

GOOD AT CHURCH

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Romans 12:1-8

I am good at church. I am good at church. Now, if you're thinking, “Sherard, that's a bit over the top,” then I am going to point to all of my colleagues in ministry—ministers of Word and Sacrament. I know all of you. I've worked with many of you over the years. And I can say unequivocally that you're good at church, too.

And elders—don't feel left out. You have been called and ordained and installed as officers of God's holy church. You serve on sessions, you chair committees, you serve on presbytery committees, you're commissioners to presbytery, and some of you are commissioners to the General Assembly. And you guessed it: you're good at church, too.

So what do I mean when I say “good at church”? Well, it means that we are competent at the mechanics of running a religious organization. We are good at organizing worship—decently and in order, of course. We are good at electing officers and forming committees. We hold great meetings. We're good at creating churches; we're even better at closing churches right now. We know the difference between a committee and a commission. We've got a Book of Order, and we're not afraid to use it. We're even good at that other book, Robert's Rules of Order.

How many of you have ever sat in on some community organization—maybe an HOA—and you're sitting there frustrated beyond belief because it is obvious that the person running the meeting has no idea how to adopt an agenda, how to call the question, how to deal with amendments to a motion—even if they've gotten so far as making a motion? All those things. And you are saying to yourself, “We do this so much better at church.” We're good. We are good at church.

But the problem we are facing today is that church has changed. The church that we are good at is fading away. And unless we intentionally make a course correction pretty soon, we're going to continue to close churches until there are none left—until there is no presbytery left.

Now, I'll be honest: I don't lie awake at night worrying about the future of the church universal—what the Creed calls the “holy catholic church” (small c catholic). The church will live on. For 2,000 years the church has survived wars and famines, pandemics, economic collapse, genocides, the Dark Ages, heresies, crises of faith, and more. The church will survive.

But I do worry about that little congregation down the street—the one that doesn't have many cars in its parking lot on Sunday. I do worry that it's not going to be here much longer, or even the denomination it is aligned with.

And we all worry about this. We do. And we're not really sure what to do about it. I remember some years back, somebody came to me and said, “Doesn't the Presbyterian Church have a plan?” And I went, “No, they don't.” There's no cheat sheet for how to build the church up.

Right now, we are living at the end of a church bubble—a demographic bubble that started back in 1945. 1945 marked the end of World War II. Millions of soldiers—men and women—were returning home from overseas, from serving their country, from witnessing horrible atrocities, and all they wanted to do was come back and reestablish their lives: to take their place in society, to get married, start a family, buy a home, get a job. And so they did these things, and they joined community organizations and civic clubs—and churches.

It was a time of what some have called the “industrial church complex.” Churches were popping up everywhere like gas stations. “If you build it, they will come.” And they did. How many of your churches have an education wing built in the '50s or '60s that contains nurseries and Sunday school classrooms that are not as full as they used to be?

In those post–World War II decades, many were drawn to the church because it was an influential institution. To be a member of a church gave a person legitimacy. If you wanted to be respected, you joined a church. If you wanted to do business in town, it helped to belong to a church. You could network through your church. And it didn't hurt to join the church where your boss attended. It was a path to upward mobility. And it worked. And because of this power, churches got a little arrogant about their place in society.

But that's changed, hasn't it? And yet that is what so many of us are holding onto tooth and nail. We want to attract new people. We want to attract those young people, those young families, those marvelous little children. But we don't understand what they want, because they're different from us. They're different from our post–World War II patriarchs. And we need to make a change, but unfortunately too many of us are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary for this change.

So, what is it that those people out there desire? Their time is valuable. Their lives are full of distractions. And they want their lives to have purpose. Just going to a church because that is the thing to do—that's not enough. It doesn't work anymore.

These people crave authenticity. They want intimate connections, not superficial relationships. They are seeking mentors and guides—people who can help them through the troubled landscape of living. They want a church that acts, not a church that just talks.

And we're so good at talking. With social media, their world is saturated with talking heads and empty influencers. And they're beyond that. They demand that which is genuine. Their lives have been controlled by faulty algorithms. They're able to spot a scam or inauthenticity far more easily than we are. And because of that, all they desire is the truth. And if we, as the church, can't offer the truth, then we need to close our doors.

So, what is it that we have to offer? Think about your church. What is your church like? What message is it sending out? Is your church a social club? Is your church more interested in its past than its future? Is your church's identity so wrapped around the power and influence it once had that it has lost sight of being followers of Christ?

I certainly hope not. Today, your church must be focused wholly on mission and discipleship. To be relevant today, your church must be present in the community and changing lives. And what I'm saying here is nothing new. In fact, it's inscribed in our own Presbyterian constitution—that blessed Book of Order. We know it as the "Great Ends of the Church." Written in 1910, the Great Ends are:

- The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.
- The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.
- The maintenance of divine worship. (And that doesn't mean just having a wonderful choir and organist; it means living a different life.)
- The preservation of the truth. (There's that word truth.)
- The promotion of social righteousness.
- The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. How are you getting your hands dirty in the name of Jesus Christ? Writing checks? That's nice. Don't stop doing that. But we've also got to be out there in the highways and byways.

In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul appeals to the Christians in the city of Rome to give their bodies as *a living sacrifice—a living sacrifice that is*

holy and acceptable to God. For living a holy life is indeed the epitome of worship. Again, it's not what we do on Sunday mornings; it's what we do every day of the week.

Paul writes that we *must not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of our minds.* We are to be humble. Don't think of yourselves as better than others. As Jesus tells us in a parable, we should be like the man who stands in the back of the temple, confessing his sins and begging for God's mercy. We're not to be like the Pharisee who stands at the altar, reminds God of how much he gives every week, and then winks at God saying, "And thank God I'm not like that guy over there."

I have a story to tell. In one church I served, there was a group of older people who always sat in the back corner. They liked to sit back there because then they could watch the visitors. At the end of the service, they would report to me which of the visitors could recite the Apostles' Creed by heart. And it just tore my heart up every time they did this, because they were back there separating the sheep from the goats. They wanted to know, "Who is one of us?"

Paul calls us to have humility, to be a living sacrifice, and to strive to be nothing less than "that guy over there." We must set aside our arrogance. For when we become humble, we become vulnerable, and when we are vulnerable, that is when our faith is visible to the world. And when we are vulnerable, we also become reflections of Jesus Christ.

Every congregation in our presbytery should consider itself to be in a time of transition. You should be asking yourselves: How are we followers of Christ?

Yes, we may be good at church. But are we good at being followers of our Savior? Are we good at being disciples? Are we good at being humble? Are we good at welcoming the stranger with genuine and sacrificial hospitality? Are we good at putting others ahead of ourselves? For when we can do that, then—and only then—will we be good at church.