

What's Our Legacy?

Psalm 71

John Breon

What's the greatest legacy of America's founders? I was thinking about that one time, so I called a high school history teacher and asked him what he thought is the greatest legacy of the founders. He mentioned two things. One is in a phrase in the Preamble to the Constitution. It's where they said that they were seeking to "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...." They were forward-looking, ever mindful of the future, concerned about future generations. They weren't writing the Constitution just for themselves but for future generations. The other significant thing he mentioned is at the end of the Declaration of Independence where it says, "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." They pledged all they had. They were willing to sacrifice, not just for themselves, but also for future generations.

Those two qualities of the United States' founders—being forward looking and willing to sacrifice—are a great legacy to our nation.

What's your legacy? What's our legacy as a church?

Imagine it's the year 2037—twenty years from now. What's the church like? What's going on in it? What kinds of ministries are happening? How big is the congregation? Who's worshiping here? What does the building look like? What will be preserved from the church's heritage? How is the church drawing on its past to be effective in the present and ready for the future?

What you imagine about the church of the future is your *vision* of the church. Can we allow God to inspire us with his vision for the church? When we do that, how do we plan and act now to get from where we are to seeing that vision realized? How do we plan our legacy? What will we do now that will affect future generations? What will we leave for the people who'll follow us in this place?

One time I came across some documents that a church's Long Range Planning Committee had put together. One was a questionnaire that included the question, "What is your vision of our church twenty years from now?" One response was, "I won't be around, so I don't have one." Another said, "My vision does not reach this far into the future."

I can understand that. It's probably realistic, but it's kind of sad. How different from the spirit of America's founders who wanted to secure liberty not just for themselves but for their posterity, for all who would come after them. And how different from the spirit of the singer in Psalm 71: "Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, *till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come*" (vv. 17-18).

Here's another response to the question, "What is your vision of our church twenty years from now?": "Hope our congregation will have double-doubled and many more young people. Of course, I won't be here to see it, but will be cheering on all the younger ones from on high." Isn't that great? *I may not be here to see it, but I'll be in heaven looking on, cheering on the next generations.* That sounds more like the singer in Psalm 71.

In my study Bible there's a note I wrote in the margin next to Psalm 71:17-18, "This was marked in Bop's Bible. I read it at his funeral." "Bop" was my grandfather—my mom's father. When my older brother Steve was little, he said "Bop-ba" instead of "Grandpa." By the time I came along, it had been shortened to "Bop." That's all I knew him as. I don't know how old I was when I discovered he had an actual name. When Bop died, Mom asked Steve and me to help conduct the funeral. I was to read some Scripture. So I looked through Bop's Bible to see if he had noted anything that was special to him. And I found Psalm 71:17-18.

I'm sure this spoke to him as he grew older and his health got worse and he was unable to all that he used to do. He had been very active. He was a plumber and an electrician. Once when he was eighty, he climbed a light pole to do something with the wiring. That's the kind of person he was.

These verses may have been meaningful to him as he thought about his family. His daughter and son-in-law, my mom and dad, are active Christians. Bop supported Steve and me in our education and preparation for ministry. One year he sent us on tour to Israel. He was active in his own church, but also came to hear us preach when he could. In these and other ways, he declared God's power to the next generation.

The writer of this psalm was apparently an old man who had been faithful throughout his life. Now he seeks deliverance from enemies, from sickness, and from shame. Against his failing strength he sets a long memory of God's faithfulness and a growing hope in God's life-renewing power. This is another lament/complaint/cry for help psalm, but it has more confidence and praise than some of the others. The psalm writer knew his relationship with God was not one he had made up on his own. He had known God's faithfulness all through his life. He found assurance in this time of frailty as he remembered that God had seen him through other times of frailty.

Reflecting on God's lifelong care, the singer mixes confidence and a cry for help. He also shows a lively interest in the future. There's much to be done and he's eager to do it. He's eager to pass on his story to his posterity, the future generations.

This focus on the future is rooted in the past. When the singer says to God, "Who is like you?" and pictures his deliverance from the depths, he's echoing the Exodus story and the songs that celebrated how God delivered the people. By faith, he puts his present troubles in the context of God's mighty acts. He shares in Israel's redemption and experiences redemption himself. "So, with his name cleared and faith confirmed, this veteran can set his mind at rest, and his fingers, lips and heart to the praise of God and the telling of his story" (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*).

Now, what does all that have to do with the church and the church's legacy? Like the psalmist, each of us as people of God and all of us together as the church realize that we have to hand on the story to the next generation. We have to make plans and take action now that will allow

future generations to hear the story and experience God's love and power in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes it's tough to look to the future in a positive way. Uncertainty, the effects of aging, or not understanding younger generations may make the future seem more threatening than inviting. But we can have a bright outlook on the future and be open to its possibilities.

