

The song we just sang, *The Heart of Worship*, was written by Matt Redman after the church he served near London got so focused on music that they forgot the true meaning and purpose of church. The church had become music critics rather than congregants. They had become more about sound quality than salvation. Wrong notes were causing more turmoil than wrong lives. Finally, their pastor said, ‘enough is enough.’ He fired the band: they were volunteers. He told the band and the congregation that there would be no music until they all remembered what church was. Eventually, they did. And what they remembered about church is important and worth warning you about. I want to warn you about church. Church is about God and God, as C. S. Lewis once observed, is not tame.

The true church is none of the following. Church is not a building, grounds, or an office. Church is not a pastor or a staff. Church is not a preschool or a child development center. Church is not a budget, a mortgage, or offerings. Church is not a social club, fraternity, sorority, men's group, women's group, or youth group. Church is not a Sunday

School. Church is not a band, a choir, an organ, or audio-visual equipment. Church is not a board of directors, elders, fellowship, spiritual care, or finance or any other board, team, or committee. Church is not a denomination, synod, or district.

The true church is not a matter of our choice, our convenience or our tastes. Church is not something that will fall apart if any of us is absent, delinquent, tardy, unwilling to serve, or absent without leave. Church is not something over which any of us has authority. Church is not something that needs any of us. Church is not something over which we have control. Church is not something on which we may press any claim. Church is not a few hours of time one day a week. Church is not mine and church is not yours. The true church is none of these things.

First of all, the true church is Christ's church and so is not my church or yours. It is Christ's. Christ's church is the people of God, unconstrained by buildings, borders or denominations, spanning every age, embracing every culture. All the true believers in Christ who were, are, or ever will be constitute His church. The church is not a 'where',

the church is a 'who'. Wherever two or more are gathered in Christ's name and around His gifts of the Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the church is there. The backstreet is as much church as the basilica when two or more are gathered in His name. The street corners and the corn fields are as much church as the cathedral when two or more are gathered around His gifts. *Where* they gather does not matter. What matters is *that* they gather around God.

Another consequence of the true church being Christ's church is that the church possesses all things through Christ through whom all things were originally made. Therefore, the church needs nothing because Christ needs nothing. He already has everything. Christ's church is eternally rich, never poor; omnipotently powerful, never weak; and infinitely great, never small. No 'thing' is required to have church. No building. No equipment. Not even a Bible is required. The church requires only Christ who is its one foundation. However, through Christ everything is added to the church. Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness and then all these things will be added unto you.

Since everything was made through Christ and therefore belongs to Christ, none of us can claim to possess anything ourselves. We have no bootstraps with which to raise ourselves. We come to the church doors as beggars all: ragged, destitute, and beloved. Possessing nothing, we bring nothing to the table. Earning nothing, we arrive into and depart from this world as Christ's dependents. The kingdom of God is not a capitalist economy; it is a welfare state through and through. We are the destitute fathers, mothers, and children. No one earns in the church. No one deserves. No one warrants. No one is worthy. Everyone here receives everything as a free gift. Everything is charity. All of us are on welfare. This is the church.

The church is Christ's church and the church is the people of God, but the church is also God's answer to the problems people created. God did not create sin, we did, and God's church exists to administer God's antidote to those infected with sin. Likewise, God did not create hunger, disease, pollution, poverty, pride, arrogance, and

violence, we did, and the church exists to wield God's power to defeat these or to beat them out of us or to love them out of us.

And there is no plan B. The church is the only answer God has given us to our problems, not necessarily the answer we might prefer. Like as not, this is how God has chosen to save us. The church is God's chemotherapy against the cancer of our sin that eats us slowly from within and without; cancer that must be killed utterly lest we miss the kingdom of heaven. The church is God's surgical amputation of what is gangrenous in us and the cauterization of our wounds. Jesus himself said that it better to enter the kingdom with one eye than to have two eyes and go to hell. The church is battlefield surgery, and as such is deadly earnest and cares not one whit about anesthetizing us, pleasing us, entertaining us, pandering to us, catering to our needs, or serving our every childish whim. The true church exists to save us at any cost and by any means - even the death by torture of the son of God.

