



November 6, 2022

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2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Building a House of Faith, Hope, and Love:

Brick Builds People



The Thessalonian Christian community had suffered harsh persecution since Paul's first letter and visit. Because of this harrowing time the excitement for Jesus' second return had reached unhealthy proportions and led the community to stray from their core faith. Paul wrote this second letter in order to recenter them in Christ here in this life.

In the game of golf there is always great temptation to hit the spectacular shot that soars over the lake, bumps just past the sand trap, and trickles to within feet of the cup. This inevitably ends in disaster and the sage advice (to which I rarely listen) is to keep the ball down the center of the fairway and stay out of trouble! This is the essence of Paul's instruction – stay down the center of the fairway of faith. In his words, *“Hold fast to the traditions of their faith.”*

Some of these traditions are very practical, basic human kindnesses such as don't sit down to eat when others at the table have no food. That is what he told the Corinthians. He told the Ephesians to only speak words that build others up. The list goes on, *“Forgive people as you have been forgiven.” “Honor others before yourselves.” “Don't seek earthy rewards but seek treasure in Heaven.”*

Surprisingly, Clay Christiansen, former Dean of the Harvard Business school, taught exactly the tradition of seeking heavenly treasure to incoming students. He wrote:

Over the years I've watched the fates of my HBS classmates from 1979 unfold; I've seen more and more of them come to reunions unhappy, divorced, and alienated from their children.

I can guarantee you that not a single one of them graduated with the deliberate strategy of getting divorced and raising children who would become estranged from them. And yet a shocking number of them implemented that strategy. The reason? They didn't keep the purpose of their lives front and center as they decided how to spend their time, talents, and energy. It's quite startling that a significant fraction of the 900 students that HBS draws each year from the world's best have given little thought to the purpose of their lives.

...More and more MBA students come to school thinking that a career in business means buying, selling, and investing in companies. That's unfortunate. Doing deals doesn't yield the deep rewards that come from building up people...

That is the heritage and tradition of Brick Presbyterian Church – to build up people!

Think about the powerful traditions within Brick.

The tradition of the Brick Church Day School that has enabled generations of families to forge deep friendships for life. One church member said her best friends today are the friends she made in our school. The Tree Lighting is another momentous time. When Christians, Jews, atheists, and more by the thousands gather outside our doors in Park Avenue to sing “Joy to the World”! What does the world need more than to sing of joy! I cannot tell you how many people completely unassociated with Brick know and love this tradition. A new church member told me though she lived downtown she grew up coming to it and in part moved close to us on the Upper East Side so she could make Brick a part of her life.

Brick builds people.

Think about the traditions of your family that have sustained your heritage for generations. It might be gathering at grandma’s for Thanksgiving. Maybe it is a summer in Cape Cod for the whole extended family. These traditions bind you and center your being.

I think about the traditions that have shaped the core of my character.

The tradition of scripture has always been central to being Presbyterian. All that we do derives from this book.

This book’s heritage is honesty and forthrightness. It sustained early Christians through Roman horrors for centuries. It was at times a lone light for people through the medieval times. It transformed the planet during the Reformation.

It is our greatest material possession thus the grand tradition of the Beadle carrying in the Bible and ensuring its safety.

This tradition of the centrality of scripture has been drilled into my head since I was five by my father and my mother but on this All Saints’ Sunday I remember how my grandfather, the late Rev. Dr Edwin Rian, shaped my faith.

His lesson became most acute in my life during the times of church schisms and splits when I served in Alabama as Executive Presbyter.

Alabama was filled with incredible people of faith and devotion. I loved them. I made friends there who taught me much about being Christian. But also, within the Presbyterian Church there was a fearful and violent legacy of severe racism, deep misogyny, and at the time I was there, strident anti-gay sentiment.

Some of the more conservative churches desperately wanted to leave the denomination. Several pastors simply lied when they said they would never lead a church out of the denomination. Other congregations unceremoniously dropped lawsuits on my desk without even so much as a phone call.

As you can imagine, the temptation was severe to sling back the same mud that they were lobbing at the Presbyterian denomination. To lob the same words of hate they were spewing at my friends. Others seeking to leave purported to found their views on scripture. We engaged in deep scriptural debate – sometimes civil, other times not.

But in all of this, I remembered the traditions taught to me by my grandfather. Ironically, he had been a part of creating a schism in the early 1920s, following a Princeton Seminary professor, Gresham Machen. For years he lived within this newly formed denomination the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and even served as its seminary President in Philadelphia. But this new, more conservative denomination of my grandfather's was not conservative enough for some. So those people split off from the first, and perhaps to no one's surprise, the church split one more time!

And so, my grandfather turned to the Bible again. And this is what he wrote upon his return to the tradition and denomination of his earlier year – he read this before the whole assembly of the church:

The decision to re-enter the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. after eleven years of separation has been the most difficult and heart-searching of my life. It has been made after months and months of deep thought, careful study of the Scriptures and agonizing of soul. The process which led me to this judgment was a slow and painful experience filled with disappointments and disillusionments but culminated by a clear conviction of the Scriptural teaching on the visible Church of Jesus Christ. I am now firmly convinced that the formation of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions and the separatist movement which it fostered was wrong because it disrupted the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

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So, because of this *saint* of my past, I have always tried my best to stand fast to the word of God as my guide, and when I inevitably fail to rely on the most crucial tradition within all of Christianity: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is this tradition, and no other, that gives us hope no matter the circumstance.

Amen.