

The Gospel: Not a Fraud, But the Truth

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
Christmas II: January 4, 2009

Psychologist Stephen Greenspan, Professor Emeritus of Educational Psychology at my *alma mater*, the University of Connecticut, recently wrote a book entitled *The Annals of Gullibility*, which was featured in yesterday's weekend edition of *The Wall Street Journal* (Saturday, January 3, 2009). The book asks *Why We Keep Falling for Financial Scams*. This topic became quite prescient given the recent \$50 billion scam perpetrated by Bernard Madoff, a scam that scammed even Stephen Greenspan. "Intelligent people," Greenspan observes, "have long been ruined by frauds." He cites the classic case of Tulipmania in which rich Dutch people traded their houses for the hottest, *can't-miss* tulip bulbs in the marketplace back in the 1620s.

Then there was Charles Ponzi, an Italian immigrant in the *Roaring 20s*, who swindled lots of other Italian immigrants through what has come to be known as a *Ponzi scheme*. Then there was the fast-talking Oscar Hartzell, who created a social movement of believers in his alter ego, and *alias*, Baron Buckland, who was soon to inherit millions of dollars, if only supporters would advance him a pittance when compared to what he would share with his many supporters, known as *the Drakers*, when his ship came in. The Baron was eventually indicted for fraud and brought to trial in Iowa, over the protest of thousands of his loyal supporters, which included shopkeepers, farmers, small groups of friends, and a great number of churches scattered throughout America's Midwest.

"What I propose", Greenspan writes, "is a multidimensional theory that can explain why so many people behave in a manner that exposes them to severe risks, predictable hardship, and financial ruin." He talks about social feedback loops, going along with the crowd, and our assuming that others know more about what we can't understand. He notes, as well, that there is often an engaging personality at the center, surrounded by peers singing his praises, with the lure of a potential pay-off or benefit for those who have the courage to go all in. All of these are factors that make us gullible to a scam.

As a Pastor for thirty years, and as an evangelical advocate of the Christian faith before that, I have heard this argument made against Christianity on more than one occasion in a variety of ways. First, there was that book back in the 1960s called *The Passover Plot*, which advanced the theory that Jesus wasn't raised, or that he wasn't killed, or that he never lived, and that certainly he is not alive today. In truth, we know – with as much certainty as we know anything – that Jesus lived and that he died. There's really no historical debate over these matters. Was he raised, or was the body stolen from the empty tomb? These are the choices that have been before us ever since those first Easter morning reports. Believers have claimed that he was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, establishing Jesus as the promised Messiah, the coming Christ, God's Son,

our Savior. The Resurrection is a pivotal biblical sign establishing Jesus as God's Son. At the other end of life, Immaculate Conception and Virgin Birth are crucial signs that also proclaim that Jesus is God's Son. Our Gospel Lesson this morning is the culmination of these claims with its conclusion that Jesus was with God from the beginning as the Word of God Incarnate. John is proclaiming what faith takes as basic. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son of the Father." (John 1:1, 14) We've seen him! We know him. It's Jesus, born of Mary, Son of God, crucified, dead and buried, and now raised to new life, true life, God's life alive among us! So, was it a hoax? Is it a scam? Does it fit the profile? There's a magnetic personality at the center, along with peers who believe and encourage us to believe. Our faith in Jesus as the Christ offers superior benefits, along with the opportunity to take a chance, to make a statement, to show the stuff we're made of. Is it for real, or have we been taken?

I immediately got to thinking about the time that Jim Fidler stood in this pulpit and began talking about faith and evidence. It was April 28th and 29th, the weekend after Easter, back in 2007. Jim began by saying, "I'm here to tell you that concrete tangible evidence is more than adequate to convince open-minded historians, accountants, investigators, theological scholars, and attorneys-at-law beyond a reasonable doubt that Jesus Christ did, indeed, rise from the dead." Jim went on, "As an attorney, and someone who spent thirty-one years as a criminal investigator, I can tell you that there is not a prosecutor, or for that matter, a defense attorney, who would not want to have eyewitness testimony from individuals of the caliber of the first Christians, the individuals who walked with Jesus, claimed they saw him alive after his death, and suffered so tremendously for their testimony in the first century." This last part really got my attention.

