

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



***I Am, Therefore I Think<sup>1</sup>***  
*Nehemiah 8.1-10; 1 Corinthians 12.1, 4-12, 27-31*  
Russ Dean, February 7, 2010

Rene Descartes, who died in 1650, has been called the Father of Modern Philosophy. Though he was trained as a lawyer, Descartes had little interest for the “study of letters.” He writes that in abandoning the legal profession he was, “Resolving to seek no knowledge other than that of which could be found in [himself] or else in the great book of the world...”<sup>2</sup> And in the world, and within himself, Descartes found enough knowledge to become one of the most renown mathematicians and physicists and philosophers in the history of Western civilization. His work was influential in the movement we now call the Scientific Revolution, but Descartes is most well known for the axiom, first penned in French, “je pense donc je suis,” which has been translated in Latin as it is now almost universally known: Cogito Ergo Sum.

In pondering his own existence Descartes uniquely and originally concluded that the very act of thinking is its own proof that one does, in fact, exist. “I think, therefore I am.” You probably are not going home this afternoon to rustle up a copy of *Meditations of First Philosophy*, so let me read the famous passage for you:

...I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No. If I convinced myself of something [or thought anything at all] then I certainly existed. [There is no supreme deception to]... bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Before I began the sermon, I said something to this effect: I do not equate “thinking” with “believing as I do.” I am well-aware that there are people of deeply-considered faith, across the theological spectrum. It is to a thinking faith that I call you today – but not necessarily one which agrees with me.

<sup>2</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*.

<sup>3</sup> The details on Descartes life have been lifted from various internet sources including, of course, Wikipedia!

Now, as ivory tower intellectual or absolutely academic as this idea may sound – thinking about yourself thinking – “Cogito Ergo Sum” revolutionized the world. The world as we know it is based on the fundamental assumption that rational thought ought to shape our science and our medicine and our government, and our religion. The “rationalism” of Descartes was foundational for the Enlightenment of the West and of the world, and each of us, whether you’re a member of Mensa or not, each of us is a product of enlightened thinking! Just look what happened...

The thinkers started thinking even more, developing ways to test hypotheses and to experiment and to project outcomes... and the world exploded with discoveries. (I’m sure there’s an “app” somewhere out there to tell you just how many!) They started thinking about rights and responsibilities and systems of government, and a revolution of thought brought democracy and freedom to the masses. And people started thinking about God, and a method of critical study was born to help us think anew about the way we think about the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

While education and the advances of this great, ongoing thought-experiment have largely been accepted in most areas of our lives, however, far too many people still want a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade God. Honestly. For more than 150 years the best minds the Church has offered up to the Academy, men and women of faith who have devoted entire lives to the study of ancient cultures and obsolete languages, have been telling us that the great book we call The Bible is no less great just because it’s not a literal play-by-play of the events it records. It has long been accepted among the best scholars of Church and Synagogue that our great book is mythological not

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<sup>4</sup> I am referring specifically to the “historical-critical method” of study, which was born in Europe, especially in the universities of Germany, in the mid-nineteenth century. This method was born out of the express conviction that the Bible should be studied as any other book, and that the Bible could, in fact, stand up to such scrutiny. (Up to this point in history, the Bible had been regarded as too sacred to be scrutinized. It was essentially taken at face value because it was the Bible.) In this method scholars began picking apart the texts in disciplines such as “source criticism,” “form criticism,” “redaction criticism,” etc... each looking at texts objectively to determine date of composition, authorship, and any other factors that could lead to a fuller understanding of the text. Though this method, and its general findings about the Bible, is now assumed in virtually all academic settings regarding the Christian faith and scripture, it has been derided by some for its “liberal” bias.

chronological, that it intends spiritual truth not scientific or historical fact.<sup>5</sup> No one in the world of mainline Christian scholarship any longer contests the basic Theory of Evolution nor regards the main characters and events of our biblical stories to be, primarily, historical. No one. Every event which is the focus of a scriptural narrative is more than historical. It may be less-than-historical, as well.

