The Church in the Rut
A.W. Tozer

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.

Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry. “We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did— and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did— and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did— and were killed by the destroying angel.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! (1 Corinthians 10:1-12)

The LORD our God said to us at Horeb, “You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites; go to all the neighboring peoples in the Arabah, in the mountains, in the western foothills, in the Negev and along the coast, to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon, as far as the great river, the Euphrates. See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land that the LORD swore he would give to your fathers— to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them.” (Deuteronomy 1:6-8)

CHURCHES GET IN RUTS ONLY BECAUSE individuals get in ruts. It is impossible that the church should do anything that individuals do not do. It is impossible that we should make any progress except as made by individuals. It is impossible there should be any regress unless individual Christians go backward. Think about people who find themselves in religious ruts. They discover a number of things about themselves. They will find that they are getting older but not getting any holier. Time is their enemy, not their friend. The time they trusted and I looked to is betraying them, for they often said to themselves, “The passing of time will help me. I know some good old saints, so as I get older I’ll get holier and better. Time will help me, purify me and revive me.” They said that the year before last, but they were not helped any last year. Time betrayed them. They were not any better last year than they had been the year before.

Nevertheless, last year they said, “Next year surely I’ll make some progress. I’ll get out of this rut. I’ll go forward with God.” That would have been this year, but this year they are not any further along than they were last year or the year before. This year they might be saying, “Well, time is my friend. Time will help me. I’m getting older, and next year I will make progress.” I say to you that the people in the religious rut are getting older, but they are not getting any holier. Time, which they have trusted to be their friend, is betraying them and proving to be their enemy.

Time is doing something else to them: it is increasing their indifference to spiritual things. The signal that God used to be able to get through to them easily is now getting fainter and fading away. Once in a while on good days they can still hear it. You know how it is when you travel away from a city like Toronto. You have your radio on to get the news or just to listen to music. You want to listen to it, but as you move away the station gets fainter. The signal is still reasonably clear, but it is fainter. And then you get into a pocket where you do not hear it at all. You say to yourself, “Well, that station is fading out.” Then suddenly it comes on again. “Well,” you might say, “we’re hearing it again.” But it is still very faint. When you get far enough away from the city you do not hear it at all.
Dull religious feelings
That is exactly what people in ruts find out about themselves. They discover that the passing of time tends to dull their religious feelings, and the signal that used to be quite clear is fading out. Then they worry a little and say, “The signal is gone. I’ll have to do something.” Suddenly it comes on again and they hear it a little and say, “It’s not so bad after all.” They are just in a favorable pocket—perhaps some new preacher has come to town. They think they are hearing the voice again, and they are, a little bit. But it is not long until they are out of range and cannot hear it anymore. Time has increased their indifference to spiritual things and dulled their religious feelings, continually making them harder to change.

Change is one of the ingredients of Christianity. If people could not change, the gospel would be absolutely meaningless. If the Lord would say, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ; repent and believe,” and a person could not repent or believe, the gospel would be meaningless. The fact that people can change is the only hope they have. If they could not change, there would be no reason to preach to them that they must change. And yet, we are sent to preach that people should change, meaning they should repent. They should turn from darkness to light. They should turn from idols to God. They should change. This is absolutely necessary, a vital ingredient in the spiritual life.

People who are in the rut, the circular grave, find that it is getting harder for them to change. They used to have spells when they were emotionally moved. Their wills got over on the side of God, and they really meant to make themselves into good Christians by the grace of God. But those times are getting fewer. They cannot afford to wait and say, “Oh, well, I will do it next Thanksgiving. I’ll do it when I come home from vacation.” No, they will either do it now or they will not do it at all.

There comes a time when they must make a change. If they do not make it, they never will. Time is stealing away their days of opportunity to make it. They began with a given number of days, and they have already used up so many days. But the tragedy is that they do not know how many remain. They do not know how many they have left because they do not know how many they have started with. While they could count the number of days they have been on the earth, they do not know how that stacks up to the number accorded them, so they do not know where they are. They only know that the days are doing what the poet said about the leaves. “The leaves of life keep falling on one."

