



Beverly Heights  
Presbyterian  
Church

**scattered seeds.**

THE MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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**faithful  
witness**

REFLECTIONS  
ON  
THINKING,  
SPEAKING  
AND  
ACTING  
CHRISTIANLY

*By Pastor Emeritus Rick Wolling*

# prologue

*When I served a wealthy Boston family.*

During my senior year in college and for the three years I attended theological seminary, I enjoyed a prize much coveted by my fellow students: I had a “live-in.”

In exchange for a one-bedroom apartment and a \$300-per-month stipend, I was the caretaker of an estate on Massachusetts Bay, north of Boston. Mary and I moved there three days after we were married in June of 1971.

Located at 75 West Street in Beverly Farms, we lived in the servant's quarters on the estate. It was an apartment above the garages and guest house on the property, across from a palatial cottage with 20 rooms. Boston's wealthiest people summered with their families and house staffs in such places. The estate was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Frederick C. Church, who had been raised in the most exclusive social circles in Boston and Newport, Rhode Island.

While Mary kept the guest house tidy and ready for the prominent and well-connected visitors who stayed at their home, I was responsible for keeping the place humming.

I washed the cars and chauffeured for the family. I waxed the marble floors and laid the fires. I shined Mr. Church's shoes. And I drove him to the train station. At Christmas, I set up the big Christmas tree in the "yellow room." I also played Santa Claus for the annual "Christmas Cheer," as well as for the big family gathering on each Christmas day.

Every Friday I raked the pebbles on our huge circular driveway to make the entrance (more) impressive and neat. Each Saturday morning, I raked the beach which was 75 yards long and 30 yards to the water's edge of Massachusetts Bay, piling up the seaweed, burying it in the sand and making nice straight lines with my old-fashioned wooden rake.

I loved every minute of my time with the Churches and would do it again in a heartbeat.

The Churches only attended worship service on Christmas Eve, when the small Episcopal church was the place to be seen in Beverly Farms. Before graduating from Harvard,

Mr. Church had attended St. Paul's School in New Hampshire where he was required to attend chapel three times per week during which he picked up no small amount of biblical understanding.

While Mr. Church was interested in what I was studying, he didn't believe any of it. Mrs. Church at times showed hostility to the Christian faith. She seemed mainly concerned with how her "nice Gordon boy" impressed her friends, to whom she lent

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me out on occasion, due to the fact that I "cleaned like a dream."

Mr. Church could be demanding while Mrs. Church was persnickety. But I grew to love them both. I was sad to leave them when I completed my degree and moved to my first parish calling on Long Island.

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As I reflect on how fortunate I was during those four years, I am filled with gratitude for all I experienced and learned. But what strikes me most about that time is that God, Who by His sovereign grace allowed Mary and me to enjoy those early years of our life together, also had salted us into that sumptuous household and its surroundings.

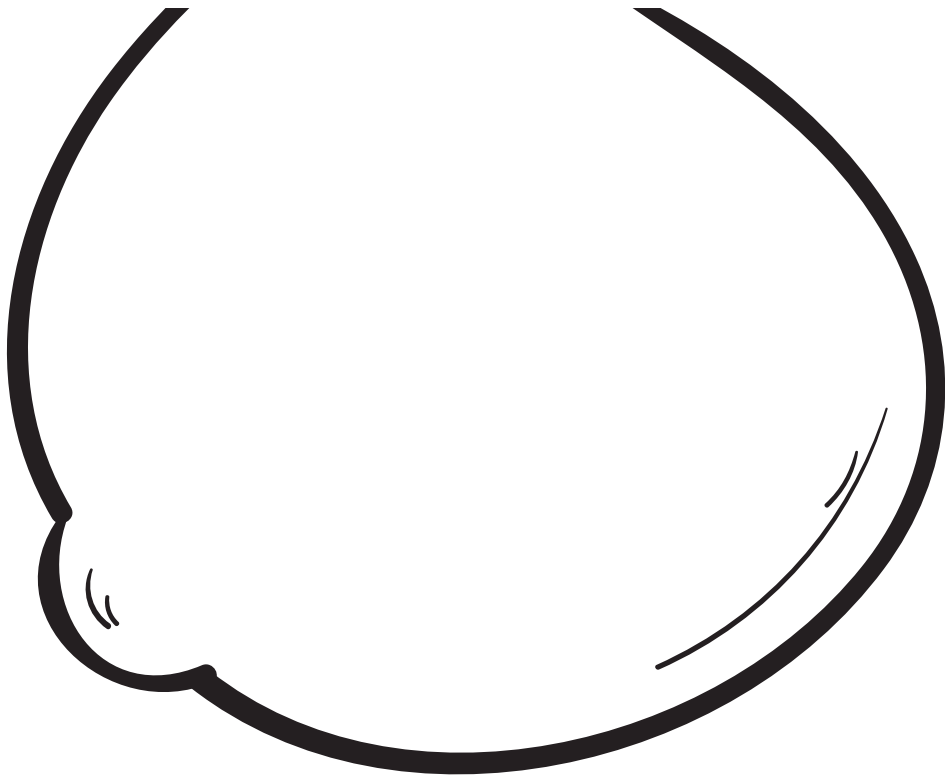
Though it wouldn't be until 1992 when I articulated a theology of Gathered/Scattered for this church, I was, in fact, the light, salt and leaven of the kingdom of God, where He had sovereignly scattered me. And I was aware that this place was unique, and that God had placed me there to be His faithful witness to the presence, power and glory of Jesus Christ in whom my employers did not believe.

