his own salvation.

The Bible's teaching is that God elected a people for himself before ever the world began. He did so out of his mere good pleasure, his discriminating, electing love.

It is for those people Christ came into the world and died. His atonement is particular, not universal. He died not in the room instead of every sinner, but in the room instead of each one of his elect people.

He is the saviour of his people. The Bible's teaching is that before a man or woman can believe upon Christ, he needs to be renewed by the Holy Spirit, born again.

[13 : 15] And its teaching is that a person who has been renewed and has believed upon Christ will never, never fall away and be lost at the last. Each one will most certainly enter into the everlasting glory.

It is all God's doing. He is suffering. We are his people are elect according to the foreknowledge of God. I was preaching on that text at an evening service just a week or two ago and pointed out then that foreknowledge means loving beforehand, that special love he has for his people.

To know in the scriptures means to love. Elect according to the foreknowledge of God through sanctification of the Spirit and to obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Christ.

It is God's doing. And our confession sees no contradiction whatsoever between the twin biblical doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Now those doctrines to which I've been referring are not generally prized throughout churches today. Indeed there are those churches that would reject them and ridicule them.

[14 : 32] But we reaffirm those doctrines. And on Tuesday evening this week in our General Assembly it is expected that the church will be recommitting itself afresh to its acceptance of the whole doctrine of our Westminster Confession.

Prize those doctrines. Be sure that you love them, that you treasure them, that you assert them. Ask for the old ways, the old paths wherein the good way is.

That's the first then of those old paths for which we should ask. the old path of reformed doctrine. And the second is this, holy living.

Holy living. This is undoubtedly a path along which our disruption forbears walked. You only need to mention the names of some of the men who were prominent at the time of the disruption to realize that they were men of outstanding saintliness and godliness and Christ-likeness.

Men like the Boner brothers, Andrew Boner and Horatius Boner and John Boner. Men like W.C. Burns and John Kennedy of Dingwall, Dr. Moody Stewart, Calder Macintosh of Tain and I could mention many others.

[15 : 56] They were men who climbed to a height of holiness to which it seems so few climb in our day. There were spiritual giants in the land in those days.

Read the accounts of the life of each one of those men I mentioned and you'll find that each of those accounts breathes a very spirit of holiness. Not only were they themselves such saintly people, but the general standard of spirituality in the church was high, was deep.

Men and women realized that a profession of faith in Christ, being a communicant member in the church, was in itself a commitment to a life of holiness.

This old path is a biblical path. The Bible, from beginning to end, calls us to holiness. It reveals to us a holy God, a God whose command to us is, Be ye holy, for I am holy.

What then were the distinctive emphases and characteristics of those people, those men and women too, which made them the holy people that they were?

[17 : 16] Well, of course, their holiness, their saintliness is accounted for by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit of God within them. He sanctified them and made them the holy people that they became.

But, what did they themselves do in response to the promptings of the Spirit within them in the pursuit of holiness? They mortified sin.

They had a tremendous awareness of the terrible sinfulness of sin. It is that which God hates, which is an abomination to him, and the Christian must hate it as well and have nothing whatever to do with it in any shape or form.

Certainly, sin survives within every one of us, but it is to be abhorred. It is to be repudiated. It is to be slain. We are to flee from it as from the most virulent plague.

Robert Murray McChain in his diary, and I have no hesitation at all in placing him amongst the great men of disruption times. He died just a few weeks before the disruption, but before the end of his short life he was making preparation for the great crisis which he knew was inevitable and for coming out with his friends after the disruption.

[18 : 40] he in his diary writes that not only must he avoid the particular sins of which he was guilty, but he must avoid the very occasions that gave rise to those sins.

You see, so much in earnest was he about repudiating, about mortifying sin, he would avoid the very occasions that gave rise to those sins. They were people in whose lives the graces of the Holy Spirit flourished in great abundance.

Love and joy and peace were seen in them in great profusion. We are to cultivate those graces. We are to strive after them. We are to pursue them.

We are to give ourselves to the cultivating of them. In the New Testament sometimes you find lists of virtues given and then we're told follow after these.

Certainly it is only by the work of the Holy Spirit within that we can become holy but nobody who relaxes and becomes passive becomes a holy person.

[19 : 48] And in those people we find too a love for the means of grace. They loved the Sabbath services, they loved the prayer meeting in the middle of the week, they were never absent from those gatherings if they could be present.

They treasured greatly the preaching of the word of God. You find that they spent time every day alone with their Bibles and in private prayer.

