

“Ask Bill Anything!”

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

April 10, 2016

This is “Ask Bill Anything” Sunday. After eight years of talking at you, I invited you to submit questions that you want me to address. In retrospect I should have called this “Stump the Pastor” because the questions were *really* hard! Five people submitted questions; I will answer six. I have to ask a favor, though – I need a few extra minutes. I’m exceeding my time quota that I agreed to last year!

Peter Robinson wonders: “The Apostles’ Creed says: ‘... on the third day he rose AGAIN from the dead.’ It sounds like he rose twice.” Yep, it does. The creed was originally written in Latin, and that particular line is “*tertia die resurrexit a mortuis.*” *Tertia die*: on the third day; *a mortuis*: from the dead; the sticking point is in the verb *resurrexit*, which is a form of the verb *resurgo*, which means to “rise up again” or “appear again.” Another verb, *surgo*, simply means to “rise” or “get up”, but when you add the prefix *re-* onto it to make it *resurgo*, you get that sense of “again.” I do not know why the creed’s composers used *resurgo* rather than *surgo*. My guess is they were trying to say that he had already appeared (during his life) and now he rose up so that he appeared again, but I agree it’s confusing. It certainly is *not* intended to mean that he rose from the dead twice. Peter, I hereby give you permission to omit the word “again.” Just say, “on the third day he rose ... from the dead,” and you’ll be fine.

Maggie Knust says: “I am wondering what the relationship is today between the Presbyterian Church (USA) and Calvinism. The popular concept seems to be that Calvin was a rigid, theocratic, austere, joyless kind of guy who founded the Presbyterian Church. We aren’t like that now, are we? Was Calvin really not like that, or have we moved away from Calvinism?” A great question, and an important one, because there’s often confusion about this. Jean Calvin was a French pastor and a Protestant reformer who was considered a heretic by the Roman Catholic Church because he publicly disagreed with official church teachings, and he had to spend a portion of his early career in hiding. There was controversy throughout his ministry, not only with the Catholic Church but also with other reformers; they were all trying to articulate a more biblical faith, but they disagreed with each other on numerous details. If we have an impression of him as a “joyless” man, it may be related to the *suffering* he experienced as he tried to faithfully preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of tremendous hardship. He was not the founder of Presbyterianism; one of his students was: a Scotsman named John Knox, who took what he learned from Calvin back to Scotland. He wrote a theological statement called the “Scots Confession,” which the Scottish Parliament adopted in 1560 as Scotland’s official creed. Parliament also divided Scotland into ten districts – later called “presbyteries” – for supervising the churches, and the Presbyterian Church was born. A century later, the Scots Confession gave way to the

Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, which were the official theological documents when Scottish Presbyterians emigrated to the New World. The Westminster standards remained the official theological position of the Presbyterian Church in our country all the way to 1967 – though they were revised in the early 1900s, as some theological affirmations had come under scrutiny. In 1967, we made a *radical* change and created the *Book of Confessions*, a compendium of major theological statements from the early church, the Reformation, and the modern era; curiously, nothing written by Calvin was included in the compendium. The *Book of Confessions* does not offer *one* theological position; rather, it outlines a *trajectory* of belief and leaves room for latitude – some would argue, *too much* latitude, as there is no list of clearly-defined “essential tenets” that all Presbyterian leaders must adhere to. So, the short answer to Maggie’s question is that Calvin was a *major influence* on Presbyterian thought, but there has been a progression of development over five hundred years. We would not be who we are without Calvin, but we are not “Calvinists” in the strict sense.