What does it mean to be a faithful witness for Christ?

For two millennia, followers of our Savior have struggled to answer that very question. The answers are as numerous and varied as the people who ask it.

For the disciple of Jesus Christ, the reliable three-legged stool of faithful witness includes thinking Christianly, speaking Christianly and acting Christianly.

That's what my time with the Churches was all about. And though I never had the opportunity to lead them in the believer's prayer of faith, I believe that thinking, speaking and acting Christianly made an impact for Christ which, as I'll share later on, pointed them toward the wonder and glory of the God I love, and Who they resisted as strongly as many do today.



# thinking

## CHRISTIANLY

*Thought is the foundation of faithful witness.*

Charles Johnston, a native Oklahoman, was well-known as the best down-hole geologist at work for 200 miles in any direction. His expertise was in high demand in the oil fields of Oklahoma.

Poppy, as he was called by his first grandchild, had a deep love for Jesus. He was a life-long Sunday School teacher and chairman of the pulpit nominating committee that called me, in 1977, to the pastorate in Seminole.

A man of science and logic, he was often befuddled by the actions of members of his family, church and community which, he believed, were lacking in fact, logic or both. From time to time, he would call me and say, “Rick, help me out with this.” After reporting the situation that had him flummoxed, he would ask, “What is the thinking?”

I am continually amused at his conversion of the verb into a noun (think/thinking). Pastor Nate and I have adopted his expression as our own when we converse about various issues in the church and larger world.

What is the thinking? It’s a good question. Poppy understood that actions and words, if they were to make sense, needed to flow from sound thinking. When things didn’t make sense to Poppy, it was because the “thinking” was weak or non-existent.

Sound Christian thinking is the very foundation of faithful witness for Jesus Christ. As one thinks, so one speaks and acts and thereby gives testimony to the wonder and glory of God and his Son.

In the Apostle Paul’s day, people wondered about the thinking expressed to them in epistles to the Corinthian church. In their view, Paul was gentle in person but came on rather strongly in his letters. Essentially, they accused him of a lack of integrity – inconsistency in what he said and did.

Defending himself, Paul explained that his actions stemmed from his thinking (2 Corinthians 10.3-5): “For though we live in the world, we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy

strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”

This was the framework of Paul’s thoughts about the world around him. It was his worldview.

A personal worldview may be founded upon maximizing personal pleasure or upon many other influences such as race, political affiliation, sexual identity or gender. It may

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## **Sound Christian thinking is the very foundation of a faithful witness.**

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also be influenced by personal feelings based upon the views of friends or those expressed by favorite media outlets.

By contrast, a Christian worldview may be as simple as beginning our thinking with God rather than ourselves – a view from above, as I have said in other contexts. Whatever issue is under consideration, the first and foremost question is: *What does God have*

*to say about this?* versus *What do I think about it?*

A Christian worldview is shaped by the reality of God’s existence as He is revealed in Scripture. We think Christianly about things when we do so in light of the reality that God exists; He created the world with intention and design; He is sovereign and His will is perfect and shall be accomplished; He is the source of all that is good, right, true and beautiful; He is righteous and we are not; and, therefore, we are sinners in need of redemption.

