

Dear Pastor Lee,

Greetings, dear friend, in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks very much for sharing your heart in your recent email. As you know, while no pastor, I've tried to think of my work as a theologian in service to the church, and therefore to people like you leading and serving churches.

It was a long time ago that you were a student in my Christian Ethics class. You said you fell in love with the church in that class, having already been in love with Jesus, discovering the church just then as the beacon through which God's redemption in Christ shines forth. You started off thinking your job was to change the world, a job you felt burdensome, and came to discover that the world had been changed in Jesus Christ, your only job being to witness to the fact that God in Christ was making all things new, and that the start of that newness was the church. In one semester, you went from a Finance/Econ major to applying left and right to seminaries, hoping to go anywhere people would train you to follow the Spirit. Goodbye investment banking, Hello pastoring. Needless to say, I was a little nervous when I met your parents at graduation and you said to them, "This is Dr. Tran, the person that changed my life and made me want to be a pastor!" I remember your parents looking less than impressed, as if they entrusted you to Baylor and we ended up ruining your life. I remember them looking at me with a kind of side eye, as if the one Asian professor you had turned out to be a race traitor! I wanted to tell them they had only themselves to blame, raising their kids Christian and all. Thankfully I kept quiet!

That all seems so long ago, those younger versions of our selves now having grown older (in my case, old!). It's been 18 years since you graduated, and you've been a pastor of some sort 15 years—serving the last 10 years as senior pastor of your suburban church. Wow, how time flies!

I have to admit, your email hit me like a ton of bricks. I think the last time we corresponded was when you came across something I had written and sent me a nice note. At the time you seemed to be doing well. I think I recall your joking that the great achievement of your tenure as pastor was that you were shrinking the church. It sounds like since then things have gotten hard. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you seem to be feeling a great deal of disappointment, and even wonder if things we talked about way back then set you up for failure. You even quoted a couple of passages from our class readings. The first comes from Sheldon Wolin, which you recount me describing back then as "the great political theorist of participatory democracy." You bring up this passage where he (neither religious or Christian) describes the great contribution of Christianity accordingly: "The attempt of Christians to understand their own group life provided a new and sorely needed source of ideas for Western political thought. Christianity succeeded where the Hellenistic and late classical philosophies had failed, because it put forward a new and powerful ideal of community which recalled men to a life of meaningful participation" (Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 87). You remember my summarizing Wolin as saying Christianity introduced a new way of imagining human existence, that the church offered a novel way of inhabiting time, and indeed instilling time with meaning insofar as time could be conceived as time *for* others and God. You then bring up John Howard Yoder. You somehow had a copy of a paper you did for the class, one where you quote Yoder describing this novel community, the church, as those Jesus gave "a new way to deal with offenders—by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence—by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money—by sharing it.... He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society—by building a new order, not smashing the old" (Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 29). Your email recalls how back then your

discovering the church as this new way of being in the world and Yoder's account of the gospel as continuous with God's creating a new community of the saved—Yoder's "original revolution"—became a kind of second conversion for you, the first marked by your childhood baptism and this second conversion taking the form of God's call for you to become a pastor to serve this new community, this original revolution, this gospel.

And then your letter, crushingly, describes how your long experience as pastor has found very little of this to be true. You say that rather than a whole new way of being together, it feels like the same old way of being together, which is more like not being together. You describe church communities where getting people to spend time together beyond Sundays feels like pulling teeth. You talk about "the slog" of ministry, where year after year you can only expect so much change from your congregants, and instead, you see folks "wallowing" in the same old sins, everything from consumerism to racism to plain old complacency. You say it feels like the opposite of a revolution, and if anything, it is the church that is in need of revolution. You observe that church attendance was dwindling before the pandemic, but after, almost no one shows up for anything.

Mostly you say that you feel as if God hasn't shown up, that you did your part, giving up a career in what felt like a promising life. Now that God hasn't shown up, you feel like you're the only one without a chair, as if everyone else knew "the church" wasn't really a thing, everyone but you. You're too kind to say as much, but I get the feeling you felt you were fed a fantasy by people like me, or perhaps the things we read, and especially the way we read and talked about Scripture. You then bring up how you feel like the Wolin quote has proven misleading, and you make the astute observation that perhaps the dissolution of the church matches a larger dissolution of communal life in the late modern world.

And then you talk about Yoder, and how his long dark history of sexual abuse, which he actually tries to justify with his original-revolution theology, came to light in the years since our class read him, and specifically read him in ways that inspired your pastoral vocation. This feels, you said, not simply a defeater to theological arguments endorsing the centrality of "the church" but likely Christianity's ruination. Even though I didn't know then what I know now, I feel so bad having had y'all read Yoder. Like secondary victims, you students were given Yoder without any warning. It must feel not only like a betrayal but a violation. After all, church sexual abuse is particularly pernicious inasmuch as it operates *within* the church's communion, and therefore distorts from the inside Christianity's central claim that we are bodies gathered around one body; it violates that trust and makes a liar out of any claim that we can be one body, weaponizing the very idea of church. If the dissolution of communal life is a function of the late modern world coming apart at the seams, here the dissolution finds its source in something far more intimate. Your reaction in your email is to say, No wonder no one wants to come to church, for not only is it often meaningless, it's dangerous.

