

## The Church: Assessing Its Worth

*Acts 2:1-21; Matthew 13:44-46*

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church  
Greensboro, North Carolina

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As we all know by now, whether we knew it as we entered the sanctuary or not, today is Pentecost Sunday. It is figuratively and literally a red-letter day in the life of the church and one of the few days in the liturgical year where we wear red stoles and hang red paraments. Like some other churches in recent years we even encourage our members to wear red on this Sunday for among other things Pentecost Sunday is celebrated as “the birthday of the Christian Church.” When the Holy Spirit descended upon the gathered disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem, waiting as directed until Jesus’ promised gift of the Spirit came upon them, it was a glorious and awed-inspiring event — too mysterious and wonderful to describe adequately in human speech. A rushing wind, tongues of fire, a cacophony of languages and voices telling of the wonderful works of God. From that upper room, empowered and energized by the Holy Spirit the Apostles began to move out into the city of Jerusalem, then into Judea, then Samaria, and ultimately to the very ends of the earth according to the *Acts 1:8*. Through the influence of these spirit-filled followers of Jesus the world started being “turned upside down” through the witness and work of the church.

And so today we rightly celebrate the birth of the church and its continuing life and witness, even as we recall what the church has meant to the life of the world, the life of the nation, and the life of its members. It would be hard to overstate the contributions of the church of Jesus Christ to the betterment of human kind over the succeeding centuries. It is a heritage worth knowing, worth preserving and worth continuing.

And yet, I worry about the state and the future of the church and I question whether we truly value and cherish the church which has been handed down and entrusted to us. Maybe you are blissfully unaware of the challenges before the church today. Maybe you just assume that because it has always been here it will always be here. Maybe you have never seriously examined the character of your own discipleship the quality of your commitment, or the inherent worth you attach to the church in your own life. Today I would invite you to do that for your own sake as well as for the sake of this congregation facing challenges of its own, as we prepare for new leadership that will soon be taking up these challenges.

According to a Pew Research study conducted in 2015, here are some of the startling discoveries which we ignore at our own peril.

- Despite overall United States population growth, the total number of mainline Protestant adults has decreased by roughly 5 million between 2007 and 2014.
- Between 80% and 90% of all congregations in America are either stagnant or declining.
- Over 20,000 pastors left the ministry in 2012.

- A survey of over 1,000 pastors indicates that 71% are burned out and/or battling depression beyond fatigue, and 48% would leave their churches today if they could get another job.
- Pastors often feel isolated and alone and discouraged. In fact, 50% of newly ordained, protestant pastors leave the ministry within the first 5 years after ordination.

Nothing so disappoints and discourages pastors, especially younger pastors, than the seeming cavalier, nonchalant, apathetic attitude toward the church and its life and work. I've seen it here too. Projects are worked on, money invested, preparation arduously and passionately undertaken but no one shows up and enthusiasm fades. Disenchantment wedges its way into one's very sense of call.

I remember having those same feeling when I was a young, enthusiastic, perhaps idealistic pastor. I had been happily serving a congregation for eight years with no thoughts of moving on to my next call. In fact, a much larger church had asked if I would come interview with them and I declined. Six months later an elder, now deceased asked if I would address a very difficult issue in a sermon and I promised to do so the very next week. I labored for days over that sermon but the elder who made the request was absent on that day. When I called to inquire about it he explained that the only tee time he could get on Sunday was at 11:30AM so he had to miss church. I hung up and immediately called the chair of the search committee that had approached me and said I am ready to talk if you are still interested. They were, and I left for a new work. Maybe it was a precipitous decision. Maybe I was nursing my hurt feeling too much, but church leaders know only too well that apathy and skewed priorities and mediocrity are abhorrent to the Lord and deadly for his church.

We say that we want to be *"a church of growing disciples for growing disciples,"* a worthy goal and a challenging mission. I like it! I can get behind that mission, but it will never become a reality unless we revive our discipleship and build up congregational vitality. It takes disciples to make disciples. It always has, and it always will.

We say that we want to reach out to young adults and young families and engage them in our life and work, but this will not be achieved by calling a young pastor and expecting her or him to be some kind of Pied Piper. It will take nothing less than a vital and committed congregation that is focused on service and witness to a waiting world in distress. A Lutheran pastor told me last year that of the 83 million millennials in American today only 15% are active in a church or synagogue. Our task is tremendous to be sure but nothing to compare with the task given to the early church beginning on Pentecost to go into all the world with the gospel and the Spirit's empowerment.

So, what does the church mean to you? What are you really celebrating today? What are you personally committed to as a professed disciple and member of Christ's church? What value do you attach to the church?

In the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation the risen Christ warns and admonishes various churches about the character of their life and witness. The two that may be most applied to lethargic churches today are the letter to the church at Ephesus where we read:

*"I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first." (2:4-5a)*

Or the letter to the church in Sardis:

*“I know your works. You have the reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.” (3:1b-2)*

Maybe even more concerning is the letter to the church in Laodicea:

*“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm ...I will spit you out of my mouth.”*

So, what does the church mean to you really? What is its worth? And how would you go about assessing its worth?

If you believe the scriptures are reliable and authoritative, there is an objective way, I suppose, of assessing its worth. We can see what the Bible says about it. And what do we find?

The church is called the very “bride of Christ” for whom he gave up his life. Jesus considers the church as a gift from God for which he was grateful and for whom he prayed. At the end of his life, on the night of his arrest, according to John 17 Jesus prays fervently for those believers present and future who had been entrusted to him as a gift. He prays for their unity, their protection and their mission. Jesus loved the church unconditionally and sacrificially. That ought to tell us something about the worth of the church, right?

