

THINGS TO TEACH YOUR CHILDREN: Jesus Loves the Church

Seventh in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin from I Peter 1:22-25 and 2:1-10

“You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” I Peter 2:5

In the late afternoon of December 29, 1940, as dusk turned to twilight and then to night, air raid sirens sounded across London. Blackout curtains snapped shut, external lamps were extinguished, and Londoners by the thousands hurried to the safety of bomb shelters and the Underground tunnels. Soon the drone of heavy bombers could be heard on the air, and then the long arms of searchlights began relentlessly sweeping the skies, and the boom-boom-boom of the anti-aircraft guns began, pumping out their porous wall of flak. But it was not enough. For soon the first of ten thousand incendiary devices began to rain on central London, depositing fiery cancer into hundreds of ancient buildings, many of which had stood since the last great fire of London 300 years before. Fire crews rallied but were soon overwhelmed as each individual blaze linked with its neighbor and ignited block after block in a roaring storm of fire. Among the losses were eight churches, masterpieces by the great architect, Christopher Wren. It was Britain's history and culture that was being consumed that night.

In the center of it all stood St. Paul's Cathedral, the boldest of all Wren's creations. Its great dome, constructed of wood and covered by lead sheathing, had been the symbol of God's presence in England for two and a half centuries, and this was the target of the German master planners. For if St. Paul's could be destroyed, something in the heart and soul of the nation would perish with it. The Dean of St. Paul's commanded a small force of volunteer firefighters who scrambled across the roof and supports of the building, stomping out each small fire as it fell, and pouring water on the hot spots that threatened to eat into the interior.

But the conflagration around the cathedral now served as a bright beacon for the second wave of bombers, the ones that carried the heavy explosives. These would bring the buildings down, drive the fire fighters back, and spread the blaze until London itself would lie a charred ruin. And the tactic seemed to work. The fires spread, the flames leaped high into the night. And the noose began closing around St. Paul's itself. Then came the order from the Prime Minister: "Save St. Paul's!" Churchill commanded. "Pull the fire crews back, surround the cathedral. St. Paul's must not burn!" And through narrow gaps in the walls of flame, they came with their hoses and pumps, beating back the voracious enemy. Still the dome stood, high, untouched. And citizens of London filtered into the building by twos and threes, fearful, but praying for divine aid to save the church from the demonic power of the fiery hell around them.

Back on the German airfields in France the bombers refueled and reloaded, and lumbered into the air. First the incendiaries, then the five hundred pound bombs. This second attack was aimed to spread the destruction until all London was scoured from the map. But as the first planes began their journey across the channel, their radios crackled with the order to return. The weather was closing in. The planes would not be able to

find their way back to base. They must be preserved to kill another night. When Hitler found out, he was furious. Heads in the German air command rolled. But back in London St. Paul's still stood, its dome reflecting dying glow of the flames, its high cross appearing through the pall of smoke that lay over the city. Wherever they were, Londoners would lift their eyes and see the proof that God still reigned, even in the darkest hours. Surrounded by the charred and angry hulks of burned-out buildings, the words of Isaiah echoed, "*When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*" (Isaiah 43:2-3) The church stands. The Dean of St. Paul's said, "It was a miracle."

How important is the church of Christ to you? What would it be like if your life was in flames and all you cherish was threatened—and there was no church on the horizon, no cross pointing heavenward? For many in America today, it seems that's how they want it. George Barna is a prominent Christian researcher and pollster. For decades he has traced the spiritual trends of our culture. Recently, Barna admitted that he's grown disillusioned. He's believed that if the church became aware of what is happening in our society, if we were informed about our ineffectiveness, if we knew how far our secular neighbors have retreated from Christian belief, then we—the church—would change our ways. One of his best known books is titled, *Frog in the Kettle*, in which he compares the church to a frog dropped into a pot of cool water on the stove. As the water heats, the temperature rises so imperceptively that the frog, instead of jumping out, simply sits there and boils to death. That's the position the church is in, he warns. But in spite of all Barna's work, the church hasn't changed. We are like that frog, slowly boiling to death.