Here's what Jim said in this regard: "Christian persecution was a part of early Christian history. Anyone who contends the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus was a hoax perpetrated by a group of disciples should check out the history of martyrdom. Eleven of the twelve Apostles, and many other disciples, died horrible deaths for their unwavering adherence to this story. The hundreds of eye witnesses to Jesus' Resurrection spread out all over the known world at that time. For promoting this story, these individuals lost their homes, families, and material wealth. They suffered torture, beatings, stoning, scourging, stabbings, hangings, immersion in cauldrons of boiling oil, and crucifixion for absolutely no recognizable earthly material gain. Not one person recanted. Not one said he wasn't sure. Not one said he might be confused. Not one claimed he might have been hallucinating. Not one instance of contradictory testimony from those alleged eyewitnesses has ever been recorded." A hoax? A fraud? A huge payout? A promise of great reward? Only if you don't bother to look at the historical record.

Jim had one more point to make about the possibility that a passover plot was unfolding. The notion "that Jesus faked his death and escaped from the tomb is, in my opinion,

patently absurd. According to eye-witness testimony of friends and enemies alike, Christ was beaten, tortured, and stabbed. He suffered internal damage, massive blood loss, asphyxiation, and a spear pierced his heart. There is no reason to believe that he, or anyone else, could survive such an ordeal, fake his death, sit in a tomb for three days and nights without medical attention, food, or water, remove the massive stone that sealed the tomb, escape undetected, convince hundreds of eyewitnesses that he was resurrected from the dead and in good health, then disappear without a trace. We don't need a CSI team to tell us that is ridiculous. And to what end? So that his followers could perpetrate a lie for which they would be rewarded with scorn, ridicule, torture, persecution and death?"

Tulipmania, the *Ponzi Scheme*, Bernard Madoff, who made off with 50 billion dollars: these were scams, the perpetration of a hoax feeding into the anatomy of human gullibility. But the Christian faith is clearly, and without doubt, not among them. Despite promised benefits related to eternal salvation, there is no big payout, just an invitation to take up the cross, and follow Jesus through the suffering that comes with it. The Apostle Paul got it right in Romans, when he proclaimed that following Jesus produces not shame, but hope, which through suffering builds character and strengthens faith, which does not disappoint because the Holy Spirit has been poured out into our hearts, and lives, and minds, convincing generations of believers of the truth that Jesus was the grace of God embodied, God's Word of truth Incarnate.

Many of you know that when it comes to dealing with issues of truth, philosophically speaking, I am in the camp that holds that the creation of a community – over time and across cultures, made up of simple believers who simply believe that they have encountered the truth, and have been embraced by the love and life that flow from it – is an argument, a proof, a demonstration, not of a scam, or a hoax, or a lie, but of a vision for living that leads to knowing what is true, embracing what is good, and doing what is right. When you look at the historical record, it's not just about the deaths that early Christians died; it's about the lives they lived, from the first century to today. That's the kind of witness that endures. These courageous stories of death and life form the substance of a witnesses that tell us that the way to true life is not about formulas on a chalkboard, musings of the mind, the perpetration of a hoax, or the scheming of a scam. The way to true life is a long term campaign, of sorts, fought out on the ground of real life, where real people endure real disappointment and great loss, along with facing risks worth taking, and bets worth making, like the risk of believing in the truth, hanging on to what's right, being inspired by a vision of what is good, and working on the virtues that enable us to pursue it. I would say that these are the challenges that our Christian faith has promised. These are the benefits that come with walking in the way of following Christ. These are the promises, which the Gospel has made and on which our God has delivered for those who have placed their trust and their life in the love that is ours ... in Jesus' name. Amen