Elsewhere in the New Testament the church of Jesus Christ is referred to as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God.” (1 Peter 2:9). Paul refers to the church as the very “body of Christ,” as “citizens of the kingdom,” and the “children of light,” and “co-workers with Christ.” Elsewhere God’s kingdom people, his church are described as “the flock of God,” “the assembly of the saints,” “God’s heritage.” “the temple of the living god.” Clearly in the Bible the church is considered those “chosen by the Lord and precious” as one hymn writer put it. Without question Jesus Christ loved and valued the church enough to die for it.

How important, how valuable is the kingdom of God and the citizens of that kingdom who constitute the church? Let us consider the two brief parables we read this morning. In the first, the parable of the hidden treasure, we see that the assessment of the kingdom’s worth is like a man who discovers a buried treasure in a field and is so overjoyed by his unexpected find that he reburies it and goes and sells everything else that he might purchase the field and claim its treasure.

In the second parable, the pearl of great price, a pearl collector seeking valuable gems finds in his search an exquisite pearl of supreme worth and incomparable beauty. Gladly and willingly the merchant sells everything else he has that he might have the one thing that was his life’s desire and the goal of his searching.

Jesus, ever the master storyteller, must have known the human appeal and hope of finding unexpectedly a treasure beyond all treasures. Who has not dug in the sand at the seashore hoping to uncover some buried treasure? Who has not dreamed of finding some lost or misplaced treasure. Two years ago, 68-year-old Jimmie Smith in New York looked in an old shirt’s pocket and found a lottery ticket. He took it in to a store and discovered it was worth \$24 million and only two days left to claim his prize.

Now it seems clear that both Jesus' parables here are making the same point. There is in life a highest good, a *summum bonum*, an ultimate joy and treasure that awaits our discovery and allegiance. Jesus calls it the kingdom of God (or heaven.) It is present whenever an individual totally dedicates himself or herself to God, to the reign and rule of God in his own life and in the world, to that community "chosen and precious" that is serving that King and helping to usher in his kingdom. I understand that the Kingdom of God and the Church of Jesus Christ are not necessarily synonymous. And yet, we believe that the church ought to be an "exhibition of the Kingdom of God to the world!" So, they are intimately related. That, according to our Presbyterian constitution is one of "the great ends of the church."

Some people are like the man in the field almost stumble upon the hidden treasure. They find God, or better, are found by God when they least expect it. Others, like the pearl merchant, spend their lives in search of life's most precious possession. The church is composed of both kinds of people who come to possess the greatest treasure, a life with Christ and his servants.

The Lord says in *Romans 10:20*: "I as found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." These people may never have sought God, but they may never have found it necessary. They were born into a Christian home, nurtured in the church, taught from birth to love and serve God and neighbor. They may have struggled at times with questions and doubts and they may have transitioned from their parents' faith in some ways, but they never lost sight of the joyful truth that God is alive and loving and active and there is a priceless value in living under his lordship and being a part of his redeemed community.

Then again, others may never engage in a search for the king and his kingdom, yet God intervenes in their life when they were caught off-guard. In some Damascus Road-like experience they are confronted and claimed by the living God. A book is read, a sermon heard, an experience occurs and life and faith "do an about face." There is repentance and faith, a new allegiance, a new commitment, and one suddenly knows they belong to the King and his kingdom and the ultimate and most priceless gift has been received.

Still others, some folks like the pearl merchant are never satisfied by life's lesser prizes and pleasures. They know a hunger they cannot name, a thirst they cannot quench, and thus a quest and a search are undertaken. And when and if they discover it, it diminishes all those other gifts and treasures they once prized. Like the Apostle Paul they can say of all those things previously enjoyed and cherished which he gave up, "I count it all as loss, as garbage, when compared with the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (*Phil.3*)

So, what do the king and his kingdom mean to you? What are Christ and his church worth to you? Well, if you need more than the words of scripture and the life and teachings of Jesus, you can turn from an objective to a subjective test. How genuine, how passionate, how joyful, how faithful is your devotion to Christ and his church? Before a new pastor arrives, this would be a propitious and fitting time to renew your vows of commitment to Christ and his church, to re-up for a new season of service, and to move Christ and his church to a pre-eminent place in your life, in your marriage, in your family, in your work, in your finances, and in your politics. Our God is a jealous God and will not abide being rejected or ignored. If Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior and if you intend to be among the disciples, then this decision is not just one among many. It is the major decision and the preeminent commitment of life and it represents life's greatest gift and most cherished possession. Do not take it lightly or be casual and

nonchalant about the things of God. God deserves your best. So too does the church and the servant-leader you will call to help you live out your faith and commitment.

In conclusion, there is yet another way to assess the church's value, but I hope and pray we will never learn its value this way. And that is to consider what would be missing from your life, from your community and your world if the church should fail or disappear.

I told you last week of the new initiative by the Presbyterian Mission Agency challenging congregations to become one of many *Matthew 25* churches, which commits to working intentionally on reviving congregational vitality. An article on this states':

*You might think that the vitality of a congregation or worshiping community is based on the number of members, the scope of programs, the size of financial gifts or some other statistics. Not so — at least not entirely. Rather, a community's vitality is primarily its spiritual strength and its capacity for purposeful mission.*

*"You judge vitality by how many people will miss the church if it is no longer there," Moffett said.*

I am convinced that among the things you will miss if the church fail's is the freedom we enjoy in this democratic society. There is not time to deal with this today, but I am convinced that our political freedom lives or dies with sound religion. A couple of years ago the North Carolina head football coach, Larry Fedora, made the astounding claim that if football goes down so does American. No one loves football more than me but, coach, I beg to differ. America rises or falls with church and on the Sunday after the 4th of July I intend to deal with this. I hope you will be present to consider the message.