Several years ago I was in a week-long pastor's school (attended by every day protestant pastors, like me), and one of the keynote speakers was a good-ole-boy from Tennessee, whose education has led him to become one of the world's foremost experts in biblical archaeology. He lives in downtown Jerusalem six months of the year, working for the Israeli Archaeology Society. He returns to Tennessee for six more months – just so he can retain his accent, I think! I asked him about “The Exodus” – that most formative of all Old Testament events, in which Moses led the Children of Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Without hesitation he said, “There was no exodus... Oh, there were exodii... many small occurrences of Israelites leaving Egypt... but there is no archaeological evidence there was ever a mass exodus of the proportion we read, literally, in the Bible.”<sup>6</sup>

Are you ready to think about that? Too much of the Church is not, but as Bill Dols, formerly of Myers Park Baptist says, “Just because it didn't happen, doesn't mean it isn't true.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> With historical-critical eyes, for example, the creation narrative is seen as an epic poem, establishing a basic order of creation, with God as the creative force behind creation – but not as an actual description of the opening days of the history of the world. This hermeneutic (method of Bible study) was developing alongside a developing science that was able to explain more and more as a product of a natural order, rather than requiring a supernatural controlling hand. It is perhaps understandable why some quarters of the Church responded so defensively – as both of these disciplines seemed to be forcing God out of the equation – but the Church must be open to truth, no matter in what form it presents itself. A god (and a faith in that god) which cannot stand the scrutiny of critical eyes, is hardly God at all.

<sup>6</sup> I stated his title incorrectly. Dr. Charles Page is actually the Academic Dean at the Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies in Jerusalem, where he has served since 1989.

<sup>7</sup> This former Episcopal Priest, and Minister of Education, has written a book of “sermons and prayers as story,” entitled, *Just Because it Didn't Happen...* which is from the full quotation, a line he attributes to novelist Tim O'Brien.

It's 2010. Many of you hold in your possession at this very moment, a palm-sized powerhouse of almost inconceivable computing power. Just 40 years ago even NASA would have been envious. Men have walked on the moon, and we have been communicating for two years, with a vehicle that is now stuck in sand – on planet Mars! Many around us are recipients of bionic implants of one form or another; they make our limbs function, keep our hearts ticking reliably. But in the last Presidential election the only question that really mattered for a significant portion of Americans was if the candidates believed in Evolution or Creation. Do you understand what I'm saying? Our world is exploding with life-altering advances that come on the wheels of critical thinking, and many religious people are simply in no position to accept these truths. In a 2009 Gallop poll 41% of people who attend church regularly said they did not believe in evolution.<sup>8</sup> You need not be an atheist to affirm one of the most basic tenets of modern biology. It sounds to me like Galileo's trial, revisited!<sup>9</sup>

You would not think of allowing a surgeon to prescribe life-saving medication, much less to open your chest, if she had not studied, was not up-to-date on the very newest, the very best in medical theory... if she did not use her mind to the fullest of its potential. But it is still routine for students to enter seminary being cautioned that they not let professors take away the understanding of faith they learned... in Sunday school.<sup>10</sup> The religious enterprise is the only one I know of in our advancing world which still faces tomorrow largely skeptical of the very process of intellectual scrutiny which has given us the today we live in.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114544/darwin-birthday-believe-evolution.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> I affirm the truth of the Theory of Evolution as fully as I can understand it. (Though I reserve the word "believe in" for items of religious faith.) This truth is not "just a theory" as many detractors claim. It is bedrock principle in modern science – and has been nearly since Charles Darwin proposed the idea in his 1859 ground-breaking book. I continue to be amazed at the resistance this science faces from an otherwise largely-educated population (the religiously faithful). I should not be. It took the Church 500 years to fully accept Galileo's "heresy" – that the earth is NOT the center of the universe!

