

*“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

In the days of the great ocean liners, long before the availability of air travel, people travelling from North America to England would know they were near land when they saw the Eddystone Lighthouse off Plymouth. That lighthouse has a startling history. The first beacon was built there over three hundred years ago to warn ships of the reefs. Mr. Henry Winstanley (no relation to our Winstanleys), confident that he had built a permanent structure, chiselled into its side, "Blow, O ye winds! Rise, O ocean! Break forth, ye elements and try my work!" After the first winter, the lighthouse needed major repairs. Then, hardly three years later, while Winstanley and his men were making more repairs, a hurricane churned the ocean into a fury and swept the whole lighthouse into the sea. All lives were lost. Some years later, John Smeaton, a pioneer in civil engineering, erected the third Eddystone Light squarely on top of Eddystone, laying the foundation deep into its rocky depths. But he built with faith and prayer, not boasting in his own skill. He engraved on the side of the new lighthouse these words of Scripture, *Except the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain that build it.* (Psalm 127:1 - KJV) Winds and waves far worse than those that ripped out the first structure have raged against it; enemies have tried to destroy it; but for over two hundred years it stood unmoved to greet and guide travellers to British shores.

For over 2,000 years, another edifice has stood firm and solid, even though the storms of this world have often raged against it. It has stood unwavering in the midst of attacks from without and from within. It is the glorious building that God, the Holy Spirit, has built on the Solid Rock, Jesus Christ. We are, of course, speaking of God's church. In these weeks after Pentecost which we refer to as *The Time of the Church*, we focus on what it means to be God's people in the church. Today we rejoice that the Church, built on Jesus Christ, the Rock of Ages, the Rock of our Salvation, will stand rock solid as long as this world endures.

In every generation there have been those who have feared for the future of the church. When we read the Acts of the Apostles or look at the epistles of Paul, we see that there were times of struggle both within the church and from outside the church. But it also seems true that the church is facing problems today that can seem overwhelming to us. We fear declining numbers. We worry about the shortage of pastors. We live in a world where so many see the church as irrelevant and out of touch with the world today. There are those who declare that we are living in the post-Christian era. In their opinion, the church is collapsing, a building that should be condemned because it is no longer useful. How sad it is that when we hear mention of the church in the news, it is usually in a negative sense because of some scandal or a new case of abuse. We hear people speak of the church as an evil tyrant, conspiring to control people's thoughts and lives. Some very prominent individuals have labelled Christians as abusers, since we force our beliefs upon our children and on other people. In our relativistic era, where all truths are supposed to be accepted as of equal value, the message of the church, which insists on one truth—and that Jesus Christ alone is *“the way, and the truth, and the life”* (John 14:6, ESV) is an unwelcome absolute. When the church that is built on Christ and on His Word of truth still insists on calling sinful what God has said is sinful: homosexuality, euthanasia or medical assistance in dying, living together, lying, cheating, selfishness and greed and all those other vices that the world likes but God condemns, then we are not progressive enough for a world where, as Paul says: *“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.”* (2 Timothy 4:3, ESV)

Of course, it isn't just the things outside the church that worry us. In the greater context of our text Paul declares: *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility”* (Ephesians 2:13-14, ESV). Yet we can see the walls go up so quickly again. Members of the church exchange angry, sinful words and the walls go up. Instead of the forgiveness that should be exchanged, there is division and separation. Or a congregation decides to do something that is not agreeable to all the members. It may have been a majority decision, but it wasn't *my* choice, and the walls go up again. The pastor says something in his sermon that seems a bit harsh or that we struggle to accept, or that we just don't like, and the walls

go up. God tells us through our text today that ***“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”*** (Ephesians 2:19–20, ESV) But we don’t always act as a loving family. We aren’t one in Christ the way He wants us to be one in Him. If anything we behave like a broken, dysfunctional family.