They gave themselves to those activities. They recognized that the preaching of the word of God is a divine ordinance and they attended to it.

Let us be diligent, my friends, in giving ourselves to using those different means of grace which God has given to us for the promoting of holiness in his people.

Those are the means that God has ordained for the promoting of holiness in his people. And those people separated from the world.

[20 : 55] There is a whole outlook from which the Christian must stand apart if he is to become a holy person. The Bible says love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.

For if any man loved the world, the love of the Father is not in here. Worldly ways, worldly attitudes, worldly pleasures are a hindrance in the life of holiness, inconsistent with a profession of faith in Christ.

And then those people too were so careful in their observance of the Sabbath day. The free church became noted for its careful observance of the Sabbath.

I was reading just recently again in the memoir of McChain how when he was on that famous journey to Palestine with his three friends, he was travelling by camel through the Egyptian desert.

And on one Sabbath morning they were sitting beneath the palm trees breathing in the stiflingly hot atmosphere. And Andrew Bonner who writes the memoir and who was with him says he remembers the look of great indignation, the look of horror on his friend's face when the Arab attendants were trying to insist that they continue with their journey and make up time.

[22 : 25] That McChain would most certainly not do. It was not to be a day for travel even in the Egyptian desert. It was to be a day spent completely for God and for the things of God.

And when we keep the Sabbath day in that way, a day exclusively for God, it will promote holiness of life within us. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

But perhaps what was most noticeable in those people who reached such great holiness of life was this longing that they had for Christ himself.

This intense yearning that God himself would come and that he would make himself known to them, that they would have the sense of his presence, that he would reveal himself to them, and that they would come to know him better.

That is what they wanted more than anything else. They delighted themselves in the Lord their God. And when God did draw near and did give to them a sense of his presence, when they wrote describing that, they did so in language frequently that was rapturous.

[23 : 43] Theirs was an experimental religion, that I might know him, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings being made conformable unto his death.

Am I not right in saying that all this is far removed from much, perhaps from most of what we find in evangelical religion today?

Ask for the old paths and walk in them and you will find rest for your souls. Our church, the Free Church, in spite of all its faults, and we know that it has had many, has been successful in producing men and women of moral character, of moral backbone.

I was reading recently what was written by Dr. Donald McLean, who was once principal of our college in Ettenbrand, who in the First World War was closely associated with the chaplaincy services.

He tells how a very high ranking naval officer at the deadliest moment in the war, when our naval forces were under terrible strain, gave an unsolicited testimony to what he called the husbands and the sons of the windswept islands off the Scottish coast, where the people were reared in what was allegedly gloomy and severe Calvinistic doctrine.

[25 : 20] He said that in one crew after another, those men proved the rallying points for those staggered crews, by their physical courage, by the influence of their moral character, and by their devotion to duty.

And I find myself wondering, is it the case that our church today is producing as many people of that caliber as it did then? Holy living.

Ask for this old path and walk in it. What are the old paths? We should ask for first of all, reformed doctrine, secondly, holy living, and thirdly, this, evangelistic concern.

Either path of evangelistic concern. The free church in its best days has been a Calvinistic church. We are wedded to the doctrine of the divine sovereignty and the salvation of sinners.

faith. But in our best days, we have always been a church that has laid tremendous emphasis on laying before men and women, on setting before men and women the free invitation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 43] In its early days, the free church had a tremendous concern, a tremendous evangelistic concern. those disruption fathers knew that men and women without Christ were lost, that they were on a road, a broad road leading to an everlasting hell itself, that they were perishing, and they did all they could to warn them of their plight.

They did all they could to urge them to flee to Christ. They told them that Christ crucified and risen is the only hope for sinners, and they urged them to flee to him, to lay hold by faith upon him.

Read their sermons, and you will find that so often they were evangelistic sermons in which they were pleading with their fellow sinners to lay hold by faith upon Christ as their Savior.

They were concerned that there should be gospel ordinances, the preaching of the word in every parish in the land. They were tireless evangelists.

Many churches in those early years after the disruption hundreds of churches were built up and down the land. The people just had to have the gospel preached to them.

[28 : 06] In the parish of Strontian in Argyle, the local landlord was unsympathetic to the free church and he would not on his extensive estates give any ground for the building of a church.

And so what the people did was they sent to a ship building yard on the Clyde and ordered a floating church. It was brought to Loch Sunert and it was anchored there and the people made their way by boat to hear the gospel being preached.