<sup>10</sup> I was given this advice by friends – as I entered college and seminary!

It is a fear-filled, pathetic way to try to be relevant in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

About 2500 years ago a priest named Ezra stood before a weary but enthusiastic people who had been in bondage, exiled in a foreign land for as long as many of them had been alive, but who were now standing within the walls of their beloved Jerusalem. Ezra lifted before them the book of the law. It's not hard to imagine that some of them had never heard this text read – recited in Babylon, yes, but many may have never actually seen a copy of the Torah. So on that day and in that place Ezra read to his people from the book they had revered in their hearts, even if they had never seen it with their eyes – and he read “*with interpretation.*”

In the winter of 1990 Amy and I lived in the basement of Gardiner Baptist Church, just outside the northern entrance of Yellowstone National Park. We were there at the behest of the Southern Baptist Convention, working with 21 collegiate volunteers as resort missionaries in the park. If you have a chance to go to Yellowstone, run, don't walk, to get your tickets. If you have the opportunity to live while you are there in the basement of a fundamentalist church, led by a self-proclaimed former town drunk, who had been dramatically called to preach the “wordaGod,” run, don't walk – in the opposite direction! It was a great summer in the park. A very long summer in that basement! Among other memorable gems of enlightenment that summer, I learned that the pastor was quite proud of the fact that in his life he'd only read one book “written by man.” You see, the Bible was all he needed – and apparently it wasn't written by man. No, he didn't need any *interpretation*... but Ezra's people did, and so do I, and so do I. So I hope you read books written by men, and women, who have studied long and hard. I hope you read perspectives to your left, opinions to your right. And I hope those *interpretations* open your mind... for God longs for us to grow up in faith. Little Ames Oliver needs a church that can

still accept him, and that can still challenge him, when his university education and the lessons of life teach him that a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade God is just way too small.<sup>11</sup>

Paul's lesson to the church in Corinth concerning the dispensation of gifts is not an exhortation, specifically, to a thinking faith. But it is a text that, if you listen closely, should make you think. Since I first really heard it about five years ago, I have given a great deal of mental energy to this, at-first-disturbing, but finally-energizing thought. I have mentioned my thinking to some of you, some who found it upsetting. But I didn't write this word, folks, I'm just trying to think about it! Seriously.

Paul says God gives all gifts. That whatever your gift is, it is "*the manifestation of the Spirit.*" He says there are lots of kinds of gifts. Each is given for "*the common good.*" Now, so far, so good... "*To one,*" he says, is given "*wisdom.*" And some of you have that gift. *To another... knowledge.* I know who you are, too. Others can *heal... or work miracles... or prophecy... or discern.* Each of you is in our congregation, too. Paul says some are even led to speak in *tongues* or to *interpret* that strange noise. Now, if we've got that gift among us... I don't know of it! Maybe that's coming!? But here's where Paul gets... curious.

He is writing to the church – Paul is not suggesting some of these gifts come to people outside the "*body of Christ.*" He is speaking only to the Body of Christ, only about the Body of Christ. *For just as the body is one and has many members... so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...* So, talking to the church, Paul says "*to another [is given the gift of ]... faith...*" Faith? A gift... given to one? Some? I'm going to have to think about that. And I have.

Before I tell you what I've come to think about this, let me fairly admit that I cannot find a commentary that fully agrees with me!<sup>12</sup> And I do know that sometimes when you're the only

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<sup>11</sup> Today's service included a parent/child dedication for Ames.

one marching on the wrong foot in the band, you just have to face the fact that maybe you are out of step!<sup>13</sup> But if I'm wrong, I believe God will forgive me. And I don't worry about leading you astray – because it's your own responsibility to think for yourself. Jesus added to that great commandment of his religion that we are to *love God – with all our minds* (Mark 12.29). I'm trying to do just that, as I try to make sense of this sometimes hard-to-understand world. So here's what I think. Let me know what you think, too.