A beautiful sugar maple stands in front of our house up on Old Orchard Grove. It is one of the greenest trees I have ever seen. It hangs on to its leaves a long time, and then sometime in October I notice some leaves are missing and say to myself, “Oh well, there is still a mass of leaves. I do not need to worry.” The next day I notice there are not as many leaves, and then I begin to notice some branches beginning to show. Before the snow flies there is not a leaf left. People in the rut never know when the last leaves are falling for them.

Reasons for the rut
Why are people in the rut? There are several possibilities. They may never have been truly converted at all, and this is one of our great problems now. We have a dozen ways of getting people into the kingdom of God, when the Lord said the re was only one. They leak in, ooze in, come in by osmosis and get in by marriage—just get in by any kind of way. But there is only one true way. When people find that after being in the church for years they are not making much progress, they ought to examine themselves and wonder whether they have been truly converted. True conversion means radical repentance, a changed life, conscious forgiveness of sin and a spiritual rebirth. Genuinely converted people, as the old Methodists said, had a radical repentance, which eventuated in a changed life. Then there came a consciousness of for giveness of sins and a spiritual rebirth. People in the rut may never have had that at all.

Maybe they have been abandoned to the devil as a severe disciplinary measure to keep them out of hell. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 5:4–5)

A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks with out recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:28–32)

People in the circular grave, who are getting older without getting holier, may have been abandoned to the devil because...
e of two things—some fleshly sins (1 Corinthians 5) or grave irreverence at the communion table (1 Corinthians 11). Protestants are altogether too much inclined to take things for granted. We laugh at those on the other side of the ecclesiastical fence because they bow and scrape and kowtow in the presence of the church. But we lack reverence—be not cause we are free in the gospel, but because God is absent, and we have no sense of His presence. We sometimes come to the communion table in a moral and spiritual state totally unfit for receiving communion, and yet we take it. Paul said, Â“We are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.Â”

Re: Church in the Rut - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/2 13:48

Sin is the cause
It is almost certain that sin is the cause of the rut, the circular grave in which so many people find themselves. Since only sin offends God, and sin is extremely deceitful, it can be present doing its deadly work while the people may not be not a ware of it at all until it is called to their attention. There are several kinds of sin that cause the rut. First is the sin of omission, an act left undone that should have been done. Next is the sin of commission, which is an act displeasing to God, to the Holy Spirit. There is also sin of the flesh. The world may approve of sin of the flesh, and even churches and pastors may permit it. It is astonishing what preachers will joke about with their congregations, laugh off and put up with. Maybe pastors permit it, or laugh it off at least, and say, Â“Oh well, you canÂ’t be too holy, too angelic in this world.Â” But the Holy Spirit is grieved by it.

So the people move around their circular grave not hearing the voice much any more. They used to hear it, Â“Get up, get up. YouÂ’ve been in this place long enough. Get up! Move! ThereÂ’s the land before youÂ—IÂ’ve given it to you. ItÂ’s all in the covenant; it is all in the purchase of the blood. It is all yours. Get up and move toward me. Move toward the holy place and the holy land and your possessions. Victory and deliverance and power in prayerÂ—it is all yours. Rise up and take it.Â” They once heard that signal coming strongly to them, but it is not coming so strongly any more. The Holy Spirit is grieved and does not talk so much. And the people move around in their circular grave.

Perhaps they have committed sins of the mind. Â“Society,Â” said Emerson, Â“is in conspiracy to make every man like every other man.Â” But what he did not say was that society is in a conspiracy to make every man ungodly in his thinking. By Â“ungodlyÂ” I do not mean that he likes pornographic pictures or that he stands on the corner of a street on a windy day and watches the girls go by. That is only one facet of wrongdoing or sin. Wrong ambition, love of money, overappreciation of earthly things, jealousy and envy all fit in to make a web, and society is teaching us and conditioning our minds to think sinfully. This begins in the cradle.