In the face of all this, Paul reminds us that the church is not a structure or edifice built by human hands, but it is spiritual house that God, the Holy Spirit builds upon Jesus Christ—***a holy temple in the Lord.*** In the Apostles’ Creed we confess [*“I believe] in the Holy, Christian Church, the communion of saints.”* The Holy Christian Church we speak of in the creed is made up of all those whom the Holy Spirit has *called by the gospel, enlightened with His gifts, sanctified and kept in the true faith.* (SC, 3<sup>rd</sup> Art.) This church exists wherever the Spirit, working through the Word of God, and through the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, brings people to know and believe that even though they are sinners, enemies of God who disobey Him as rebellious children, they have forgiveness for their sins and newness of life because Jesus Christ, the true God, died in their place upon the cross, and rose again as the victor over death and Satan. That is what makes us saints. But we are a communion. We are together as one in Christ. This is the church that stands, even though the spires of churches built ages ago have fallen. This is the church that stands, in spite of the rages of men and the persecution of the world. This is the church that stands in spite of our internal conflicts, as God’s people hear His Word of truth and rejoice in the life and salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ alone.

The devil is always at work—and working hard—to make the church fearful, uncertain and doubtful. But the Church that is built on Christ and His Gospel of truth is able to withstand the devil’s assaults. We look to the Lord, who has reconciled the world to Himself through His death and resurrection. We look to a Saviour, who has defeated all the powers of sin and death and darkness. We have the confidence we just sang of in the hymn: *Though with a scornful wonder The world sees her oppressed, By schisms rent asunder, By heresies distressed, Yet saints their watch are keeping; Their cry goes up, “How long?” And soon the night of weeping Shall be the morn of song. Through toil and tribulation And tumult of her war She waits the consummation Of peace forevermore Till with the vision glorious Her longing eyes are blest, And the great Church victorious Shall be the Church at rest.* (LSB 644)

We do not face the future in fear; rather, we look forward in hope to the victory that is ours in Christ. We also know that contrary to popular belief, the church is not passe; it is not ‘out of touch’ with the real world. It is not falling apart or crumbling. Rather, the church is as relevant and as necessary for the world today as it ever was. Two thousand years after its birth, the church still stands, rock-solid in the midst of this wishy-washy world. Through the church’s ministry, the Holy Spirit of Pentecost has continued to work, so that countless people who were dead in their sins and doomed to hell, have come to know the redeeming love of Jesus Christ, and the forgiveness and life He gives to all who believe in Him. We cannot even begin to imagine what this world would be like if it were not for the influence of the Christian church. The psalmist says: ***“God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.”*** (Psalm 46:5, ESV) God continues to work in and through His church to build us into that wonderful temple where He lives by His Spirit.

Do we have our problems? Yes, we do. Do we have our divisions, even within this congregation? Yes, we do. Do we always live as the church God has called us to be? Sadly, no we do not. We have our failings, our weaknesses and our struggles. Thankfully, we also have the hope, forgiveness and life that is ours in Christ. When we wonder what the future of the church may be and when we wonder about our congregation, the simple truth is that God has given us the answer to our fears and questions. The answers we need are found in His Word, and proclaimed by His true church. His Word gives the church the answer to the real root problem—the problem of sin. It’s just like a bumper sticker you may have seen says: *Christ is the answer.* He is the answer to the problem of sin, which brings all the problems we may have in the church. Christ gave Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin. He is the answer to anger, hate or bitterness as He teaches us the meaning of love. He is the answer to all of the problems of life because in His resurrection from the dead we have the promise and assurance of a better life, a life filled with the power of His Holy Spirit. He, who has forgiven us, empowers us to forgive others in His name—and yes, that means our brothers and sisters in the Church. He is the one who helps us cope with, and overcome, the things that affect our lives today. He is the strength of His Church.

The church built on Jesus Christ stands as rock solid as it always has been; as rock solid as it always will be. We hear Jesus promise: ***“on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*** (Matthew 16:18, ESV) No matter what we, as a congregation, have had to face in the past days, months or years, we know that the church endures, because it is the church of God. God will preserve His church, just as He has always done. God will comfort His church, when His people find themselves hated and cast out by the world around them. God will chasten and cleanse His church when people turn from God’s truth to follow the misguided teachings of men, even if those teachings claim to be made in the name of the Lord. We

know that God will empower His church to continue its saving ministry to a lost and dying world in His name, as we will do this week in our VBS.

God has built His people together in Christ into a holy habitation. We are rock solid in Him. May God keep up His building programme, for His church is needed so desperately in this world. And thanks be to God for the blessings we have through His Church in Jesus Christ! Amen.