

What (or maybe how) I Learned in Church

For many years now, the Church has been the center of my life. Which, as a Christian, it should be, seeing that it is the Bride of Christ, and that for which Christ gave His life to atone for on the Cross. To be a part of the company of the redeemed, one Church through all the ages, and to know that I am saved through the same means as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and the rest, is simply one of the greatest experiences one may have this side of Heaven.

Warren Wiersbe used to quote the little ditty, “To live above with the saints we love, oh that will be Glory! Yet to live below, with the saints we know, that’s another story!” It amuses, as it paints an uncomfortable view that many professing Christians have, and it’s this: we don’t appreciate the temporal Church and can get very critical of it. We hold it against some impossible ideal – such as the early Church in Acts or the New Testament, or the Church Triumphant in Heaven – and find it wanting.

Yet, brethren, these things ought not to be so! From the time I can remember of first going to church (which was kind of an occasional thing for our family at the time), I have loved and appreciated the Church. Theologically, that was as I grew to understand the first paragraph, above. The more I cultivate the love of Christ, the more my love of the Church grows.

Practically speaking, though, being a part of the Church in its varied aspects, has been the arena of the development of the grace gifts of Christ (1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 4), and the growth of the fruit of the Spirit as described in Galatians 5:22-23. In fact, I would advance that a Christian really can’t grow and develop apart from the Church.

From both before my conversion and now long since, the Church in its local expression—the local congregation—has taught me many things.

One was the simple discipline of regular worship and learning with the saints. Going regularly and on time has ingrained within me that

basic desire to be in church on Sunday morning, both for Sunday School and worship. I grew up being a part of a multi-point congregation. That is, there were several meeting points at which the congregation gathered, with each meeting point having its own building. For many years the Sunday School and worship services alternated so that not all the points had church at the same time through the year.

Children were of course a part of Sunday School. Yet each Lord’s Day we had opening exercises and a mini-Council meeting each Sunday. We were never sure how much class time we would have: it could be 45 minutes or 20 minutes. We had to be patient, and listen as the adults decided if to send flowers or pay the propane bill or get salt for the water softener, or as the treasurer read the offerings and expenses for each quarter.

Children were also a part of worship. I learned to sit still and listen, even if I didn’t understand what the preacher was saying or I could not yet read. If I decided it was boring or started to slouch, my mom was quick to either offer me a butterscotch drop, or if need be, a tight pinch on the thigh. I knew if those things were not respected, that there would be a “come to Jesus” moment as soon as we got home from church that might involve a lilac switch!

I learned to watch to see what was actually happening, such as the actual portions of the worship service and what to do, such as kneel for prayer or stand for the Doxology, and to learn and say the words of the prayer that Jesus taught.

I grew to appreciate music (long before music appreciation in college), understand the use of the hymnbook, and some rudiments of music and singing with the notes and musical notation. Watching the pianist play and the chorister lead (and later being elected chorister when I was 16 years old) helped me to know hymns and Gospel songs, and to connect them with Scripture.

Art appreciation was another aspect of the worship service, either for Sallman’s “Head of Christ,” which was front and center at Asher Glade for many years, or for the fairly elaborate stained-glass windows

in the sanctuary. I often wondered what some of my dead relatives in whose memory the windows were given were like, and if “The Ladies’ Aid of Asher Glade,” was deliberate in its rhyme.

These may be little things. Yet these little things help one love the Church. They aren’t to be dismissed as incidental to divine worship; they are vitally important as we mature in Christ.

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