

“The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

Essential #6

God's People: You can't live with them,
God won't let you live without them.

1 Peter 2:1-5; 9-12 (NIV)

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ²Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house ^[b]to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹²Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

The words “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation” make church members sound as though they were some kind of superspiritual elite, don't they? But is the church, *are we*, actually a loving, saintly community? Do we live lives of unimpeachable virtue and unfailing consideration of others?

The truth is that the behavior of the church is the greatest hindrance to people's belief in God. People are not driven away from the Christian faith most frequently because it is illogical and asks them to take things on faith, they are driven away because the hypocrisy, unkindness, and legalism that characterizes the church's life as a community makes the faith *unappealing*. As a person who has been dedicated for a majority of my life to full-time service in the church, I say with conviction that the church has been the most frustrating part of my walk with God.

By and large, my frustration is not due to individual Christians. Yes, I have met Christians who were bitter and bigoted (those would be present in any group), but the majority of the Christians I have known were *nice*. As individuals believers are usually kind, pleasant, and even generous, and it is not hard to believe that they are *born again*. So why is the church as a group so disappointing?

In my lifetime, I have seen the Church as a corporate reality involved in the following: Scams, as the Christian Pyramid schemes; cover-ups, protection of abusers; and genocide—and not once, but multiple times each, implicating churches of every size and every denomination or non-denomination. As churches we have defamed the name and reputation of God in every possible way—including our participation in partisan politics.

Peter writes that we are *corporately* a “Holy Priesthood.” I am tempted to respond, “You have got to be kidding, Peter.”

Such is the disappointment in the church that many want to cut it from the list of Christian essentials. Many contemporary Biblical scholars say that the actual, historical Jesus had no intention of founding the church. They point out that instead of preaching people's involvement in a church, Jesus preached about the coming of the Kingdom of God. Many theologians say that Jesus has nothing to do with today's church, and that instead God's Spirit moves among people at the margins of society, people who are not and never will be church members. Both the scholars and the theologians are right to deny Jesus's involvement with the church, if the church is understood as an *institution or organization*.

So, how does the Bible reconcile the mess that the church is in, to the idea that it is an essential component of Christian belief? I believe the Bible makes essentially three points.

In the first place, not everything that calls itself *church* actually *is*. In fact, I venture to say that NO institution, NO building, NO organization, NO denomination is truly a church to God's mind. The only entity truly worthy of the designation is a group of believers that are seeking to come near to Jesus, and only what they do together to approach God (sometimes by serving others) can be called church work. Invariably, what we think of as church work and what God thinks of as church work is different. In general, we care about the decisions we make together, but God cares about the *way* we make the decisions. For example, suppose that a small church in Houston was facing a need to replace its aged air conditioning system. There are multiple decisions that the church *could* make, all of them drastic. The members of the congregation would focus on the decision itself, but the reason that God allows them to go through such a crisis—one that could well jeopardize their very existence as an institution—is to create a lab where **love** might grow in the midst of difficult circumstances. There have been many moments in the *administration* of our church as an institution in which we were all aware that we were not acting as Church. On the other hand, I have experienced church "failure" and found that in the midst of failure new life was born.

Please notice that since God has revealed Himself as *Love*, I cannot succeed in coming nearer to God in *isolation*. It may seem to many of us that we can achieve greater spiritual awareness or personal holiness by ourselves, but the search for God without a community to share in that search leads us to find a God who dwells only in our imagination—even if our imaginations have stuck closely to the Bible to shape such a God. This is the case because God's love is . . . *heroic!* God places me in a fellowship that will require me to learn to love *heroically*. We shop around for a congregation that meets our needs and whose ideals, values, and methods match ours, thinking that we will find a group that is compatible with us. Inevitably, though, we find warts, sin, selfishness, and crises present in whatever church we join. This is not just the devil at work, it is God pressing us to come near to Him through the experience of *heroic* love, the kind of love that loves the undeserving and unattractive. We have been told that the church is a voluntary association, but the marvelous thing about it is that it leads us to voluntarily associate with people and circumstances that we would otherwise avoid.