Now George Barna has come out with a new book titled, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary*. There are twenty million people, Barna says, who "*zealously pursue an intimate relationship with God*" and are living a life based on faith, goodness, love, generosity, kindness and simplicity. They've stopped going to church, he says, and millions more will follow them, so that in twenty years, "*only about one-third of the population will rely on a local congregation as the primary or exclusive means for experiencing and expressing their faith.*" That will mean fewer local congregations, less money in donations, and reduced cultural influence. Why are people abandoning the local church? Because it's not doing its job. People are finding their spiritual connections in home school associations, house churches, Bible studies at work, or worship concerts by big name Christian artists. Barna thinks this is a good thing. "Join the revolution!" he urges. And many are. (See the review in *Christianity Today*, January 2006, 69-71) But let me go back to my question. What would our lives be like without the church? To help us discover the answer, turn to what the apostle Peter says in I Peter. See what the Bible says about the church. Beginning in chapter 1, verse 22, and concluding with verse 10 of chapter 2, Peter tells us six things about the church.

First, the church is the place where you and I are loved. In chapter 1, verse 22 Peter says, "*Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.*" Notice that Peter says

loving the brethren is God's command. Who are the brethren? It's our fellow Christian believers. Love, as the Bible uses the term here, is not just having warm feelings for other Christians. It involves serving one another, meeting one another's needs. How do you do that if you live your Christian life on your own? Do you think Peter's instruction to love one another is limited to the handful of other believers you may know if you are not part of a local church? Jesus asked, "What benefit do you gain if you only love those who love you?" We tend to limit our love to those we are friends with. Usually there aren't too many of them. Is love merely a give-back-what-you-get activity? If that's all it is we yield to selfishness and we only love when it serves our own purposes. I think of a family in one of my former churches who consistently reached out to others in the church. You could always count on them to be first on the scene when someone was in need. But then the tides of life turned and the husband died. His wife and children were now the ones in need. I was amazed by what happened. Members of the church and others from the community flocked to their side. They brought meals, cut the grass, helped with home and car repairs. They offered comfort, prayed with and for them. Somebody offered the widow a part time job to help ends meet. The family was overwhelmed by the love that poured out of the church. Everything these people had given to others came back to them a hundredfold. I think of another family whose teenage child committed suicide. They had no church and I was called in to minister to them. They came to church for a few Sundays. We did the best we could. But they had lived their lives apart. Now their needs were great, but very few knew what those needs were. Eventually they withdrew into their sorrows and shut the world and the church out, and I've never heard from them again. Which family would you rather be? Which one was loved? In the church we are loved when we need it, and give love to others in return.

Second, the church is the place from which the gospel comes. In verse 23 Peter says, "*You have been born again...through the living and abiding word of God.*" In verse 24 he reminds us that people on their own perish, just like the roses you fellows may have given your wife on Valentine's Day. But the word of God keeps on living. Peter says in verse 25, "*This is the word which was preached to you.*" In other words, somebody shared the gospel with you. You heard how Jesus died to pay for the sins of sinners like you and me, and how if we place our faith in him alone to save us, we receive God's gift of eternal life. Where did you first hear the gospel? Maybe a friend told you about Jesus. Maybe you believed as a child based upon what your parents told you. Maybe you heard it on television. But Jesus gave the responsibility to preach the word and call people to faith, to the church. LeRoy Eims spent his life working with men in the military through the ministry of the Navigators. He was a Marine himself during World War II. In the battle for one of the Pacific islands he was caught in murderous fire on the beach. He came gasped to him, "Are you a praying man? I need to pray." Eims had no idea how to pray. He called to another Marine, "Are *you* a praying man?" The other fellow cursed and turned away. And LeRoy Eims watched helplessly as the wounded man died. It haunted him, for he was convinced he himself wouldn't make it off that beach alive. Fortunately another Marine did know how to pray, and he told Eims how he could be saved. Where did that man hear the gospel? At home, in his local church. It all comes back to the church. Remove the church and where will you find one who knows how to lead you to God?

Third, the church the place where we're taught. In chapter 2, verse 2 Peter says, "*Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.*" In other words, it's by studying the word of God that we grow spiritually. Most of us can't do that on our own. Where will you find a faithful and knowledgeable teacher if not in the church? A few years ago a couple began coming to Cornerstone. They had some understanding of the word of God because in the 1970s they'd come under the influence of a self-appointed teacher who had gathered a group around him and baptized converts in Lake Murray. But this leader had some very screwy ideas and interpretations of Scripture. Then he got caught in sin. His common-law wife was his co-prophet, but their relationship broke apart, leaving his followers confused and disillusioned. Fortunately for this couple, they were able to sit under sound teaching here and begin to grow spiritually, after years of batting around in the spiritual wastelands. You have no idea how many times church members come to me with questions about how to interpret a particular passage from the Bible, or whether something they have heard is accurate Biblical teaching. The church—at least our denomination—takes the faithful teaching of God's word very seriously. Ask any of the several young men in our congregation who are currently preparing to be ordained as ministers of the gospel in the Presbyterian Church in America. Ask them how thorough we are in making sure they know the word of God and can accurately teach it. If you didn't have the local church where could you learn the Bible so you can grow spiritually?

