

“What Will Our Legacy Be?”

Colossians 1:1-8

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It is one of the highest compliments that a church can receive and I hope someone will say it about Smoke Rise on her two-hundredth anniversary. Last weekend, Jackie and I were in Frankfort, Kentucky to help the North Fork Baptist Church celebrate her two-hundredth anniversary. I pastored this church while I was a student at Southern Seminary. It is a beautiful white frame church that sits on a hill overlooking the Elkhorn Creek and one of the few covered bridges remaining in America. It could have easily been a setting for a Norman Rockwell painting.

Over the course of her history, North Fork has been known for many things, good cooks, championship softball teams, mission activities and inspirational music to name a few. More importantly, she has been known for the faith, hope and love of her members.

I'm not sure what future generations will say about Smoke Rise one hundred seventy years from now. They will probably talk about how we loved to eat, worship, eat, fellowship, eat, laugh, eat, study, eat and go on mission trips. I pray they will also say that we were a people filled with faith, hope and love. It is, perhaps, the greatest compliment a church can receive.

Why are faith, hope and love so important? They are three pillars upon which a church is built. They make the difference between a good church and a great church. Paul knew this and pointed it out in Colossians 1:3-6a.

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints, the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you.”

In all likelihood, Paul never visited Colosse but directed the planting of the church there through his fellow worker, Epaphras. It was only natural, then, that Paul was interested in their wellbeing and progress. How delighted Paul must have been to hear of their good work and the fact they were a people of faith, hope and love. Such news made his spirit soar even though his body was confined to a Roman jail.

Why? For the same reasons I mentioned a moment ago. These are the pillars upon which a church is built. These are three ingredients that make the difference between a good church and a great church. Let me explain.

A great church is built upon faith in Jesus. Members believe that he is able to show them how to live, help them with their problems, save them from their sins and take them to the Father when they die. With all their hearts, they believe that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life” and gladly follow wherever he leads.

It is my prayer that Jesus will not only be proclaimed Lord from this pulpit, but his way will be sought in every decision made, individually and collectively. It is faith in him, our Living Lord, that will bring the best out in us and help us achieve all the potential that has been placed inside of us. That's when the church is being the church, and a great one at that.

A great church is built upon hope in God. Members believe as Paul that “all things work together for good to those that love God and are called according to His purpose.” They believe that God will have the final word in a Christian’s life and that word will be good.

There is a big difference between secular and spiritual hope and I want the members of Smoke Rise to know that difference. Secular hope is **wishing** for what I want. Spiritual hope is **trusting** a loving God to provide what I need. The former leads to selfishness and frustration while the latter leads to peace and contentment. May we always be known at Smoke Rise as a people of peace and contentment.

Down through the years, I have enjoyed singing Horatio Spafford’s hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul.” It communicates the message of hope in a powerful way. Many times it has been sung with tears streaming down someone’s cheeks, but at the same time, it has strengthened their faith and given them hope for the future. It is at those times that a good church becomes a great church.

A great church is built upon love for others. Compassionate members reach out to one another and offer encouragement, advice, forgiveness and help.

As I mentioned earlier, when I was pastor of North Fork, I was a student at Southern Seminary. One of my assignments was to attend a local AA meeting. I did so and it changed my life in many ways.

At that meeting, I experienced love in action as I had never witnessed it. I listened as vulnerable people admitted their weaknesses and fellow pilgrims embraced and encouraged them. I saw firsthand the difference it made when someone who was hurting connected with someone who cared. I knew that was the atmosphere I wanted in any church I pastored. For me, that was one difference between a good church and a great church.

I want you to know that I think this is one of Smoke Rise’s finest strengths. I have told many friends that Smoke Rise is a church that lives in the real world. It is a church that does not ignore reality but faces it. It is a church that accepts people where they are and as they are and invites them to join us on our Christian pilgrimage. Smoke Rise is a church that does not cast stones but extends the hand of friendship and encouragement. I sense in this church an atmosphere that is similar to the one I experienced in that AA meeting. I like that and I believe God does, too.

What will they say about Smoke Rise in the year 2169? After they talk about how much we enjoyed eating, I hope they will say that Smoke Rise has been a church filled with members of faith, hope and love. They could pay us no higher compliment.