A Christian worldview makes a realistic assessment of things based upon God’s self-revelation and informs right speaking and right acting. Those without a Christian worldview, who fail to “bring all things captive to obey Christ,” can often appear to bounce around like a pinball. They lack coherence in what they do and speak. They often rely on what they hear someone else say or follow what someone else does, with no personal grasp of what, why or how.

As a result, their lives lack integrity.

I often wonder what the thinking is behind views that are expressed by family members, friends and those in public life? What is the thinking behind a person’s view of Covid or the recent Supreme Court decision on abortion? Is there any thinking at all or is one’s position based upon personal preference or feelings or surrounding pressures?

If Poppy were still with us today, he’d be asking these very questions. His life was characterized by thinking Christianly, and my memory of him is a reminder and a challenge that we, too, must bring all things captive to obey Christ.



# speaking

## CHRISTIANLY

### *A fiery tongue.*

Without a doubt, it was the worst moment in my half century of pastoral ministry. It was one of those moments that, as it was happening, one knows things are going horribly wrong.

It started out with good intentions: Christmas caroling at the homes of our elderly members.

Before our first stop, one of our choristers asked: “Pastor Wolling, how did you decide

whose homes we would visit?" A good question with a simple answer: "I looked through the membership rolls and focused on the older members of the congregation, those for whom a special visit with Christmas carols would be particularly meaningful."

The first stop was the home of Louise Welch, a retired professor, life-long Presbyterian and new member of the congregation in Seminole, Oklahoma.

As our group of parents with small children began singing, the porch light came on, the door opened and there stood Louise, smiling, clearly delighted we had come.

"Oh, I'm so pleased. This is wonderful. Thank you. But why did you come here? There must be plenty of other places you could have gone?"

That's when it happened. My brain froze, propriety flew away, and any sense of pastoral love and care vanished as I blurted out the damaging words: "We came here because YOU ARE OLD!"

Time stood still, the earth stopped rotating and the Lord refused to grant my wish that the earth would open under my feet and swallow me up, never more to be seen.

Louise's face dropped, parents covered their children's ears, my wife lowered her head and there I stood, alone in a crowd, to contemplate the hurt I had caused. I wanted to die.

I didn't learn my impropriety in a book or in a seminary course on pastoral ministry. I learned the lesson from my dear mother: "If you can't say something nice, say nothing at all." But I was going for the quick retort, the

cheap shot, and the (not so) funny line. Everyone gathered around me was a member of my congregation. I was their pastor. I was the one who was called to train them in the way of Jesus Christ. To be an example, a witness of how that worked out in everyday life.

And I failed miserably.

The negative witnesses are not forgotten, either, as I was reminded of recently by visiting houseguests. These two dear

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friends, who stood on the front porch of Louise's house with the other Christmas carolers, recalled it vividly. How nice of them to remember my gaffe, now over 40 years later!

There is plenty of teaching in the scriptures about our use of language. It is a gift from God and part of what it means to be created in His image. God communicates through

language, using words and sentences which express thoughts. We do too.

But like everything else in our lives, the gifts God gives to us are tainted by sin, which is often reflected in what we say and how we say it. Our verbal communication is a witness to others – either a witness to our fallenness and sin, or a witness to the redemptive power of Christ in our lives and the resultant indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