I read this text and it struck me wrong because we've all been taught that faith is for everyone. So... why do so many not have it? Why do so many say they cannot? Even those who have tried. Many say they want faith. Work on it. Struggle with it. They just can't seem to get it. And some of these people, so some of these people tell me, are in this congregation. They get church. Believe in community. Understand Jesus' ethical call, and are more devoted to that calling than many people who've never struggled with faith a day in their life. But they tell me they just really don't have it.

And the thought occurred to me... Well, what if that's just not their gift? For some of these people, and you know them too (here and beyond these walls), some have the gift of

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<sup>12</sup>For example, in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, J. Paul Sampley says, "Furthermore, faith is listed as one of the gifts..." but then he completely glosses over the distinction of faith as 'one of the gifts,' because he continues this very sentence, "...and, in Paul's view, all believers have been given the gift of faith; accordingly, no one can be viewed himself or herself as being bereft of Spirit-endowed *charismata*" (emphases added). (*NIB, 1 Corinthians*, p.944). End of discussion. In the *Broadman Commentary*, Raymond Bryan Brown does allow, "Here faith means the capacity to do great things for God...", which seems to imply at least some distinctiveness to the gift. (*1 Corinthians*, p.363.)

<sup>13</sup> The week following this sermon, I had a dialogue with Michael Kellett, our Minister with Youth and Children, who had sought a second opinion from, one of his New Testament professors at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. Michael wrote to Dr. Scott Spencer: "A NT question for you – I Cor. 12.9 – the same Spirit gives faith to one person. Seems to suggest that not everyone is gifted with faith." Dr. Spencer's response confirms for me that I'm not completely in left field with my answer! "...in the list of spiritual gifts 'faith' or 'faithfulness' (the Greek, *pistis*, can mean either or both) does appear as a gift some seem to have or have more of than others. I don't take any of these gifts to be entirely 'exclusive' to some and not to others, however. That, I may not be exactly 'gifted' with extraordinary faith, but I can and should still have faith--"*I believe Lord, help my unbelief*" (Mark 9.24) -- something like that. Perhaps Paul has in mind something like 'mountain-moving faith' he mentions in the next chapter and then thoroughly trumps with 'love.'" (underlined emphasis added)

wisdom or knowledge or healing or discernment... The Spirit of God is clear in their lives. But if faith, like the others, is also a gift... then God's kingdom just got a whole lot bigger, didn't it!?

It seems to me that Paul at least strongly implies this in his very next words, that soaring affirmation of love. *If I speak in tongues... but do not have love... it's just noise! If I have prophetic powers... if I have faith (if)... but do not love, I am nothing... Love never ends*, Paul says... *Love*. But he doesn't say hope never ends – he knows better. And he doesn't say faith always endures.<sup>14</sup> He says the greatest thing we can do or have or be... is love. If you've never not had it, and if your faith never ends – Thanks Be to God. But if it does – and maybe it does only in a fleeting moment of doubt, or maybe it has in a season of heartache or struggle... or maybe faith is just not your gift. If it is not... then love. For love is more enduring than hope. And it is even greater than faith. And that's what I think.

William Sloan Coffin was the controversial, iconoclastic pastor of New York's Riverside Church. He says this, and I hope it's alright for me to quote him verbatim in this pulpit:

The first of the four cardinal virtues of the Roman Catholic Church is “prudentia,” which basically means damn good thinking. Christ came to take away our sins, not our minds.

Since we are *homo sapiens* – thinking beings – we owe it to ourselves, to one another, and to God to live up to our names – especially in the Church.

I am, therefore I Think.

May it be so!

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<sup>14</sup> Paul does say, “*faith, hope, and love abide...*”, but that verb is the present indicative active conjugation of *meno* (to remain), which does not imply a future, eternal quality (always will abide), but a quality of the present moment. I take Paul to be saying, “Now we have faith, and hope, and love... and even if faith and hope pass away—love will never end.”