Rich Zimmerman wants to know: “In the Bible, it states, ‘You must be born again to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.’ In the Presbyterian church, what does that mean? I haven’t seen any altar calls.” Another great question. The phrase “born again” occurs only three times in the entire Bible: twice in the third chapter of the Gospel of John, when Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, and once 1 Peter 1:23, where Peter – talking to people who are already Christians – says: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” John 3 is the more significant passage; Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3.3), and a few verses later, “You must be born again” (John 3.7). The critical detail is that the word translated “born again” could also be translated as “born anew.” That causes confusion for Nicodemus; he asks Jesus, “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” (John 3.4) Jesus is talking about *spiritual rebirth*, what happens when the Holy Spirit moves in somebody’s life in a way that leads that person to faith in Christ. Sometimes that happens in a very dramatic way – think of Paul on the road to Damascus – and sometimes that happens in more subtle ways over a period of time. We Presbyterians tend to use the word “regeneration” – like when the Scots Confession says, “we confess that the Holy Spirit does sanctify and regenerate us” (3.12), or when the Westminster Confession describes baptism as “a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of [our] ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of [our] giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life” (6.154). Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, as we are *reborn* to new life in Christ. It’s the *same thing* as being “born again.” We just use different language. We don’t do altar calls ... but the Spirit still blows.

Peter and Sheren asked the same question: “Why does Jesus teach us to pray to our Father ‘Lead us not into temptation’?” Sheren notes that James 1.13 says “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me,’ for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” So if God doesn’t tempt us, why does Jesus tell us to pray to God, “Lead us not into temptation”? Apparently this subject has come up when Fred Graham has been here to fill the pulpit, and so far he’s managed to avoid answering this question, leaving it to me. (Thanks, Fred!) I have eight different modern commentaries on the gospel of Matthew, and another half-dozen on Luke, and none of them answers this question well. I had to pull Calvin off my shelf to see how he handled this! He writes: “Certainly everyone is

tempted by one's own lusts, as James tells us (1.14), but as God both allows Satan's whim to inflame the fire of lust, and also uses him as the agent of His wrath when He determines to drive men headlong into destruction, thus *in His own way He actually leads men into temptation.*" Did you get that? Calvin is saying that the tempter is Satan, but that God can and does *allow* Satan to do that tempting. When we pray to God, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (more accurately, *the evil one*), what we are doing is asking God to shelter us from the temptations of Satan. Calvin puts it this way: "being conscious of our own weakness, we ask to be defended by God's protection, that we may have an impregnable position against all the devices of Satan." See? Calvin is *still* useful, even after 500 years.

Suzie Threadgould is wondering: "Why should not all Christian giving be considered your tithe and not just that which is given specifically to the church's unified budget?" This may be the most *practical* question of the whole bunch, and my reply is not directed at Suzie but rather offered for *everybody* here. I have talked, from time to time, about the biblical principle of *tithing*. Abraham offered a tenth of his belongings to Melchizedek, priest of God Most High. (Genesis 14.20) Jacob promised God a tenth of everything God would ever give to him. (Genesis 28.22) The Old Testament laws mandated that one-tenth of everyone's livestock and one-tenth of everyone's crops were to be offered to the Lord (Leviticus 27.32; Deuteronomy 14.22). The priests were to be given ten percent of everything that belonged to the Israelites – that's how they made their living – and they in turn were to offer a tenth of it back to God. (Numbers 18.26) There are dozens of references to this practice in the Bible, and it's worth looking up the passages for yourself. All it takes is a Bible concordance or Bible Gateway online; look up the words "tenth" and "tithe," and examine the verses that pertain to this topic. It's clear that not everyone followed the practice; the prophet Malachi really let the Israelites have it, accusing them of *robbing* from God by withholding a portion of their tithes. (Malachi 3.6-10) If you're not sold on the concept of tithing, read Malachi 3 and wrestle with what the prophet says there. In the New Testament, the members of the early church shared *everything* with each other and had *no* private property. There's that grim story about Ananias and Sapphira, who withheld a portion of their giving, lied about it, and paid the ultimate price. (Acts 5.1-11) The basic principle is that *everything we have comes to us as a gift from God*, and in joyful thanksgiving, we give a tenth of it back. Some people have the means to offer a lot *more* than 10%; others who are truly impoverished might have to give less than 10%, but for all of us somewhere in between those two extremes, I firmly believe that 10% is the best practice. There are *very* few people in this country who can't afford to give 10% if they budget well. In the Bible, that 10% was to be dedicated to God, and used for the operational expenses of the temple. The equivalent for us is the church. Deuteronomy makes a distinction between "tithes" and "special gifts", what we would call "offerings" (Deuteronomy 12.6; 12.11; 12.17). This gets to Suzie's question. In Deuteronomy – especially in chapter 12 – it is very clear that tithes and special gifts are *not* the same thing. Tithes are for regular church operations; special gifts are given *on top of* and *in addition to* our tithes. When the Israelites were building the tabernacle in the wilderness, they took up a *special collection* for that. It was an offering, not a tithe. So, contributions to our renovation fund fall into the category of "offering" rather than "tithe." Katharine and I take a tenth of my salary, give it right back for the church's regular operational expenses, and then offer our pledge to the renovation fund *on top of* that. You are *always* welcome to give special offerings dedicated to *any* purpose you choose – either here or elsewhere – but I believe those offerings should come *on top of* a full tithe to support the

