

"Fading?"

Text: Acts 5:29-42

1 Corinthians 1:2-3: "To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Fading. Think about that word for a bit. Fading. The word itself is inherently nostalgic, reflective, melancholy, even slightly depressing or demoralizing. We typically only use the word when we describe the passing of something good, or vibrant, or beautiful. Flowers fade. Talents fade. Sunsets, tapestries, creativity all fade. So it is that the word has taken on the wistful flavor of gradually losing something good.

This contemplation of "fading" began for me this past week when I read an article boldly asserting: "*Christianity in America is fading.*" The article, written by a man who described himself as "*formerly a good Methodist but now a great atheist,*" gave "statistical evidence" that a growing number of Americans are distancing themselves from their association with the Christian faith. While the author tried to convey neutrality and sympathy (with all the believability of a Vikings fan pretending to offer sympathy to a Packers fan after a heartbreaking loss) it was abundantly clear that he believed this decline to be real, inevitable, and necessary.

Yet it remains forever true that "*saying something is so don't make it so.*" (Bad grammar, but true nonetheless.) So is it true that Christianity is fading? The answer is: *No one really knows, and the question itself misses the point.* First of all, surveys themselves tend to be inherently flawed. Guided inescapably by their own personal worldview, pollsters routinely use poorly (or cleverly) worded questions to achieve the "results" they hope to find. Some might ask, for example, "*Do you believe America is a Christian nation?*" How do you give a yes or no answer to that? What do you mean by "Christian"? Are you implying that America used to be a Christian nation? Are you asking if I *want* it to be?

The greater question in all of this is "*Why even ask if Christianity is fading?*" Will a "yes" answer cause Christians to try harder to save souls? Probably just the opposite. The perception that Christianity is fading can become a self-fulfilling prophecy when the seed is planted that maybe it is no longer cool to be Christian – that the in-crowd has evolved and moved on from "organized religion." What, in the end, does it matter to us if the "answer" is yes or no? You and I both know that *most* who identify as Christian today really have no idea what true Christianity is in the first place. Further, does it have any

practical bearing on the Great Commission if 150 million Americans are unbelievers as opposed to 125 million? Either way, our work is endless. More to the point this morning, whatever the national trend, you and I need to be concerned with *our* faith, *our* resolve, *our* commitment.

Our text for this morning – God's Word found recorded in the Fifth Chapter of the Book of Acts – offers divine encouragement and advice:

^{ESV} **Acts 5:29-42** *But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." ³³ ¶ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. ³⁵ And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, ⁴⁰ ¶ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*

These are the verbally inspired words of our God – the very words through which eternal life is both given and sustained. Mindful of the great value of these words from our God, so we petition that same God: "**Sanctify us** (that is, set us apart for holy purposes) **by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

Whether or not Christianity is advancing or declining around the world is known only to God. A much more insightful (and verifiable) question is why Christianity – the only true religion and the one path to eternal life – is under growing attack worldwide? According to a variety of news reports, persecution of Christians is not only increasing dramatically, it has spread

to every corner of the globe. Light and truth are clearly under attack by the proponents of falsehood and darkness. Why is that?

First of all, true Christianity may or may not be fading, but the world certainly is. This earth's demise is certain. God has declared it. First from Isaiah 34:2,4: ***For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter. ⁴ All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.*** From the same man who spoke to us in our text for this morning: ***But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*** 2 Peter 3:10 Finally from the Apostle John: ***Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world--the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions--is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*** 1 John 2:15-17

The second answer is that, for whatever reason, throughout history God has allowed darkness and falsehood to rise and fall, and he alone knows why. Nothing new here. Gamaliel, the man who also instructed the Apostle Paul when he was still a Pharisee and his name was Saul, spoke of the phenomenon in our text for this morning: ***"Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered."*** You and I could add to Gamaliel's list the names of men from our own times. No doubt every generation could compile their own list. All have two things in common: 1) they rise, and then inexorably they fade, and, 2) their following is built on a culture not of God but of man.

Gamaliel offered a bit of counsel in our text that still holds great value today: ***"... let these men alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"***

There is wisdom here on a number of different levels. First is the demonstrable truth that just as false prophets will continue to rise up, so also they will continue to fade away. It has always been so and will always be so. God can and does accomplish his good pleasure through them, but the false

teachers themselves, in the end, self-destruct. They fade away as did the men Gamaliel mentioned in our text.

The greater truth or value here for those of us living as Christians in our 21st Century world is learning just how we can avoid being carried away by a passing fad or novelty, or by a demonic force of darkness.

Peter set the tone already in the opening words of our text when he said: ***"We must obey God rather than men."*** While he spoke these words in response to those Jewish religious leaders who had commanded the disciples to stop teaching others about Jesus, these words are really foundational to everything that the Christian thinks, says, or does. The basis of life itself is not so much about our relationship with other human beings as it is about our relationship with our God. To put it another way, if our relationship with our God is wrong, nothing else in life can be truly right – no matter how cleverly outward circumstances might mask that truth.