The second point that I draw from what the Bible says about the church is that if this is a spiritual elite, it is a curious elite that follows a reject who seeks rejects. Consider, if you will, Tom DeLay the man who became the House Whip when the Republicans took the House in 1994. He was roughly the Adam Schiff of the Republican Party in the impeachment of Bill Clinton, and he represented the district where I live. All things considered, I am frequently sympathetic to Republicans, but Mr. DeLay's heavy-handed political maneuvering (his nickname was "the Hammer") never sat well with me. I confess, therefore, to a certain degree of satisfaction when Mr. DeLay ran into trouble over alleged corruption. As I was inwardly gloating over a particular news report on his troubles one day, along with the majority of the American people and probably the majority of the members of his own party, the thought occurred to me, "what if Mr DeLay belonged to your church?" Instantly, I realized that as his pastor I would have to stand with him and by him. You may not be able to love the sin, but you are obligated to love the sinner, especially if he belongs to your own church—this is an essential part of being a church.

The problem is that the true church is composed of those who *have* experienced grace and are drawing near to God and those who *will experience* grace in the future and are drawing near to God without realizing it. This is why the farmer in Jesus's parable about the wheat and the weeds tells his servants to let both grow together until the harvest—some people only experience God's grace at the very end of a long (and sometimes bitter) church membership, yet they are always truly part of the church.

Those who do not yet understand grace invariably substitute law (guidelines, procedures, moral standards) for it. The law, any law, invariably ends up excluding those “rejects” that Jesus (who is always in some degree being rejected by those who are building the institutions, organizations, and denominations) is trying to reach. Those who *have* experienced grace may also end up excluding others because they tend to believe that *everybody* should experience grace *in the same way*. During the final years of the persecution of the church by the Roman Empire, some priests and bishops were required to hand over the church’s copies of the Scriptures, otherwise they would be responsible for the torture and death of their parishioners. Many gave in, and handed over the Scriptures. After the persecution was over, some of those who had not given in or whom the persecution had passed over, argued that there was a need for a “pure” church, one that was not tainted with “treason” or compromise. These folks formed their own fellowship. Oddly enough, though, any church that seeks to be “pure” by excluding the “impure” always ends up excluding Jesus as well, because Jesus is always in the process of identifying with the impure.

Don’t ever forget that this passage in 1 Peter that calls us a “royal priesthood” is the very same passage that asks us to consider ourselves “aliens and exiles.”

The third point that I draw from what the Bible teaches about the church is that because there are *actually* those who truly do seek to come near God, and because coming near to God requires *repentance* (a change in attitude), the church is never content to remain the way it is. The church is always a self-critical enterprise. The church is a group dedicated to the pursuit of God, which inevitably entails the pursuit of excellence in *community*.

Consider how many good developments in the history of humanity have been born in the church. The style of community life known as monasticism that was solely responsible for preserving civilization during the Dark Ages, the movement for the Abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement in the USA in the 1960’s, the idea of equality and rights for women, and even the idea of International Law were all significant contributions that the church has made to humanity. Even distinguished contributions by individuals: the art of Michelangelo, the music of Bach, the literature of Austen, the Brontes, Alcott, and Beecher Stowe, were demonstrably only made possible in settings which the church provided.

We, the church, bumble along, struggling against our own selfish passions and incompetence, ranking low in the opinion of the world and in our own opinion—until the time which Peter describes as the day of *visitation*. This is the time when something happens: a natural disaster, an economic crisis, a tragedy; that sets everyone to look for help and for an answer from God. On the day of visitation the church usually shines, precisely because its response is not primarily *institutional* (like the government) but *relational*. It is at such times that we are revealed as—a chosen race, yet not racist—a royal priesthood, yet not political or legalistically “religious”—a holy nation, that does not consider itself holier than others nor is it seeking independence from them.

Brothers and sisters, as the church our secret is that we have been made special simply because we are held together by Him who loved us *heroically* and who would have us love others *heroically* on our quest to draw near to Him.