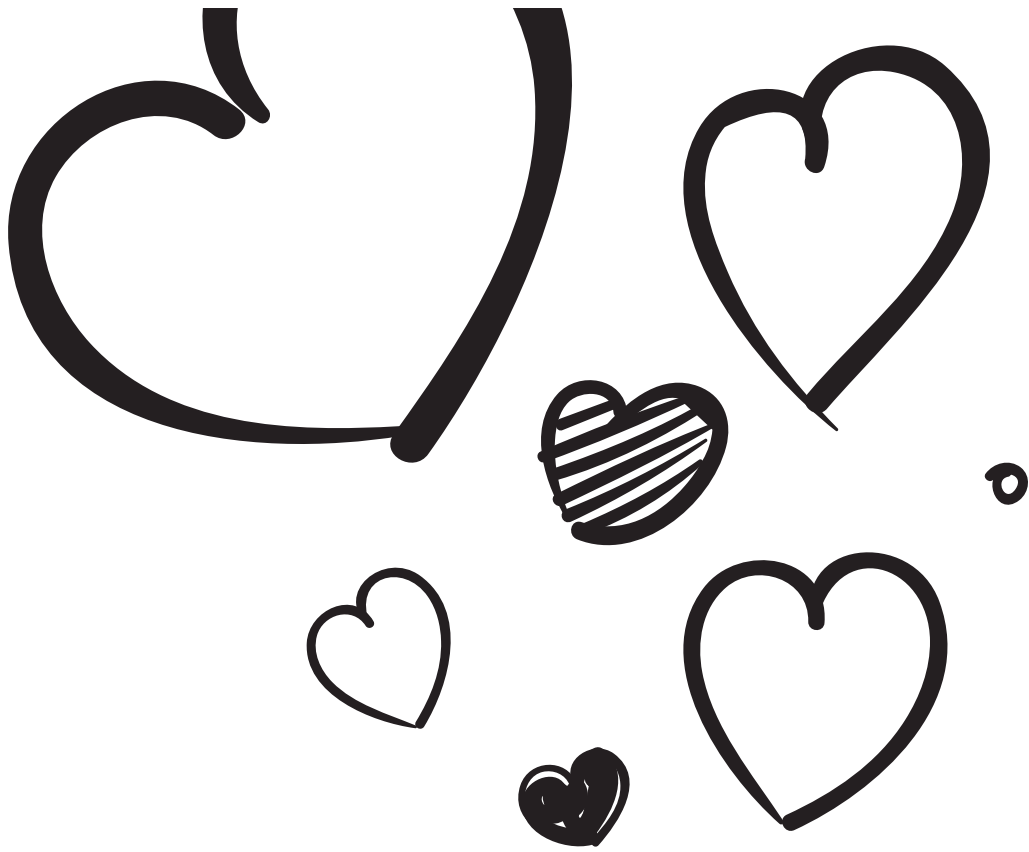
Jesus challenges us to speak with integrity. The Apostle James warns that the use of our tongues can either be a blessing to those who hear us – or a curse. "The tongue is a fire," James says, followed quickly by, "... this ought not to be" (James 3. 9-10).

The most helpful biblical teaching on how we speak to one another is found in Ephesians 4. In other places, I have identified at least 10 questions we must ask ourselves as we prepare to speak.

As I think about what I said on that porch 42 years ago, and evaluate it in the light of those 10 questions, I stand condemned by at least eight fails. What I said was not loving or true. It gave the evil one an opportunity to do his work. It tore Louise down instead of edifying her. It did not impart grace and it was not kind or tenderhearted.

Worst of all, it was a horrible witness to the Lord Whom I love and whose example I was challenging others to follow. Years of personal testimony to the goodness, grace and love of the Lord Jesus can be destroyed by being careless, thoughtless and proud, in what we say and in how we say it.

As in so many other things, Mom was right. I should have followed her advice.



# acting CHRISTIANLY

*Loving a neighbor - by bringing him cookies.*

“Come in here for a moment. You’re not going to believe this,” I shouted to Mary from the kitchen.

“Unbelievable” was Mary’s reaction.

The two of us looked out our kitchen window. Across our property, there was our neighbor, Mike, washing his car.

A fairly common activity 364 days of the year, but not on Christmas morning.



Who washes their car on Christmas morning? Someone for whom Christmas is not a special day. Someone who has nothing to celebrate and no one with whom to celebrate. That's Mike.

From the moment we moved to the property next door to his, Mike and I seemed at odds with each other.

I had taken some grass clippings from my mower and spread them under the shrubs along our joint property line. Mike took offense at that. He hung a POSTED sign on his boundary fence and amplified the message with a few choice words of his own.

After consulting with other neighbors who confirmed they all had issues with Mike, I decided it was best to keep my distance. I ignored him – and continued to do so, until that Christmas morning.

It was Mary who broke the ice. Following our traditional breakfast, she busied herself in the kitchen, preparing a box of Christmas cookies. She then went to the door with her coat on and, cookies in hand, headed down our driveway.

"Where are you going?" I asked. "I'm taking these cookies over to Mike. It's Christmas for goodness sake."

I thought it was a bad idea and told her so.

