

What Matters In the Light of Eternity:
 “Church Matters”
 Acts 20:25-32

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I love thy kingdom Lord,
 The house of Thine abode,
 The church our blest Redeemer saved
 With his own precious blood.

My heart resonates with those words penned by Timothy Dwight more than two hundred years ago. I love the church. A thousand sermons finely tuned could not express my gratitude, for all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become, I owe to the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church is of God and shall be preserved to the end of time and I would like to offer some reasons why.

THE CHURCH IS OF GOD AND SHALL BE PRESERVED UNTIL THE END OF TIME BECAUSE EVERYBODY NEEDS A PLACE TO BELONG.

Biologically humans are designed to be with other people. The need for community is written into our spiritual DNA. You are not called to be a lone ranger; you will never be happy living in isolation. The Church represents the largest association of people in the world.

Renowned preacher Fred Craddock had a deeply devoted mother and a highly skeptical father. His mother was a pillar of their community church. His father wanted nothing to do with it. New preachers would pay him a visit only to have Mr. Craddock snarl and say, “They just want another number on their rolls.” Lay people would visit, but Mr. Craddock was certain they only wanted his money, so he stayed home alone until he got sick, deathly sick. Fred said, “I flew home to see him. His room was covered with cards and flowers sent from the church. The refrigerator was full of food made by church members. Fred said when I walked into Dad’s room he motioned for me to come to his bedside.” In a voice that was barely a whisper Mr. Craddock said, “Tell them I was wrong.” “Wrong about what?” asked Fred. “Wrong about the church,” said Mr. Craddock. “At my funeral, tell them I was wrong.”

The Church is far from perfect. How could it be perfect? People like you and me are members. Groucho Marx said, “I wouldn’t want to be a member of any church who would have me as a member.” Fred Allen said, “The first time I sang in the choir, two hundred people changed their religious affiliation.” Guru’s now

market their start-up churches as churches for those who hate church. It will be interesting to see if their negativism lasts.

The Church is not a museum of saints, but a hospital for sinners. We are not perfect people to be put on a pedestal; we are sinners saved by grace trying to learn the Christian life.

Churches are filled with people who still have a long way to go. Some have unstable backgrounds, poor role models, a history of tragedy and disappointment. You are burdened with insecurities, hypersensitivity, lack of self-confidence. Compared with smug, secure, non-believers, you can't hold a light, but you have found your way to church. This is a saving place, a healing place, a place for the wounded and the broken-hearted. I hope you feel welcomed. As for me, the Church has been my place to be. It took me in and held me close and gave me a place to serve and use my God-given talents and gifts. I want to thank you, the people who populate the Church for pouring out your love, affirming my abilities, and being willing to follow the leadership of a country boy from Kentucky. I thank God for the Church.

THE CHURCH IS OF GOD AND SHALL BE PRESERVED TO THE END OF TIME BECAUSE EVERYBODY NEEDS TO KNOW WHO JESUS IS.

The main challenge of the Church is to make the main thing, the main thing. Jesus came to see and save the lost. Jesus is the reason for the Church. He has no other outlet to make disciples of His way. Jazz musician Fats Waller's father was a minister. Wanting to help his dad, he often wrote spiritual songs that could be used in church. One has a line that goes, "Everything that is not of Jesus will go down."

Rock solid commitment to Christ is the only sure foundation for any church. Otherwise it will be ripped apart by the hard storms without or it will crumble and fall apart by decay from within. Every worship service we conduct, every Sunday school class we convene, every small group we establish, every choir or mission trip we take, need to have as its stated and embraced purpose the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what I have tried to bring to the pulpit of this church, a solid, relevant, life-transforming Christology. From the e-mails I receive, some of you are getting it. Christ himself is Christianity.

Christ is our Savior. I rejoice that as an eleven year old kid I gave my life to Christ and I have never wavered nor regretted that decision. He has done so much more for me that I could ever do for Him. I didn't understand all the mysteries of the Atonement and why the Church seemed obsessed by being washed in the Blood, but I knew I needed a friend and that I could have a friend in Jesus that means everything to me. Jesus my Savior gives me the glad assurance of heaven and the wonderful gift of eternal life on earth. Have you accepted Him as your Savior?

In more recent years, I have tried to accept Him as Lord of my life, the Master of my fate, the Captain of my soul. I have tried to ask what He would do and act accordingly.

A business man at a hotel grew weary and tired of being yelled at and sprayed with angry spittle from dissatisfied customers who expected five star services from a Motel 6. One day he got an idea. He placed a giant mirror behind the front desk and customer tirades all but ceased. When people saw how rude and hateful they looked while yelling and screaming, they stopped yelling and screaming. Turn your eyes on Jesus. Would you let Jesus be the mirror of your life? Be prepared to change.

THE CHURCH IS OF GOD AND SHALL BE PRESERVED TO THE END OF TIME, SO THAT EVERYBODY CAN SERVE THEIR NEIGHBORS AS THEMSELVES.

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Have you discovered that?

Nancy Ortberg tells about her oldest daughter coming home from Sunday evening worship deeply affected by something she had experienced in worship. It was a word from the Lord, and she had written it on a piece of paper so not to forget. The statement was this. “Help me not to be O.K. just because everything is O.K. with me.” That’s why self-centered, self-righteous people often feel conflicted in church. Church is not all about them. They have yet to understand why.

The Church calls us to do more than just talk a good game. Christianity is not just a creed we profess; it is a lifestyle we live. It affects the way we act, the way we think, the way we speak, the way we work, the way we live, and the way we treat other people.

The Lord and I had an argument not long ago. I wanted to know why He would cut my ministry short when He had introduced so many ideas into the life of this church that remain in their infancy. Here was His reply. “If you lived to be seventy, you would have more unfinished business than you have at sixty-three. Besides, the rise and fall of these ministries are not dependent upon you. So sweep out your self-pity and check your ego at the door, take up your cross and follow me.” Does God ever talk to you like that? Sometimes we need to remember who is in charge here!

THE CHURCH IS OF GOD AND SHALL BE PRESERVED TO THE END OF TIME FOR GOD’S KINGDOM TO COME ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.

What makes me optimistic about the Church is that I see signs of liberals and conservatives, local churches and whole denominations investing in the severe needs of the world.

Yes, the government has a part, but the political structures cannot cure the ills of our time. Government, by its very nature, is limited in what it can do and the

changes it can make. What it often perpetuates is its own power and its own bureaucracies.

Churches, on the other hand, are able to minister at local levels and by calling are interested in feeding the hungry, serving the poor, and leaving no child behind. The time is right for a new partnership to emerge to meet the social needs of our society. This does not mean accumulation of power and jockeying for political position. This means a cup of cold water in Jesus' name without the state getting so upset that it is in Jesus' name. It is the Church taking care of released prisoners which greatly lowers the return rate. It is the Church investing in the least and lost without losing its soul to politics. It is why we are working in Tumbleweed, South Africa and Harvest Hands in Nashville. We cannot ignore the cry of the needy.

What a wonderful time to be a part of the Christian Church, God's best hope for humanity. It matters in the light of eternity.

Amen.