regular operating expenses of the church. I firmly believe that's the model the Bible lifts up, and I don't see *any* reason why we should be re-writing the Bible. Besides, the church *truly needs* your tithes. Here's why: (1) Some of our staff members are being significantly underpaid, given the quality of their work, their level of expertise, and the going market rate. Most churches would be paying them quite a bit more than what we're paying. We lost an employee because they got a better offer. When we conduct interviews, salary sometimes comes up as a major sticking point. We are *not* doing the right thing for all our employees. Don't you think that needs to change? (2) Our mission budget is currently \$11,025, a mere 4.4% of our total budget. We cut it by more than \$3,000 this year because we ran into a major budget crunch. In contrast, Delta Presbyterian Church in Lansing – which has fewer members than we do – has a mission budget of \$34,000. That's more than *three times* ours. Think about the *impact* that church is having on the community! Are you all content with a 4.4% mission budget? Don't you think that needs to change? (3) There is a new Presbyterian student campus ministry, reaching students at both MSU and LCC. It's called U Kirk, and they will be here next week, leading worship. U Kirk needs churches to offer significant financial support if it hopes to continue beyond this current year. Several Presbyterian churches in the area have made major commitments, some offering *thousands* of dollars out of their annual budget. But so far we have given U Kirk *not one penny*. Think about that next week as they're leading worship here. So far, we've given them *nothing*. Don't you think that needs to change? (4) We have generous members who are aging and dying. Who is going to replace those generous givers? In December we published a financial analysis in the newsletter. 46% of our members are giving \$1000 or less. 67% are giving \$2000 or less. Yet all the evidence I see suggests to me that the vast majority of people in this congregation are *not* leading impoverished lives. Folks, I'm serious: if some of you in that 42% or 67% don't get serious about generous giving, we're going to *really* be hurting in the years to come. I don't think God's will for us is to shrink our ministry as our generous givers die. I think God is calling some of you to step out in *faith and trust*, and *give to the church like the gospel truly matters*. Finally, one last point: I don't know what any individual person here gives. But *Jesus* knows. We affirm that he will come again to judge the living and the dead. I hope those aren't just *words* to you; I hope at some level you really *believe* them. When Jesus invites you to have a conversation with him about your generosity, what's going to happen? Is he going to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant?" – or is he going to say, "I suffered and bled and died for *you* – and that's *all* I meant to you?" Jesus Christ *is* our Lord and Savior. Our giving is a reflection of how much we *believe* that.

One last question. This one comes from Sheren. "When someone asks you why you're a Christian, what do you reply?" Really great question, and it ties directly in to what we were talking about last week. She goes on: "How do you explain what would seem preposterous and emotional to an unbeliever, without them walking away shaking their head?" There is so much I want to say about this, but I truly am out of time. So I'm going to defer this one. Two weeks from now, I'll offer some general thoughts on the question, and I'll answer it from my perspective. In the meantime, I would ask all of you to take that question home and ponder it. "When someone asks you why you're a Christian, what do you reply?" What's *your* answer? Every single one of us needs an answer to that important question!

Thanks for your patience. This was fun. Maybe I'll do it again someday ... in another eight years!

© 2016 Rev. Bill Pinches