

The First Presbyterian Church

1324 Marion Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

July 8, 2020

Dear Church family,

As some of you know, I began a series on Haggai last Sunday. Soon we will be considering the following passage: “For thus saith the LORD of hosts: Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts” (Haggai 2:6-7, KJV). These words from the second chapter of Haggai are familiar to us from Handel’s great oratorio, *Messiah*. I have often wondered in recent days if we are entering a time of shaking — a time of reordering, disruption, disarray.

The disruption of which Haggai spoke was a preparation for the coming of Jesus, then still hundreds of years away, but it bears remembering that disruption never feels good. Certainly the times in which we now live, though filled with many of God’s blessings, often feel highly disorienting. Lockdowns, protests, political vitriol — is there any end to it?

First Presbyterian Church of Columbia has been shaken in a particular way in recent days. Many of you will have already heard of or read the National Public Radio report on race and the church, which aired late last week and is posted on NPR’s website. The report was perhaps unfair in some respects, but it brought into the open an issue that, over the last decade or so, has troubled some within the church and some without: the name James Henley Thornwell, which attaches to our education building and lecture series, and the name Benjamin Morgan Palmer, for which our ministry building is named. Both were ministers of First Presbyterian Church: Thornwell from January to December 1840 and again from 1855 to 1860 and Palmer from 1843 to 1855. Both men faithfully preached the Scriptures and, without apology, both served the church well.

Unfortunately, both men supported the institution of slavery in the South. Indeed, Thornwell did so by arguing explicitly that the Scriptures support slavery. There is much, much more to be said about both men — they were profoundly decent men and extraordinary theologians and preachers — but their stance on slavery is a fact that cannot be sidestepped.

The fact that we have buildings and a lecture series named for these men has become a point of offense among some in our city and in our church. The NPR report, in addition to quoting Thornwell on the subject of slavery, noted the unfavorable opinions of some of our African American brothers and sisters at Ladson Presbyterian Church on Sumter Street, once a daughter church of First Presbyterian Church. The opinions expressed by members of the Ladson church are an accurate representation of the way First Presbyterian Church’s use of the name Thornwell, in particular, is perceived by some, perhaps many, of Columbia’s black community. The name also comes up with increasing regularity on the campus of USC, some believing that all such names in places of honor constitute an offense.

It is true that many in our day seek to disparage the past and deface its public memorials. As Christians we take no part in destructive behavior and the perverse attitudes that give rise to it. We further recognize that even men and women of great accomplishments are detestable sinners, wholly without hope apart from the mercy of a holy God.

Even so, having these names in places of honor has become a cause of offense, and our elders have agreed that First Presbyterian Church should remove the names from our buildings and from the summer lecture series. On July 2, the Session of First Presbyterian Church voted unanimously to establish a Community Relations Committee to study the matter and recommend a course of action. That committee’s members are Tom Gottshall (chairman), Robert Belding, Jerry Brewer, Chandler McNair, Paul Riddle, Mark Ross, Ken Wingate, and Wilmot Irvin (as an advisory member).

On July 6, after its first meeting of several hours, the Committee recommended that the church immediately discontinue use of the names Thornwell and Palmer on church buildings and for the summer lecture series. The Committee will continue to meet in the coming weeks and will, in due course, recommend ways in which First Presbyterian Church can use this experience, painful as it is in some ways, as an opportunity to build relationships in the community for the sake of the gospel.

Some, seeing the wanton destruction meted out by mobs elsewhere in our society, may worry that we, too, are effacing our history. I do not think that is the case. There is much more to learn from Thornwell and Palmer in their writings. Thornwell's four-volume *Collected Writings* is still available in our church library and for purchase on the internet. His works on the nature of God, creation, the Scriptures, and justification will continue to be taught and read, whatever the names of our buildings may be. The same is true of Palmer's works, in particular his superb *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*. In any case, I doubt very much whether either man would wish his name assigned to a church building.

I have been an admirer of both James Henley Thornwell and Benjamin Morgan Palmer ever since I was introduced to their writings at seminary in mid-1970's. To mention but one issue, Thornwell's contribution to the understanding of the office of ruling elder shaped my direction into Presbyterian convictions (I was a Baptist) and continues to be important. Palmer's *The Broken Home* and *Theology of Prayer* are two very fine works. I fully intend to read them again.

For years, I believed that we could honor the good while conceding to the bad. But their views on slavery and race were not just bad and wrong, they are fundamentally at odds with Scripture. I recall a black preacher, some forty years ago at a Banner of Truth conference in England, saying, "I love Thornwell on this issue, but he was horribly wrong on race and slavery." That narrative does not work anymore. The names now are a "stumbling block" to our ability to witness to our African-American brothers and sisters. They are an impediment to enable us to witness on college campuses. And they are hurtful to our African-American members.

The times have changed and the time is long overdue to address the issue of slavery and race that both men held and propagated. Our denomination expressed its contrition in 2016, and First Presbyterian Church accedes to its statements.

Our elders are aware that the time may come when we are pressured to make changes we cannot make. Institutions around the country are facing such demands, many of which are made in bad faith and for ill purposes. Neither our ministers nor our elders believe that is true in this instance. We believe, in fact, that this change is overdue, irrespective of the NPR story. But we are also aware that the time may come when we're asked, or told, to make changes we cannot make if we are to remain faithful to the Scriptures. With the Lord's help, we will know the difference between wise and unwise changes.

These times demand that we come together as a church body and pray. We ought to be praying for guidance, for Christian poise in times of chaos and rancor, and for discernment to know how we might present the Lord Jesus in a more faithful and disarming manner. We need the ability to witness on college campuses without having to be on the defense over past views on slavery.

We may live in a time of shaking and disruption, but the kingdom of the Lord Jesus will not be shaken. I think of the Letter to the Hebrews and the twelfth chapter. The writer alludes to that prophecy in Haggai. "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken," he says, "and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."

Sincerely in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Derek Thomas", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Derek W. H. Thomas
Senior Minister