With no hesitation in her step, Mary marched up to Mike and offered him the cookies. At first, he initially declined, citing a personal policy of not accepting gifts from anyone. But Mary persisted and, after wishing him a merry Christmas, she came home.

The Bible says that we should love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

Jesus was once asked "Who is my neighbor?" In His story of the Good Samaritan, He demonstrates that our neighbor is one who has a need, whose need we see and seek to address in love and grace.

Mary saw that Mike's need was one of loneliness and estrangement from others and from the Lord. Who else has nothing else to do on Christmas morning than wash

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his car? Hers was a simple act of kindness, to a neighbor in need.

Mary's gesture was a demonstration of faithful witness – she ACTED Christianly toward Mike. I, on the other hand, wanted to stay clear of the man.

Before His ascension to heaven, Jesus said His disciples would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and even to the ends of the earth. In other words, to

people who were both near and far. No one exists outside the group of those to whom believers must witness, not even Mike.

Faithful witness is expressed in many ways: personal testimony, literature of various types, sermons, studies and, as indicated earlier, in what we say and how we say it.

And faithful witness includes ACTING Christianly through an expression of love, care, grace and concern. Faithful witness through Christian action, when undertaken by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, in obedience to God's word and flowing from a believer whose heart is softened toward others by God, can occur through the simplest acts of kindness and concern, even through the gift of a tin of Christmas cookies.

Acting Christianly is something far beyond generosity. It is a sign of Christian discipleship, of tenderness to those who may be lonely or in possession of needs that are very real but go unexpressed or are intentionally hidden.

Like the man who had fallen among thieves and was ignored by the priest and the Levite, two men of spiritual nature and profession, Mike was ignored by most people, myself included, due to his own antisocial and unsanctified temperament. But he was ignored all the same.

Mary is a follower of Jesus Christ, a student of His Word and a neighbor to someone who lives 75 yards away. She knows the story of the Good Samaritan and she knows how it ends. So, she heeded Jesus' words to "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10. 37).

That's faithful witness by acting Christianly.

# postscript

*Faithful witness is sometimes  
not forgotten.*

On Memorial Day 1975, I inched my U-Haul truck out of the drive of 75 West Street en route to my first pastoral call on Long Island. Our four years with Mr. and Mrs. Church had come to an end. Though sometimes challenging, it was with sadness that Mary and I drove away with the expectation of never seeing the Churches again.

In fact, I would return to Beverly Farms three times in the coming years. The first time was to conduct the wedding of one of the Church's daughters. I was happy to see the entire family again and the greeting I received was both warm and generous.

A second call came shortly thereafter, placed by one of the sons, Dickey, who informed me that his father had suffered a stroke and was in a coma. Dick needed moral support in standing against his mother and siblings who wanted to “pull the plug on Dad.”

Would I come to Boston to visit his dad? I gladly made the trip.

When I walked into his room at Mass General Hospital, I saw an unconscious, frail-looking, bed-ridden man. A stroke is the great equalizer, I thought; for all his stature and wealth, he was no different than anyone else near death. We prayed. Mr. Church recovered from the stroke and lived three more years.

The third call was the most surprising of all. Mrs. Church telephoned to tell me that “Freddie” had died. Would I come to Boston to conduct his funeral? I agreed.

The sanctuary of Harvard’s Memorial Church was packed to overflowing on the appointed day with Boston glitterati. The governor of Massachusetts was in attendance, along with the mayor of Boston, both U.S. senators from the Bay State, and political and business leaders. I recognized some names from newspaper reports. There were others whose homes I had cleaned and cars I had parked at social events in Beverly Farms.

I felt a good deal out of my element when I was greeted by Harvard’s relatively new chaplain and vocal opponent of American evangelicalism, the liberal theologian Peter Gomes.

I was a kid with little experience and newly ordained. These were not the social circles I grew up in. With the courage that comes to a 29-year-old from the Holy Spirit alone, when

I climbed the 15 steps into the “high pulpit,” I felt completely at ease. From my perch I surveyed the crowd below. I recognized that regardless of social standing, all were of the same condition – everyone needed Jesus.

After the service, as I was changing out of my clerical robe, there was a knock at the door. A distinguished looking gentleman entered the room. He identified himself as Henry Cabot

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Lodge, Jr., a two-time United States senator and ambassador to the Vatican.