A woman was celebrating her 100th birthday. Her mind was keen and alert. She was caught up in the excitement of her party. A reporter came to interview her. He asked this high-spirited, 100-year-old woman, "Do you have any children?" She replied, "Not yet!" (James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* 23).

Do we have any spiritual children—people who have come to faith in Christ through our influence and witness? What about spiritual *grandchildren*—people who have come to Christ because of the witness of someone we led to Christ? If not yet, it's never too late. The future is still wide open. God invests the future with possibilities and opportunities.

Hold on to your image of the church in 2037. What do the people of 2037 say about us? Are they grateful for our boldness or are they trying to make up for our lack of vision and boldness?

A father had promised his son that they'd go fishing one Saturday. But when they got up Saturday morning, rain was pouring down and it looked like it wouldn't stop. The boy moped around the house, looking out the window from time to time. He complained that God should have known that it would have been better to have the rain on Friday. His dad heard him and explained how much they needed the rain and how it would help the crops. Then, about three o'clock, the rain stopped. There was still time to go fishing. And they caught a stringerful of beautiful fish. As the family sat down to a supper of fresh fish, they asked the boy to give thanks. He did and then added, "Lord, if I sounded grumpy earlier today it was because I couldn't see far enough ahead" (Hewett 314).

Can we see far enough ahead to face the future with cheerfulness? Is our desire to declare God's power to all who are to come enough to motivate us to be bold in believing God and daring in obeying God's call?

Will we “expect great things *from* God and attempt great things *for* God”? (William Carey, [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William_Carey_\(missionary\)](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William_Carey_(missionary))).

Complete this sentence: “I have a dream for my church that someday....”

I’m going to suggest one approach to this that I find helpful. Over the years, I’ve read and heard a lot of church mission/vision/purpose statements. Here’s one that covers the basics.

The church is a Christian community where people can get to *know* God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, where people can *grow* in the likeness of Christ and in relationship with each other, and where people can *go* into the world, equipped to witness and serve and live all of life in God’s light. Know—Grow—Go.

The church is a place to meet God. It’s a community of faith where we meet Jesus, get to know him and become like him. Our worship, study, fellowship, praying, serving, everything we do, ought to give people an opportunity to encounter God and get closer to God.

The church is a community where we grow, where we experience transformation. It’s a place to grow in faith, to make progress in our relationship with God. We encourage each other. We challenge each other. Preaching and teaching nourish our spirits. Through Communion, prayer, forgiveness, worship, fellowship, service, giving, and many other practices we grow in grace.

The church is a ministry training center. Every Christian is called to ministry. When we get together we can hear how God is calling each of us to minister. We discover and practice the gifts God gives us to make us servant-leaders in the church and beyond. We’re trained and equipped and empowered to carry on the ministry of Jesus together in Bryan County.

The church is a center for mission. God sent his Son on a mission to the world. After his resurrection, Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). We’re not only a called and gathered people; we’re a *sent* people. Our Lord sends us into our homes and schools and jobs, into the world around us with a message and with God’s love. The local church is the base of operations for that mission. We hear the call in

the church. It's in the church that we're equipped and strengthened to go and do what God calls us to do where God calls us to go.

As we know God, grow in grace, and go in the power of the Holy Spirit, we're declaring God's power to the next generation—and the next and the next.

There's a legend that Zacchaeus used to go early in the morning out of the house and across town, carrying a water jug. One day his wife followed him and found him watering a tree. He carried water from a well to the tree. After watching him do this for a while, she asked him why he was watering that tree. He said to her, "I was in this tree when I met Jesus."

As a church, let's be the place where others can meet the Lord. May each of us find our relationship with the Lord growing and strengthened because of our involvement in the church. May we leave as a legacy a place where future generations can come to know Christ, grow in him, and go out in ministry to the whole world.

And in 2037, the people who worship here will say that we were faithful. They'll celebrate the legacy we left them and they'll pass it on to the next generation as well.

We're pilgrims on the journey of the narrow road
And those who've gone before us line the way
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary
Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses
Let us run the race not only for the prize
But as those who've gone before us let us leave to those behind us
The heritage of faithfulness passed on through godly lives

After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone
And our children sift through all we've left behind
May the clues that they discover and the memories they uncover
Become the light that leads them to the road we each must find

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful
May the fire of our devotion light their way
May the footprints that we leave lead them to believe
And the lives we live inspire them to obey

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful

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