



A Church on Every Corner

Do not let your deeds belie your words, lest when you speak in church someone may say to himself, 'Why do you not practice what you preach?'

- Saint Jerome, Letter church father & saint (374 AD - 419 AD)

My locality is part of the *Bible-belt*. If you do not know, this region is perhaps characterized by a strong or significant Evangelical influence manifested by many churches and other related statistics. This designation may only apply in political or demographic context; but has its foundation in the *Great Awakening* and the many revivals and spiritual events that transpired during and following that period of the early 1800's. Having limited my residence to a relatively small segment of this region and having little or no formal background or education in theology, I approach this story of my soul with some degree of caution and reverence. The matter of religion – and specifically Christianity – is a sensitive subject for which such an approach is important, even essential. Therefore, I ask (and pray) that the content is framed in the right intention and purpose for what should be redeeming, and not condemning, to the *Bible Belt* and a church on every corner.

The church building or structures that represent a church is not really the focus of my story because such structures do not actually represent the church or body of believers. A church is the members and participants that make-up or even visit this place be it a dedicated building, a rented or borrowed space, or even a tent or outdoor pavilion. Where the congregants meet is where the church can be found; so if any number of people come together to worship, than the church is in session. Even with the clear distinction between buildings and churches, scripture bears-out that each member of the body of Christ is a temple of God and, therefore, can still represent this body in solo. In both the singular and plural representation of temples is the essential presence of Christ in the form of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is the temple(s) Helper – the presence of Christ that has been poured-out or released as God's directive and purpose from the early church of Acts.

Within the general collection of Christian churches or denominations are different beliefs and practices – or doctrine – stemming from interpretation of the scriptures and, in



particular, the New Testament with its Gospels and Epistles. Centuries of differing interpretations have led to a fractional New Testament church or *Bride of Christ*. Considering the church in the rough, the body is much divided – rather than united – by these centuries of doctrinal distinction, human interpretation and translation of the Bible. With this prescribed position is the opportunity to speak as a layperson and nothing more; to risk the chance of being wrong but, at the same time, to venture into a subject and institution that is far more complex than any and all of the writings presently in the these stories.

Trying to place myself in a position of one completely unfamiliar with a network of churches would be the best course to convey the described complexity – as though never exposed to the Christian churches and consequently confused by the shear diversity and division. Churches are divided by their creeds and covenants, by their communities and commerce, and by a host of idiosyncrasies sometimes represented by the minor differences in the name, prefix or suffix. Some years ago, I was able to learn some history of the church in North America – its branching and lineage – through a new members’ class at a Presbyterian church (United Presbyterian of America; not USA). But as will likely be a refrain in this story, I beg your forbearance in my comments – as the aim is to convey a perspective for the call of the church in our locality – not a critique or condemnation of the *Bride of Christ*. On this refrain and a line of the personal and prescribed conviction of Paul (of Tarsus), I *press-on toward* an explanation, a description of *this upward call*...



In the not to distant history, a military might sound the alarm with the phrase, “Call to Arms”. Such a signal was the response to either an immediate threat or the general or publicized summon of the populace to serve – volunteer, conscripted, or otherwise. With some association to this selfless sense of devotion and duty – and by example of Christ and his sacrifice – the church has been the institution for the call of many *armored Christian soldiers*.

In keeping with the military analogy, these buildings might be thought of as a fort or garrison – a refuge or safe haven for those in need of protection or care. Consider the



example of one of the oldest churches in the locality, the First Presbyterian Church of Jacksonville. At the time of its construction, or around 1837, the church building was among the first in the town and the surrounding locality; and later served as a hospital during the Civil War. Without knowing the extent of the hospital's service, I can imagine the pews filled with the wounded and dying, the stretcher bearers, medical and church staff interposed – all fulfilling this call in some form and degree. Yes, the building was at center of this

wartime hospital – but what value would have it served in actually caring for the wounded and dying? The care and compassion came from the hearts of those who contributed to this immediate need – whether for one side or the other of the conflict – and their salvation from physical and perhaps spiritual



death. As Christ had compassion for the multitudes, as expressed in healing and physical care, so too should the soldiers of the garrison, the church. The *Bride of the Way*, the church is compassionate, a *Good Samaritan*.



Fort or by any similar name, the church and its extensions are perpetual training camps for the soldiers of Christ and, as with Christ activity in the temple, should be about teaching and equipping soldiers for the ever present and pervasive spiritual battles. “Extensions” have or can be homes that, as the residence of the body's members, are also co-ops – both of its residence or family, and visitors on occasion. In the continued analogy of the military, think of the church like the fort and the homes like the outposts – working as network to build the strength of fellowship along with individual minds and hearts. Taking the verse from Hebrews, *a builder is more valuable than the building anytime*, the place is not as important as the people and those who pastor them.



Still, the building or a building is important and, as with any investment, should be well utilized. But what seems to be the rule is that church buildings are underutilized – though often well-equipped and accommodating for full-time or extended use. Accessibility and support of home-schools, scouts or similar Para-Christian groups work well in increasing both utilization and training opportunities among other benefits. With church buildings often among the best a town has to offer, utilization has so many present and eternal benefits that a lockable door seems inappropriate.