Fourth, the church is the place where we worship. Of course, a Christian may worship privately. But look at what Peter says in verses 4-5. "*Coming to Him as a living stone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*" Notice that you as an individual are a *living stone*—singular—but you are being combined with other *living stones*—plural—in order to build a house where holy priests—that's us together-- offer worship to God. It is Christ's intention that Christians worship together. The writer to the Hebrews says "*Do not neglect the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some.*" (Hebrews 10:25) The word *church* literally means *assembly*. We are to come together each Lord's Day to worship as a body. The church is responsible to conduct the worship of God as he desires it. If you didn't have the church, how often do you think you'd actually stop to worship on Sundays, and how well would you worship?

Fifth, the church is the place where we serve. The reason we term what we're doing a worship *service* is that God calls us to serve him. The reference in verse 4 to a priesthood reminds us of one of the basic tenets of the Reformation—the priesthood of all believers. It means that you don't need a priest to intercede between you and God. Jesus is the high priest who offered up to God the ultimate sacrifice—his life in place of yours. Therefore when we become Christians, each of us may come directly to God in our worship, our prayers, and our acts of service. But it is not just you that you represent as a priest before God. You fathers and husbands have a special responsibility to lead your families to God. You could do that at home, certainly. But isn't it better to have others to help you? Isn't it better to share the tasks of teaching and outreach and the conduct of

worship with others who may do a better job in one area or another than you are able to do? We are to lead our families in serving one another in and through the church. Not everybody does this. A couple were on the final day of a cruise and were making their way back to their stateroom to pack when they almost stumbled over a man who was sitting in the hallway with his back against the wall. "Are you OK?" they asked. "I'm fine," the man said. "My wife is in our cabin packing, and I'm helping by sitting out here." You're not going to do much serving if you're not in the church.

Sixth, the church is the place where we belong. Everybody needs a place to connect, a group to identify with. It gives you meaning and purpose in your life. You need that. Your kids need that. Notice what Peter says in verses 9-10. *"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."* During the bombing of London, Hitler expected to break the will of the English people and then they would sue for peace. But just the opposite happened. People began to say, "We can take it. Let him throw his worst at us." Churchill spoke to this indomitable spirit, "We will never surrender." The British people gritted their teeth and identified as Londoners. After 9-11 when the Twin Towers fell, every American became a citizen of New York. The church is like that. Peter says we're rejected by men, but we are the church, saved by the grace of God. We are together, gathered in congregations where we belong to each other.

Sometimes local congregations are virtually dead. Often the church is ineffective. But what are we to do? Do we abandon the church in a fit of pragmatism? No, that's where George Barna has it wrong. When the local church falters and doesn't live up to its calling, we pray for revival, for the Holy Spirit to bring the church to life again. After all, the church is Christ's creation, bought with his own blood. Jesus loves the church. We are the church. We should love her too. Teach your children to love the church.

I'm going to ask you to do something tangible this morning to help the church. It takes money to run the church, to proclaim the gospel; to teach men, women, and children; to conduct the worship of God; to do those things that serve one another; to provide a place where we belong. We have many things we'd like to do in the coming year. We're preparing the budget for 2006-2007 right now, and we need to have some indication of what we'll be able to do. In your program you'll find a financial commitment card. Would you please indicate on the card what you think you will give in the coming year? There is no obligation. This is just an estimate and we know your circumstances may change and you may need to adjust what you can give. Please sign your name and then fold the paper and tear it in two so your name and the amount you plan to give cannot be connected. Then drop it in the offering plate. If you need to think it over or talk about it with your spouse, that's OK. You may bring it in next week. Thank you for your support of the church, the church Jesus loves.

Preached by Dr. Rick Perrin on February 19, 2006 at Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, 5637 Bush River Road, Columbia, SC 29212 and Dutch Fork High School Tel. 803-772-1000

www.DiscoverCornerstone.com Copyright 2006