

1442

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1 Peter 2:2-10

As a pastor, I get a lot of people asking me questions. That is perfectly okay. I enjoy answering questions. It is who I am as a preacher and a teacher. It is my role to provide guidance and information on matters of faith, scripture, spirituality, doctrine, etc. Part of my job is to be your resident expert. For example, I might get asked...

- Why do we pray for the catholic church in the Apostles Creed? That is a small-c catholic. It is the Latin word for universal. We believe in the universal church.
- Why are Presbyterians so wrapped up with predestination? I knew you were going ask that. We're not. That is just a five-hundred-year-old misunderstanding.
- Let's say, hypothetically, that I won \$10,000 in the lottery. Is gambling a sin? Yes. But tithe 10% to the church and we'll call it even.
- I'm thinking about getting a tattoo. What does the Bible say about tattoos? The Old Testament prohibits tattoos. The New Testament doesn't say anything. I think you can be guided by the words of 1 Corinthians which says, *You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.*
- Do dogs go to heaven? I hope so or else I'm not going.
- What is the difference between Presbyterians and Scientologists? Sorry, there's not enough time in the world to answer that.
- In a bar fight between Martin Luther and John Calvin, who would win? Luther, hands down. He was a beer-swilling German monk. Calvin was a bookworm and was perpetually sick.

Never hesitate to ask me a question. If I know the answer I will tell you. If I don't then I will make up an answer... I mean look up an answer.

I get asked a lot of questions, but there is one question that I get asked occasionally that really gets under my skin. It should not bother me, but it does. You can say, Sherard, you are too sensitive about this, and I will agree. The question still bugs me.

The situation is always the same. I will be introduced to someone. They will learn that I am a pastor and they will ask what church I serve. I will tell them First Presbyterian Church in Lebanon. Usually, that is the end of it. Sometimes, they may confess that they also are Presbyterian and then we chat. The question that irritates me (and this happened recently) is when the person that I've just met asks me "how big is your church." This question, I contend, is impolite. It's like walking into someone's house and saying, "Great place you got here. What did you pay for it?" Or asking how much money they make. Or saying to someone, "You look like you've lost weight. Have you been sick?" Or, heaven forbid, inquiring if someone has had cosmetic surgery—things you don't ask someone you don't know that well.

This question about the size of one's church is appropriate in certain situations. If you are seeking advice about a staffing change it is okay to be asked "how many members do you have?" Or, if you are ordering t-shirts for the church picnic, not only can you ask how big is your church, but you can also ask how big are your church members.

The problem with the 'how big is your church' question is that it is meaningless. Different churches use numbers in different ways. Some churches count households (or families) instead of individuals. Some churches have a reputation for padding their numbers. For Presbyterians, the standard metric is the number of names on the Active Roll. Our Active Roll currently stands at 197. That is a fairly clean and accurate list.

As an aside, the average size of a congregation in our denomination is 163. We're above average by 20%. In the Middle Tennessee Presbytery, out of 85 congregations, we are 22nd in size. Last year we grew by 7 members. (Not every church grew.) Out of the 85 Middle Tennessee churches, we were 8th for growth. Statistically, we are doing well.

Now, that 197 members does not include children; it does not tell you about worship attendance, or Sunday School attendance. It does not tell you about mission involvement or how many attended the fish fry this week (over 100).

When someone I don't know asks me 'how big is your church,' the only thing they want to do is to compare churches. I suspect that they want to walk away with proof that their church is larger and therefore better. I don't give them this opportunity because rarely do I answer their question. Normally, I'll change the subject or pretend I couldn't hear them and move on. Or, depending on my mood, sometimes I'll answer by holding my arms out and saying, "About this big." Or I might answer 1.5 million. They will look confused and I will explain that the PCUSA has 1.5 million members and we view ourselves as a connected church, we are one church. Or, occasionally I will give this number—1442. You are no doubt wondering what is that number? That number is the number of people who have

been members of this congregation since its founding in 1910. When you join the church, your name is written into our membership ledger and you are given a sequential number. [The most recent person to join—number 1442—happens to be Marilyn Peyton over here.]

If someone were to object and say that clearly this church does not have fourteen-hundred members, I would tell them to read the letter of First Peter.

<scripture> The book of the bible that we know as First Peter was written to be circulated among the churches of Asia Minor—what today is known as modern Turkey. In the first century, this region consisted of Roman colonies—Galatia, Cappadocia, Bithynia, and others. Also in the first century, Christian missionaries were active in this region spreading the faith. The general view towards Christianity, however, was to one degree or another, a level of hostility. These Christians were mostly converts whose conversion was not universally praised by family and neighbors. Some even suffered persecution. It is to them that this letter is intended, calling them to maintain their faith in the face of persecution.

The writer calls the Christians to come to God as *living stones*. (What a wonderful image.) Despite being persecuted by mortals these living stones are *precious in God's sight*. These living stones have a further purpose. They can gather together and create something larger; they can form a *spiritual house*. These living stones are special because they are called by God to be a *holy priesthood*. The writer of this letter is affirming and supporting these new Christians. Despite the hostility or persecution they may face, he is reminding them that God has chosen them to be members of God's church.

In the city of Bath in England, there is a church that has a problem with some of its members. The church is Anglican and is called the Abbey Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. It has a lot of deadbeat members who are destroying their church. It is not the people in the pews, it is the bodies in the basement.

The church was founded as a monastery in the 7th century. The current building is a gothic cathedral that is over 500 years old. It sits on the remains of a massive Norman cathedral. It is estimated that 6000 people have been buried the floors of the church. Over time, as bodies decayed, these graves have settled and in places the floor is collapsing and the structural integrity of the entire building has been compromised. Imagine, it is Sunday morning and you are in worship singing *The Church's One Foundation* and suddenly the floor gives way and you are in the foundation. To control this grave situation, the church undertook a massive, multimillion-dollar engineering effort to dig out the old dirt and bones and inject a stabilizing mixture under the floors. Any human remains (and there are lots of them) were handled respectfully and with lots of prayers by the priests.

The members of a church—dead or alive, past or present—they make up the church as much as the bricks make up the walls of this building. Our church currently has 1442 bricks. Most of those folk are deceased. (Thankfully, they are not buried under the church.) Everyone of these people, whether we know them or not, define who we are. When you become part of this congregation, you become part of a legacy that has been building for a century. We are influenced by the elders and deacons, the teachers and pastors, our friends and mentors in the faith who help us grow from spiritual infants into a holy priesthood.

Christians are not single bricks sitting alone. We are part of a spiritual house, living and working together in the name of Christ as a community. We are cemented together in our love for one another.

We are living stones cemented together into a spiritual house. Just as this building has a cornerstone on the northeast corner, this congregation has as its cornerstone Jesus Christ, our spiritual cornerstone.

When I am asked that particular question that I find so annoying and I answer 1442, I am being faithful to scripture and the image put forward by the letter of First Peter—1442 souls who committed their lives to Christ through membership in this particular congregation, who willingly answered God's call to join with others in the faith to worship and serve, to be the living stones in this spiritual house, to be *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people* so that we may proclaim to the world God's *mighty acts*.

Let us give thanks to God.