

The Church and Her Place

We have said repeatedly that the Church is not a place and this of course is true. The Church is not a place but a people, not a location but a congregation, not a building but a community of persons, not bricks and stones and mortar but flesh and blood relationships, not a structure but a society, not an organization but an organism, not a piece of geography but a fellowship. ^{the physical facilities} The place which a church occupies is always secondary to the people who are always primary, and to try even for a moment to reverse the relationship is to reverse the nature of creation and any attempt at this ends in futility and disaster. I hope in the Church of the Covenant, whether we're here for a month, or a month of Sundays, or a month of years, that we will always clearly know the difference between being committed to a people and occupying a building, and that we will never confuse, even slightly, the two. We will remember that ^{we} ~~you~~ can always have a church without a building, but we can also have a building without a church. The maintaining of a physical location is not proof of the existence of a church. But this is not to say that a "place" is not important, that a location is not strategic, and today I want to do what I have seldom done in our ten years together endeavoring to be the Church is Lynchburg, trying to be a fellowship of reconciliation in our city. I want to ask the question, "What's in a "place?" What's in a geographical location like this one which we call 4415 Boonsboro Road? What is the significance of our land and buildings, our grass and flowers and trees and woods; our chairs and tables, carpets and curtains, washrooms and water facets, doors and windows, candles and table cloths, pictures and lamps, pipes and septic system, etcetera? What's in a place? Why is a place important anyway? Why was it that ten years ago yesterday we had a crew of 20 people raking the yard, sweeping, cleaning, waxing, making curtains, setting up borrowed chairs in this room because we didn't have any of our own, doing all the last minute things to get ready for a ~~xxxxxx~~ service of worship which would be the first for the Church of the Covenant at four o'clock in the afternoon on Sunday? ^{Joe, Randy, Mitch, Wade, etc.} What percentage, what value, what significance is there in a church like us having a place of anykind in the city, or more especially a place like this with all its beauty and convenience, its dignity and status, its wealth and opportunity?

Let me begin by saying that the Bible is not averse to places. ^{PHYSICAL, MATERIAL, GEOGRAPHICAL - WORLD} It is full of places and it mentions them without any hesitation at all. The Bible is very careful to be very specific in its mention of places. Bethlehem, the stable and manger; Nazareth, Jerusalem, the Sea of Galilee, Jacob's well, ~~Rxxxxxx~~ the Jordan River, Pilots court, the Upper Room, a hill called Golgatha which means the place of a skull. These are all places, specific geographical locations, important because of what happened or what didn't happen in them. Today this table, around which we gather is really an extension of that table in the Upper Room two thousand years ago, and as the whole world of Christendom gathers round this table to break bread today, millions of minds travel back in a matter of seconds to that Upper Room in which this ~~xx~~ sacramental act of worship originated, and a little unimpressive elevated chamber where twelve fairly insignificant people met with one they loved takes on a world significance. Places are not necessarily important in themselves, but they are significant because of what happens or doesn't happen in them.

Look at Capitol Hill: Capitol Hill could be anywhere I suppose with any kind of architecture, but from this spot comes a decision which in a matter of minutes can make all the people of the world a little richer or a little poorer, a little safer or a little nearer the brink of disaster. Or look at Dallas, or look at Mississippi, or Brooklyn or Harlem, or the house we grew up in, or the one we now live in. All of us will remember places which have had a profound effect upon our life, which have left their deposits upon us because of what has happened to us in that place

Now to come specifically to the Church of the Covenant: What is the meaning of this place for us, and how ~~xxxxxxx~~ is it related to God's claim on our life and why really do we have it? I think we need to ask from time to time whether it is right for us to have it? Whether or not another place could serve the mission in which we are engaged better than this one? Whether or not this is the best stewardship of our resources? These are questions which together we will always have to be raising; Today I would like to mention three possibilities for our mission and ministry in this place and through this location. This does not mean that our ministry is limited to what happens here. We have said many times that perhaps our most effective witness as Christians is made out yonder in the structures of the world, as priests at the elbows of our fellow workers in the factory and office, ^{home} and school and business. But if as a corporate community we have a witness to make through some place such as this, then I think we need to see clearly the possibilities and the opportunities, and not default in utilizing the property and facilities at our disposal and the tools in our hands.

These are the possibilities that I see:

1. A place where there are recurring signs, hints, indications that God still acts in history.

One of the most fundamental convictions we have as Christians is that God is not only alive but that He acts in our human history, that He is present in the world carrying out His purpose and His mission. This is why Jesus is important to us. In Jesus God gets involved in the stuff of this world. He walks in our shoes, he suffers our pain, he lives in our kind of flesh, dealing with our kind of people. Bethlehem and the stable are important because we believe this is God acting. The Upper Room is important because this is where several people got a hint that God really does give his life and his love to rather ordinary, dull, even rebellious and selfish people, and they become different because of it. Golgatha is important because here again there is a clue that God is present in this event. We believe supposedly that God is not removed from us but that he is involved with us, but the trouble is that we have such a hard time seeing any visible signs of his activity today. This may be because we are not open enough to see his activity; it may be because of our own blindness, but it also may be because we are not exposed to events which ~~are~~ more obviously may be interpreted as the activity and work of God. - Certainly at times many of us feel like what those boys expressed ~~very~~ last year when in the night they wrote in large painted letters across the front of the Peakland Baptist Church, and across the red door of the Lutheran Church and across the back of First Presbyterian Church "God Is Dead!" -

If one really wants to get a hint that God still acts in his world where can he go; where might he find some verification; where might he get some personal assurance? The signs, or hints, or indications will be different for different people:

It may be the change of attitude and heart - one who is calloused becomes sensitive
one who is dull and bored becomes vibrant & radiant
one who is irresponsible becomes responsible
one who is self-centered becomes self-giving

It may just be an atmosphere in which one sees beauty and feels loved such as Van so well put it in his statement about "What's So Special about the Church of the Covenant?"