All the while, you could have made a nice life for yourself and your family had you followed out your path in finance, not only a more comfortable and prestigious life, but one not so prone to disappointment. You remind me that part of the benefit of investment banking is that no one expects that to be morally praiseworthy, so there's no letdown when expectations go unmet. There you would have been left alone to do your thing. Now you're stuck in a church where your available options seem to be either success, where success often means (you remind me of Hauerwas' funny quip) being attacked by a thousand biting ducks, or failure and the empty pews that come with it.

To your credit, I don't read your email as simply voicing disappointments and pointing fingers, even though you have every right to do that. Indeed, I do feel bad that things have

turned out difficult. I feel bad that what we discussed all those years ago both inspired you the pastorate and seemingly set you up for failure. And I feel really bad that I didn't know to protect you from Yoder, not only his abuses but also how his abuses did damage to the world you're now supposed to help your parishioners love. But again, I sense you're not just asking me to acknowledge the difficulties, but you're letting me know in order to hear what I think. And again, this is to your credit that you still hold me as someone worth listening to as well as confiding in. So here goes, my two cents, which may be worth far less than that.

I don't know if they ever mentioned it, but did you know I ran into your folks a couple years back? It was about the time pandemic restrictions started loosening up and people were more out and about. I was having dim sum while visiting Dallas when some folks I didn't initially recognize approached me. They reminded me they were your parents and that we had met at your graduation. They invited me to join them for lunch. I felt surprised they felt so warm toward me given that I perhaps had ruined their kid back in the day. When I asked how you were doing, their faces lit up talking about your life as a pastor. I asked how your church was going, and they related that COVID had made so many things difficult. But then they said something that surprised me: "But that's the way it's supposed to be." They even cracked a joke and said "Jesus never promised us a rose garden" or some such thing. They talked about how proud they were of you, how you were doing the LORD's work, how glad they were that you chose the path you did. They said that while there's no denying you're the poorest of their kids, there's also no denying you're the happiest, the one with the least money and the most meaning. And then, they did what a lot of Asian parents do—they insisted on paying for our lunch. I did the Asian thing and fought them for the bill, but stopped when they said, "We insist, we want to thank you for all you did for our child."

As I drove home, I wondered whether they had ever said those things to you, whether you ever felt those things from them. I wonder that now. My wonderment is not so much about whether you feel love from them or whether they're good at conveying their pride in you. My wonderment has to do with whether you've heard the truths they conveyed to me that day, that meaning matters more than money, that you are doing the LORD's work, that the church doesn't mean a bowl of cherries but rather something hard but good, and perhaps good because hard, and that you've gone down a path where happiness becomes, eventually one way or another, undeniable. Those are truths, Pastor, truths I bet you convey every day to your people, sometimes with words I'm sure, and knowing you, eloquent words, but also continuously and quietly through the way you live your life.

I too feel what you're feeling, or at least as much as I can. Less and less students want to go to seminary and the ones who do aren't inspired by the pastorate as much as things like academia, chaplaincy, organizing, social movements, etc. You know I think those things are great, but they are not what I see Scripture claiming as the way God redeems the world. Perhaps I want to say that the great difference between things like the church and social movements is that while social movements seek to change the world, the church lives in the good news that God has saved the world, thereby calling people to God's peace and patience such that we don't need to change the world but to love it, where loving it surely changes it. I imagine our shared sadness for the current plight of the American church comes not from any sense that empty pews indicate some lack of God's blessings, but rather that people sit outside of those blessings, missed opportunities to participate in the greatest show on Earth. And hence for me the real tragedy of the legacy of church abuse is not that it somehow hinders God's making all things new, but rather that it puts the lie to God making all things new.

All these signs of dissolution of communal life in late modern society saddens me too. The social forces at work, having been at work for decades if not centuries now, makes so much about common life difficult. And if the church is, as I think Wolin rightly thought it was, about the common life God makes possible, if it is indeed a new way of inhabiting time *together*, then the social forces, however we account for them, feels a fundamental threat to what church promises. This makes empty pews troubling indeed. But I also want to say, echoing your parents, that I'm not quite sure that by "church" the New Testament meant "lots of people" much less "megachurch" just as I'm pretty sure that when the older Testament talks about God's people, it shows forth a people often on the underside of history, often under the thumb of empires, that no matter how much God's people wanted to be empire, God will not surrender them to such small dreams, that they will instead remain a nomadic, exilic, empty-pewed people—and yet God is still theirs, and they, God's. God promised us life and life abundant, which is not the same as a bowl of cherries or a church full of people. People coming to church is one sign of God's presence and power, but not nearly the only one. Sometimes that presence and power is indicated by the pastor that remains even as people leave. Now, don't get me wrong, none of this is license to stop being the amazing "effective" pastor you are, inviting people, serving people, giving marvelous sermons leaving people wanting more, being the kind of church where the Spirit adds daily to your numbers. But, as you know better than I, you don't do that great stuff because your goal is full pews—you don't do that stuff because you think the world is about to end, but because you think the world has ended, the new world has come, and loving people by preaching word and sacrament is what one does in the terms of that new world. Maybe this is me saying that God has emptied out the pews in order to help church be church, to clarify matters as to what matters. The church, that which God has mysteriously chosen as the means by which God makes God known, betokens God's infinite capacity to take us in, quite often despite ourselves. Churches might be empty, or emptier, but God is full, infinitely full—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, world without end.

I hope you can rest in these truths, uttered feebly by me, better by your parents, and my guess, best by you. Yours in love, me (your *old* teacher ;).