Re: Church in the Rut - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/2 15:55

Thoughts require much prayer
To think GodÂ’s thoughts requires much prayer. If you do not pray much, you are not thinking GodÂ’s thoughts. If you do not read your Bible much and often and reverently, you are not thinking GodÂ’s thoughts. Those thoughts you are having are earthly thoughts—thoughts of a fallen race. They are the thoughts of a lost society. They should not be our thoughts. Paul said, Â“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ JesusÂ” (Philippians 2:5 KJV).

There also has to be a lot of meditation. We ought to learn to live in our Bibles. Get one with print big enough to read so it does not punish your eyes. Look around until you find a good one, and then learn to love it. Begin with the Gospel of John, then read the Psalms. Isaiah is another great book to help you and lift you. When you feel you want to do it, go on to Romans and Hebrews and some of the deeper theological books. But get into the Bible. Do not just read the little passages you like, but in the course of a year or two see that you read it through. Your thoughts will one day come up before GodÂ’s judgment. We are responsible for our premeditative thoughts. They make our mind a temple where God can dwell with pleasure, or they make our mind a stable where Christ is angry, ties a rope and drives out the cattle. It is all up to us.

What should you then do? Examine yourself. Have you found yourself in that awful circular grave, not making any spiritual progress? Have you found that the passage of time upon which you have leaned so heavily has become a broken reed and is not helping you at all?

The philosopher Socrates said, Â“An unexamined life is not worth living.Â” If a common philosopher could think that, how much more we Christians ought to listen to the Holy Spirit when He says, Â“Examine yourself.Â” An unexamined Christian lies like an unattended garden. Let your garden go unattended for a few months, and you will not have roses and t
omatoes but weeds. An unexamined Christian life is like an unkempt house. Lock your house up as tight as you will and leave it long enough, and when you come back you will not believe the dirt that got in from somewhere. An unexamined Christian is like an untaught child. A child that is not taught will be a little savage. It takes examination, teaching, instructi
on, discipline, caring, tending, weeding and cultivating to keep the life right.

Re: Church in the Rut - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/3 0:17

I do not want to leave you on a low note. I am trying to wake you, not discourage you. There is not a reason in the world for you to be discouraged. Suppose there were an elixir of life that could cure any disease anyone could have, and it was sold down at the corner, and you could buy it for a nickel a bottle. It was the magic elixir of life that would make anybody healthy.

Then suppose that I found an old fellow sitting on a bench and I went and sat down beside him. I noticed by looking at him that he had high blood pressure. I could tell it by the veins that stood out on his forehead. I began to try to tell him, Â“ You have lived long enough on this bench. Get up; thereÂ’s something better for you,Â” and he began to resist me. The next day I would have to preach a whole series of sermons to him to get him to know how sick he is, when just down the street a little way was the cure for what was wrong with him.

That is precisely where we are in the church. You have to work on people for weeks to get them to see that they are in a rut. It would be cruel to do if there was not a remedy. But the justice of God is on the side of the confessing sinner. Â“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousnessÂ” (1 John 1:9 ). Because Jesus Christ died, because He was God and because He was man, His atonement was absolutely and fully efficacious. All of the attributes of God are on the side of the person who confesses his or her sin and turns and runs to the feet of Jesus.

Â“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defenseÂ—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole worldÂ” ( 1 John 2:1Â–2). There is the cure. That is only one little passage, and of course similar ones are all over the New Testament. The blood is shed for us. God pardons and forgives for ChristÂ’s sake. The Holy Spirit is here to take the things of Christ and make them real to us. There is nothing, not even the devil himself, that can hinder the confessing sinner.

END

From Rut, Rot or Revival