The minister of Ferrantosh just across the water was Dr. MacDonald. He was so tireless and defatigable in his labors as an itinerant evangelist that they called him the apostle of the north.

Four times he went to the people in remote St. Kilda to make the gospel known to them. That was actually before the disruption but I'm illustrating the spirit of those great men who were the prominent men at the time of the disruption.

He went to Ireland and he preached the gospel there. The church was so concerned about the lost that it appointed a full-time evangelist. He was actually an Episcopalian, a man, Mr.

[29 : 17] Brownlaw North. An Episcopalian note, the church you see was not the narrow sectarian body that she has often been caricatured to have been and Mr.

Brownlaw North's preaching of the gospel was greatly blessed. The people in the church in those days had such a great compassion for perishing sinners and they did all that they could to make the gospel known to them.

God honored their labors and the fires of revival broke out in many parts of the land. We need today to be filled, to be fired with evangelistic zeal.

All around us are thousands of people perishing in their sin, lost in sin, passing daily into a lost eternity. Oh my friends, do we know anything of what it is to shed tears over the fate of the lost?

Are we doing all that we can do to bring them under the sound of the gospel, to bring them to the church, to the place where they will hear the gospel being preached?

[30 : 25] Are we doing what we can to tell them ourselves, with our own lips, the message of salvation? Are we pleading with God for his blessing upon the preached word?

As I've said already, the preaching of the gospel is a divine ordinance, and we should expect to see people being converted under the preaching of the word.

Are we praying that people will be converted? Are we praying for revival? And in passing, let me ask you, have you been converted? Our great concern, of course, is not primarily or merely that people should be brought into the church itself.

That's merely a means to an end. Our great concern is that they should be brought to Christ himself, not that they should become simply members of the church.

That will do them more harm than good if they're unconverted. Our great concern is that they should be brought to Christ, that they should have him as their own saviour.

[31 : 32] Ask for the old paths, within the good ways, and walk in them and you will find rest for your souls. But those men of the early free church were concerned not only for Scotland, they were concerned for all nations.

They were filled with enthusiasm for foreign missions. Even before the disruption took place, the evangelical party in the church of Scotland, and they were the men who left and came out of the disruption, were urging the general assembly to send the gospel to the heathen.

At the disruption, almost all the churches, foreign missionaries, came out and threw in their lot with the free church. Alexander Duff of Calcutta, a Perthshire man, is one of the great names of the modern missionary movement.

It was just 150 years ago, last year, that Christian Witness to Israel was founded. It wasn't called that then, but the people who founded it were men who were prominent at the time of the disruption in the actual disruption itself.

The early free church was a missionary-minded church. I wonder, is that so today? I hear reports from different parts of the church and different parts of the country that missionary meetings are so poorly attended, and there are really very few in our day who are offering themselves for service with the church overseas.

[33 : 10] My friends, let us make sure that we are vitally interested in the work that is being done by our church in other lands.

Let us be well informed about it. Let us read about it. Let us be praying for those who are gone. Let us be doing what we can to show our support for those who have gone and are serving in other lands.

Without Christ, the heathen will perish. Let that stir us up to a missionary concern, and if it does do so, then we will be walking in the old paths wherein our illustrious forbears walked.

Ask for the old paths and walk in them. and you will find rest unto your souls. I've tried to indicate three of those old paths this morning.

Reform doctrine, holy living, evangelistic concern. There can be no better way to honor the memory of those men we're thinking of this week in particular than to walk in those old paths in which they walked.

[34 : 24] The people of Judah and Jeremiah's day were given over to wickedness. So is our nation today. Oh, that we would ask for the old paths and that we would walk in them.

I've had to preach this sermon this morning until about midday yesterday I'd intended preaching something entirely different but I just could not get away from this message and I'm convinced the Lord himself has led me to it.

I freely confess to you and I sometimes have a great fear that in the free church today we do not value as we ought the distinctive testimony that is ours.

May God stir us up to ask for the old paths and to walk in them. Let us pray. Oh Lord our God we pray that thou will cause us to hear thy call to live in a way that is truly pleasing to thee.

May we be faithful to the revelation given to us in the scriptures. May we live in accordance with thine own revealed will and may we be filled with a compassionate concern for those at home and abroad who are without Christ and may we seek to do all that we can do to make known to them the glorious gospel of redeeming grace.

[36 : 10] For that gospel we give thee thanks afresh may we delight in it and prize it and show that we value it by making it known to our fellow men and may God bless such efforts to the bringing of many to rejoice in the salvation of the Lord.

Hear us we pray for Jesus sake. Amen.