Whether as directed by or through the church body, truth should be the purpose or objective in all teaching whether of the Gospel, Biblical content, lifestyle or similar training. Of course, Pilate’s question comes to mind, “What is truth?” in considering all possibilities – both directed and allowed by the church. Since the answer is not unanimous or consistent among all churches – by way of doctrine and other – I will simply reply with my simple response. Christ is truth and, therefore, let all teaching be based on that fact as well as his place as savior. Whether as a course on Old Testament or a quilting bee, all meetings or functions must begin in prayer giving thanks and praise for God’s truth and salvation, Christ. On this foundation and with the broader outreach to the community, the *Bride* of Truth is a teacher and mentor with open office hours.



A casual drive through this locality will inevitably include older church buildings along with the customary cemetery on property. Understanding that this arrangement was common in the last century, the casual observance gives reason to pause and consider the deeper meaning and reason(s) for this practice. Great and historical church buildings, as well as the more basic structures of bygone eras, included the ceremonial burial and internment of clergy in crypts; but also sanctioned exterior property for the common clergy and congregants if so considered for a burial site. Exclusion of these arrangements in the modern era suggests the result of municipal zoning, state law or other conditions that require the segregation of the dead from the living in Christ; but such may not be reason as the practice continues in the burial grounds of these older properties.

Not far away, and sitting about halfway between two townships, is an old Methodist Church called Four Mile. The church building is the classic white framed



structure with steeple, chimes a cemetery dating back to the 1700's. On a recent visit to this church and walk about the grounds, I soon realized the heritage that lies resting while a few of the remaining worship inside; and besides the historical interests came a moment to reflect on this deeper meaning and reason(s).

End-time prophecies, scripture and commentary describe events to include the rising of the dead from their graves or places of physical death. This supernatural event will include a judgment – by God of course – and the final verdict for each and all, the living and the dead through the ages. In



the book of Revelation, John describes such events as does the Old Testament in the Book of Daniel. In brief, the message or foretelling deems these dead and buried in body as much alive in soul; hence, God's judgment on each and all with a verdict of either eternity or final death. From a spiritual perspective, the graveside is not a place of the dead but of the living – just as those of us who remain alive physically for what purpose(s) God has for us.

The word “life” or “live” is often applied to church bodies whether in the name or by assessment of some sort. A church might be named “Word of Life” while another “Word Alive”; or by some assessment of health or well-being, a church body may be deemed as dying if the body is decreasing in membership or outreach. Whether by name or assessment, life or living connotes that the body is well, growing and maturing. Such a desired health of the church is keeping with the purpose or *Great Commission* given to church through the Gospel of Matthew and in other passages. For those who are spiritually alive – which really comes down to the individual heart and not the entire or general body – eternity with Christ is the reward.

What's in a name is not really important – but rather what's in the heart. As for assessment, the human perspective is subject to pitfalls and error. Putting ourselves on



the judgment seat is an easy pitfall that may erroneously rank one church as alive and the other dead on the basis of worship style or music. Again, human perspective is dangerous and therefore should be kept in check of individuals let alone an entire church body. What should be the course is to understand that each of us is individually accountable – or were accountable while still alive in the body – and therefore will have to answer to God on that *Great and Dreadful Day*.

About the only time that such assessment is truly right is when the church building is clearly vacant or left for ruin. Without the complications of church body, the designation of dead becomes rather droll by the blatant evidence or condition of the once-occupied building. One example is a classic-clapboard chapel located at nearby BRAC or closed military post. Evidently among the earliest-built of the remaining buildings, this church building seems to have weathered the storms judging from paint and surrounding barracks of similar construction and era. Anyone can clearly see that this



church body is dead but as for any such church that still accommodates people; well, let's leave that one to God and simply pray for the brethren as Paul did for church bodies of his day.

Within the same BRAC property – which was once truly a fort or garrison – are other churches in various states. A new church has been constructed – which is actually the cities First Baptist Church relocated from the old part of town to the new site. Not far from this new church (or new location) is an old building being renovated for another local church body poised to move from a rented structure to an owned





structure. This church is not purely Baptist or any other mainline denomination; but is an interdenominational church made up of college students, families and similar. One church has relocated to a new building; the other church plans to relocate to an old church that is being renovated for ownership. In either case, my assessment of the life (or death) is worthless – as I am a human perspective and nothing more. In keeping with the *value of the builder over the building* however is the realization that – no matter the status or condition of the building – a church should *live* in the understanding of the Psalter who says that “unless the Lord builds the house, it builders labor in vain...” So regardless of the structure, the body must live for Christ both in the physical of the present and spiritual here and forever. The *Bride of Life*, the church is the individual heart in fellowship with other kindred hearts of the *Light in men*, Christ.



This year, two of the largest denominations are celebrating their 200th anniversary in the state; the Methodist with 1,500 churches and the Baptist with over 5,000 churches. Combine these mainlines with other Christian churches and you have one facet of the *Bible Belt* and a church on every corner. Even with such numbers however, the need to be the *Bride of the Way, the Truth and the Life* is becoming increasingly challenging against our changing culture and society. History has had its blemishes to be sure – with such maladies as racism and bigotry – but on balance, these *End Times* are ticking away and perhaps with it, the *Bible Belt*.

When *hard pressed on every side*, the early church was not crushed; rather, it blossomed or spread throughout the land – as suffering brought strength rather than weakness like *gold refined in fire*. In those times, certain leaders stood in the gap with encouragement and boldness expressed directly and by letter. Such encouragement comes in many forms – all of which is ultimately derived from God who *lifts us up with his mighty hand*. For me, such encouragement came recently in the form of a song to the tune of *Ash Grove*. For your possible encouragement, I close with a few lines of the version: We turn from the world, with its smiles and scorning, to cast in our lot with the people of God... He'll lead us at last to His kingdom above.