

Guest editorial: Church the way it used to be?

December 10, 2015

On a recent visit back to my hometown in Oklahoma, I heard about a church that has adopted the motto, “Church the Way It Used to Be.” Later, I did an Internet search for this phrase and learned, sadly, other churches are using the same motto.

✘ Mark Wingfield While I understand this phrase likely refers to worship style and music choices and Bible basics, it also speaks to the yearning of so many Christians to return to the simple faith of their childhood. Or what appeared to be a simple faith in their childhood.

This yearning isn’t new. After all, the song Give Me that Old-Time Religion was written in 1873.

While on this pilgrimage to the place where I was raised from ages 10 to 17, I took time to drive around town, once again, and visit the old haunts—the schools, the neighborhood, the site of the church that was so formative in my own life. Only the church isn’t there anymore. It long ago moved to a new location, and most of the former buildings I remember now have been torn down. What remains on that site is a sad sight.

And I had to acknowledge even if those old buildings still were standing, that’s not the church where I would want to be today. The relocated church is thriving, but it has gone one direction while I have gone another. Church “the way it used to be” is a reality neither for that church nor for me. It is an illusion, a moment in time that has passed but continues to influence the present.

Two things I’ve recently heard preached by my own pastor have helped me

work through this nagging nostalgia.

The first he spoke at a wedding, where he told the bride and groom marriage is like watching the characters in a play. Over time, the bride and groom will change—they must change and grow—while retaining the basic commitment they made at the marriage altar. One of the fundamental rules of playwriting is the characters cannot be the same at the end of the play as they were at the beginning.

And then there was a recent Sunday morning sermon where our pastor reminded us the way forward is not backward. Sounds simple enough, right? But how often do we find ourselves longing to “restore” the church to the way we once knew it? And even if we could, would we fit in there today? The way forward is forward. Time marches on, and we, the characters in God’s universal drama, will not end the story where we began it.

In the book of Revelation, Jesus declares, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Remember, Jesus failed to “restore the kingdom” to Israel in the ways his disciples had hoped. They wanted someone to move them back to the glory days. Jesus was intent on moving them forward to a glory they had not known.

We may fear the future because it is not the past. But on reflection, we may see the past no longer can hold us.

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