Against this truth, this backdrop, consider all the different pastimes and pursuits that occupy man's time and talent and it all takes on a different perspective, a different meaning or character. Jesus' disciples finally got it after his death and resurrection, didn't they? Especially after they were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost they were different men. They no longer argued with each other about who was to be the greatest when Jesus established what they thought would be an earthly kingdom. They no longer made special requests for positions of authority that would assure them of the praise and envy of men. Suddenly they recognized "privilege" where they would never have thought to look for it. You heard it in our text, but did you actually process the words when you heard them? The words are fairly stunning, not only in truth that they convey but in the profound change of heart that they indicate: ***"Then they (the disciples) left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name."***

We begin to grasp here the amazing transformation that had taken place in these men. By the events of Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Pentecost these men had been transformed into something truly different, truly special. Their lives no longer seemed to be all about what was in it for them but what was in it for their Lord, and for their neighbor. While they certainly didn't search out pain and persecution, they now recognized such things as that which they truly were and are: examples of divine privilege and honor as they sought to ***"serve God rather than men."***

It's important that we recognize not only the nature of such things, but just how and why Christians can and should expect nothing less. God does not instruct his children to go out and seek to inflame or irritate unbelievers, he has commanded us to obey – thus the ***"We must obey God rather than men."*** The reality of life in a sinful world is that

obedience to God will most often result in difficult times of one sort or another in a sinful world. Our Savior is the most obvious example.

Evil is certainly on the rise in our day. Remember Satan's first temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden: **"You will be like God, knowing good and evil"**? Satan has now seduced mankind with an even bolder variation on that theme: **"You yourself will be God, determining good and evil."** The sheer prideful blasphemy and arrogance is breathtaking in its audacity.

If then the basis of our lives is boiled down to Peter's simple statement that **"we must obey God rather than men,"** what then is it that God has called us to do? Our text did not leave us without an answer: **"And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."** You and I are called to be teachers. More than that, we are *privileged* to be teachers in the service of our God. That religion, that faith, will never fade or fail – because it is ordained, commanded, and blessed by God himself.

This "making disciples of all nations" can be a tall and intimidating order unless we break it down a bit – quantify and clarify just what it is that our God expects of us. Simply put, God has called us to remove ignorance whenever and wherever possible. That means that your specific calling is that not one soul in your circle of life should ever be able to stand before his or her Maker on Judgment Day and be able to use as his or her excuse: *"No one ever told me the truth about Jesus Christ. No one ever explained to me that I am saved not by what I do but by faith in what Jesus Christ has done for me."*

Understand that that doesn't mean that you can convert anyone. You can't. But God the Holy Spirit can. To do so, however, a human being has to hear the truth. That's exactly why Jesus left the disciples with the simple instruction to **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel."** That's why the disciples, just prior to our text, were miraculously released from prison and why they immediately went back to teaching. That's why Peter said what he did to the Jewish rulers: **"The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."** No longer could the Jews claim ignorance as to the true meaning of Jesus Christ. Were any of them converted? We'll find out in heaven. Until then our calling is simply to do what those first disciples did.

Will it be easy? Of course not. Is it "worth it"? Absolutely – just as you and I would certainly consider it "worth it" that someone once shared the message of the gospel with us.

God grant us such a love for our fellow human beings, as well as a clear and abiding appreciation for the incomparable value of our calling and purpose,

and for the unparalleled privilege of working in his service. That's the sort of work that will never fail. That's the truth that will never fade.

So, is Christianity fading? Let the true and right answer for you always be: *Not in my house, and not among those with whom I interact.* Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **1 Peter 1:3-9** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

^{ESV} **John 20:19-29** On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." ²⁴ ¶ Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." ²⁶ ¶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: www.bismarcklutheran.org

Mark Johnson, President Eileen McEnroe, Head Organist
Michael Roehl, Pastor Today's Organist: Eileen McEnroe

The Sunday after Easter – April 23, 2017

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 210 (Red Hymnal)

"The Strife Is O'er, the Battle Done"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (1 Peter 1:3-9) As we continue to celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord, we are reminded again in our first reading of some of the benefits of that event as they apply to Christians even today. This encouragement is intended by the Apostle Peter to give us strength, comfort, and peace as we look forward to the day when we join our Savior in that place he has gone ahead to prepare.

Psalms 118 (Supplement page 29) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (John 20:19-29) Christ appeared to many different witnesses on many different occasions following his resurrection. We read of several such appearances here. Most notably we are here reminded that Christians today cannot rely on visible proofs. There are none. We accept our Lord's resurrection *by faith*. **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 208 (Stanzas 1-3,8-10) (Red Hymnal)

"Ye Sons and Daughters of the King"

The Sermon – Text: Acts 5:29-42 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Fading?"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

Offering followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 311 (Stanzas 1-2, 8) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 201 (Stanzas 1, 4-5) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Lives! The Victory's Won"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (58) Average (45)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/ Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and Coffee time
Mon-Wed	-9:00 a.m.	– Board meetings in Eau Claire, WI
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Pastor Neal Radichel has returned the call to Immanuel of Mankato.

That congregation has now called Pastor Matthew Hanel. Mr. Benjamin Hanel has accepted the call to teach Social Studies in Immanuel Mankato's school. Pastor David Schaller has returned the call to Immanuel of Winter Haven. Teacher Paul Tiefel has returned the call to Grace of Sleepy Eye, MN. Teacher Ann Sprengeler has returned the call to the school of Redeemer - Cheyenne. The various CLC Boards are scheduled to meet Monday through Wednesday of this week in Eau Claire.

Flowers – Please feel free to take the flowers you purchased for the church home with you this morning.

Confirmation and Bible Study – Since Pastor Roehl is scheduled to attend meetings in Eau Claire this week, there will be no confirmation class or midweek Bible Study this Wednesday.

ILC Tour Choir Support – Since several have asked, anyone wishing to support the ILC Tour Choir may do so by marking their offering "ILC Tour Choir" and dropping it into the collection plate.