“I just wanted to tell you that the service for Freddie was marvelous,” Mr. Lodge said. “What a wonderful message of comfort and hope. You lifted my friend up but more so, you lifted up the Savior and I thank you for that.”

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Faithful witness is sometimes not forgotten. My thinking, speaking and acting Christianly in the presence of the Church family had been the predicate for my invitations. It had made an impact on them and presented me with these additional opportunities to give witness to the glory of God.

While the ultimate goal of faithful witness is conversion, I suspect that more times than not we don’t see a conversion take place.

However, Jesus did not tell the disciples that they would be his “converters” but “witnesses” to His saving works and His desire that they be saved. Our job is to share what we know. It is the Holy Spirit’s job to do the converting.

Our witnessing for Jesus is always effective – it always “works.” Either the Holy Spirit will use our witness to bring people to faith in this world or, in the next life, as people stand before the judgment seat of Christ, our faithful witness will disqualify the plea of the unrepentant who says, “I didn’t know.”

I am reminded of the fifth verse of “His Faithfulness Can Never Fail,” the hymn I composed with Paul Jones:

*‘Till He returns He bids me “Go” with word  
and love, His kingdom seed;*

*to spread abroad the glad, Good News that  
in Christ met, is man’s great need.*

*God lives, God deigns, God speaks, God  
reigns, declaring strength and favor.*

*His faithfulness can never fail, not then,  
not now, not ever!*

# Lessons on renovating one's heart

What does it mean to be a faithful witness for Christ? That's the question Pastor Rick poses for us in this edition of *Scattered Seeds*. He's done a wonderful job outlining the ways we as followers of Christ can best bear witness in the world. To better image Christ in the world, one must think, speak, and act in ways that are consistent with a life in Christ.

Helping others to grow in Christlikeness is something that is fundamental to pastoral ministry. It's a subject Rick has been passionate about throughout his career, as my predecessor as senior pastor of Beverly Heights and as a mentor. I had the great privilege of serving under Rick for 15 years. Throughout that time, I observed a leader who modeled how to think, speak and act Christianly.

The first opportunity I had to spend time with Rick in an extended way was shortly after I arrived at Beverly Heights in 2004. Rick knew that I was discerning a call to ministry, so he invited me into a book study. He asked me to read Dallas Willard's *The Renovation of the Heart*.

When I finished, he scheduled an entire day so we could discuss Willard's book. While the discussion of ideas presented in the book was marvelous, better still

was the opportunity I had to observe Rick and his mind at work, and to watch how a pastor thinks.

Rick was serious in our discussion, working hard to understand the text as he ascended the lofty heights of Willard's theological philosophy. But he was also practical, having a sense of what was worthy of our attention for ministry and what wasn't.

Above all, Rick taught me to think *with* the mind of Christ. For Rick, thinking Christianly means a reliance on the Spirit of God to give us the mind of Christ, so that we may evaluate our world through Christ. Christian thinking is "in Christ thinking."

Rick also knows how to speak Christianly. His language is honest and holy. If you've ever heard Rick pray, you know the command he has over words and his ability to lead others into the presence of holiness.

Once a pastor friend of Rick was leading a group of pastors in a worship service at his church. When our meeting came to a close, he asked Rick to pray and I heard him say, "I often wish I could be as strong as Arnold Schwarzenegger, as handsome

as Robert Redford and to pray like Rick Wolling."

Though Rick can pray like the church fathers, his Christian language is never pious, never sanctimonious but always earthy and accessible. You feel led by Rick to meet Jesus when he speaks with you. His language is clear and Christian.

Rick acts Christianly. For 33 years he led our congregation in the way of Jesus. While helping me in my development as a young pastor, he wasn't afraid to challenge or correct me. Discipline is never enjoyable in the moment, as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, but I knew Rick's acts of correction were born out of his care for me. I was glad to listen, learn and grow.

I want us to stand on the broad shoulders of our predecessors in the faith here at Beverly Heights, so that we may continue the good work that was entrusted to leaders like Rick, and passed on to us, as we learn to lean into the Christian life together - thinking, speaking and acting like Christians.

***Nate Devlin is the eighth senior pastor of Beverly Heights Presbyterian Church since its founding in 1929, when the first, Robert W. Gibson, was called.***