We have been warned: the church is about God and God is not tame. Fully informed, we are members of a church engaged in a no holds

barred battle against evil, the war for this world, for the hearts, minds, and souls of every single human being. The true church is a resistance movement fighting behind enemy lines. The church is a revolution upending an unjust world order. The church is a guerrilla organization active in the civil disobedience that will one day tumble a repressive, evil regime. The church is a counter-cultural movement challenging the shallow and depraved status quo. The church is non-conformist and politically incorrect pursuing its own agenda: the emancipation of mankind from the tyranny of the world, the devil, and our own sinful flesh. The church is the vanguard of the demonstration against all that is wrong in this world, marching to dethrone a ruthless dictator bent on destruction: the fallen one, the accuser, Satan.

We have been warned: the church is about God and God is not tame. Do not be deceived. Since its inception on Pentecost, the true church has been a powerful political force for good in this world. Why else would the Romans and every corrupt government ever since try so hard to extinguish it, mock it, co opt it, or render it ineffectual if it did

not threaten their power? Politically, the church itself is an absolute hereditary monarchy and Christ, its only king, brooks no rivals in the hearts of people. The church must confront every power in every form and forum that challenges the active reign and rule of Christ. Wherever Christ is not Lord, the church must be militant: in the marketplaces and legislatures, in the boardrooms and the courtrooms, in your house, in my house and in the White Houses. Wherever evil attempts the usurpation of the scepter of God, the church must contradict it with words and confront it with deeds.

We have been warned: the church is about God and God is not tame. This is the church of which we are members. We would all do well to remember it as we sing our little songs, as we sit comfortably in our padded seats, as we politely sip our coffee or tea, as we read our bibles in our climate-controlled classrooms, and as we kneel down on our carpeted floors to pray. This church of which we are members exists to fight evil and to resist the evil one. This church lives to rebel against oppression, to revolt against injustice, to counter corruption in our

culture, to foment dissent against wickedness, and ultimately to participate in the greatest coup d'etat in the history of the world: the overthrow of the enemy of God, the devil.

We have been warned: the church is about God and God is not tame. We are the resistance and resistance movements are never safe for those in the underground. We are the rebellion and rebellions are neither comfortable nor secure for the rebels. We are the revolution and revolutions are inconvenient for the revolutionaries. We are the subversives and a price will be demanded from those who would subvert the status quo. We are the dissenters and dissenters are not lodged in hotels or put up in beach houses, but are exiled to gulags, restrained in interment centers, and imprisoned in concentration camps. We are the rabble and the mob, those who would overthrow the rulers and principalities of this world, and as such we are called to risk our lives and the lives of those we love for the church in which we believe. We will call the tune and we will pay the piper.

We have been warned: the church is about God and God is not tame. Christ's church was not built upon His own safety but upon His death and it does not promise safety to its adherents, only salvation at our deaths or His return. This is how the church has been in previous ages. This is how the church is now in our age. This is how the church will be until Christ returns in glory to judge the living and dead and brings the war against evil to its inevitable end.

Meanwhile, we must live out our lives in the days of the final battles between good and evil, the age of the church, the age bracketed by two great events: Christ's ascension to heaven and Christ's return in glory. As the battle rages all around us, let us strip away our illusions about church being tame and tepid. According to the Book of Revelation, a tame and tepid church will in the end be no church at all. Let us no longer be cowards but conquerors, not gutless, but gallant.

Let us find courage in the courage of the great ones who fought the battle before us. Remember St. Paul, who sang his psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs not in a bright basilica but in dark prison cell. Let us remember Professor and Pastor Martin Luther who committed a capital

offense when he translated the Bible into German, the language of his people. Luther committed this treason working not from the safety of the ivory tower, but as a fugitive, fearing for his life, unable to go home, and with a bounty hanging over his head. Let us remember St. John who wrote the Book of Revelation in his old age not from the comfort and security of his home, but in exile, marooned on Patmos Island where he had been left to die, freezing, starving, and enduring the punishment meted out by Rome for his faith. Let us remember all who were faithful unto death and so now wear the crown of life. Above all, let us remember Christ who for the sake of the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shape. Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Putting on the whole armor of God, let us be the church God has called us to be. We are God's peace-keeping force and God's infantry. We, like our brothers and sisters before us, are the foot soldiers, the pawns, and the privates. We are a band of brothers and sisters bound together by the blood of Christ and by the shedding of our own blood in the cause of Christ. At our baptisms, we were drafted into this church,

this army of God to fight evil. At our confirmations, we promised our life-long allegiance to Him who called us out of darkness and saved us. At our deaths, we will be buried into His rest and His light. And at our resurrections, we will cast our crowns at His feet. This is Christ's church and the church is not tame. We have been warned.