It may be a child who feels grass under his feet and swims in the pool for the first time - God becomes believable for the first time in his life. Cite summer.

2. A place where changing patterns in community life originate: In our community of Lynchburg

as in most cities and towns of our nation and the world, there are patterns of attitude and patterns of activity and relationships that will have to be changed or there will come the eruption of violence, or the continued suffering and persecution of oppressed people. - If we take the Bible seriously we know that there is a new kind of city in the making. John calls it the new Jerusalem and he describes it in part in what we read a few minutes ago. He uses a lot of symbolism which we may not fully understand as far as the details go, but I don't think we can miss the main thrust of it. "Behold, I will make all things new. . . ." All the relationships will be different. It will be a city for the healing of the nations. "There shall no more be anything accursed." Another interesting possibility for this new city is that there is not even going to be a temple. Not going to need a church, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty . . . and by its light shall the nations walk, and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day ~~and~~ and there shall be no night there; they shall bring into it the glory and honor of the nations! This place, this location may be where the new patterns can begin.

To be specific: we know that the racial patterns of our community must be changed. I'm more convinced of this than I've ever been before since hearing John Griffin at the Mosque in Richmond on last Wednesday night. John Griffin with the help of a dermatologist changed the pigmentation of his skin and lived as a Negro in the South for a couple of months. He is a highly gifted man who was educated in Europe and has lectured extensively throughout the South. As a Negro he went back to the churches ~~and~~ where he had been the guest of honor and paid lecturer and could not get inside the doors. He answered employment ads where his skills were very much needed and for which he had the credentials but in every case was rejected. He returned to drug stores and shops which he had patronized to see what sort of treatment he would get. For 2 1/2 hours he told an attentive audience his story. One

one occasion he was purchasing some articles in a drug store where he was waited on by a refined woman clerk who was kind, gracious, courteous and understanding, and gentele in every way. He was most encouraged by her genuineness and her respect for persons. Just as he was leaving he said to her, "I am a diabetic and very much need water; can you tell me where I can get a drink of water?" In her same gracious way she was most careful and exact to think and to calculate where the closest place was. Then she said, "If you'll go 14 blocks in that direction until you come to a very broad street, then turn right and go three more blocks, on the left hand corner you will find a place where you can get a drink of water." Three steps away from where she was standing was the drug store fountain. Seventeen blocks for a drink of water because of the tab of pigmentation. - I thought it really could not be as bad here. But on last Thursday night in the Lodge Randolph and Ester as we were talking about some of these things began telling some specifics from their own experience, giving the neames and dates and places, and it was what I was hoping wasn't true.

Maybe this place could increasingly be one place where people could know each other and meet each other as they are; a place where the patterns can begin to change. And like the ripples that spread from dropping a pebble in a lake, maybe the waves of a quiet kind of influence could spread over our community.

3. A place where dreams can be born: This means a place where the atmosphere is conducive to new ideas, to a pioneering spirit and experimentation. One of the sadening realities of our modern times is a loss of the spirit of adventure. In pioneer days there were always new frontiers to be explored. Although life was rigorous and hard, one real advantage they had was that the frontier wasn't far away. This helped to keep their sense of adventure high, to know that just ahead was more unknown territory. We miss this in our time. *We are far from the frontier -*

Maybe the acres which we own can be a kind of open frontier for most who are deprived of any frontier experience - There are many dreams that never get born because there is no laboratory for experimentation - It seems to me that the U.S. is in a gifted position - to have a spot so accessible to so many people so flexible in its possibilities

One of the problems is that those who are older have lost their capacity to dream and to give themselves to a creative idea - so almost unlimited in its space + beauty + potential arrangement - so resourceful -

And those who are young enough to dream have no laboratory for experimentation.

4. A Place where failure will become a sacrament - Any attempts to implement new dreams will inevitably involve failure -

Edison - 6000 failures -

80% of all new products introduced in the consumer market don't make it. The church lives in the same kind of world with the same kind of realities.

but here our failure can be entrusted to a faithful Creator - & become a sacrament a means thru which God will speak & act. -

5. A foot in our hand - an instrument of our mission of reconciliation.

3.(continued)

(handwritten part) Maybe the acres which we own can be kind of an open frontier for most who are deprived of any frontier experience—There are many dreams that never get born because there is not a laboratory for experimentation—It seems to me that the Church of the Covenant is in a gifted position—to have a spot so accessible to so many people, so flexible in its possibilities, so almost unlimited in its space and beauty and potential arrangement, [and] so resourceful. One of the problems is that those who are older have lost their capacity to dream and to give themselves to a creative idea. And those who are young enough to dream have no laboratory for experimentation.

4. A place where failure will become a sacrament – any attempts to implement new dreams will inevitably involve failure—Edison [had] 6,000 failures. 80% of all new products introduced in the consumer market don't make it. The church lives in the same kind of world with the same kind of realities, but here our future can be entrusted to a faithful Creator and become a sacrament, a means through which God will speak and act.

5. A tool in our hand—and a statement of our mission of reconciliation.