

The Little Brown Church

*A report by the Always-Right Reverend
Doctor Isaiah J. Trin (Doc Trin, for short)*

Actually, it wasn't little at all. It was quite large. The church where I grew up, I mean. But it was brown. At least, it was brown when I was a small lad.

The church was the largest building on Main Street. It had a tower with a clock in it. The town maintained the clock. That was back when it was politically correct for churches and towns to get along. The town maintained the clock, and the church tried to maintain some semblance of order in the town. It was a good combination.

It was an impressive building, with its huge stained glass windows and towers. Some of the windows had people's names in them. Some had emblems in them, such as the one for the Masonic Lodge. That would have to be the subject of another report, since several preachers lost their jobs trying to get rid of that one. Some things cannot stand up to tradition, you know.

But the church was brown. The whole building was shingled and brown. And that's the way folks wanted it. It had been that way since the new building was put up after the fire of fifty-seven - EIGHTEEN fifty seven, that is. But one day the church needed painting. Painting the church was not something to be taken lightly. One could not just call a work day on Saturday and get it done. It could be a career for some people. It took a couple of weeks just to put up the scaffolding.

And so it was that someone (I am not sure anyone remembers who it was) came up with the idea to put metal siding on the church. The least expensive metal siding was (gasp) white in color. If siding was put on the church, it would last for a hundred years or so. Maintenance costs would be down. But tempers would be up. So economic analysis would have to be done to see if prorating the short tempers over time would amortize the long term benefits.

It was decided that decisions about the siding could not wait until the annual meeting. Besides, the annual meeting produced enough fighting to last most of the night, and no-one wanted to have to abbreviate the siding arguments just because the committee on committees couldn't find enough people to be on the committees. The deacons, who were scripturally qualified to run the church, if not scripturally qualified to be deacons, were divided on this issue. That would be enough to ensure everyone of being invited to dinner at least twice - once by each side of the argument. The preacher remained neutral, because if he crossed wires with either side of the deacons, he might be looking for another flock - and wouldn't care if he was in a brown or white building.

Most of the little old ladies who spent a good portion of their day on the party-line telephone (you have to pay extra for conference calls now. Everyone had them then)

could tell you who was for white and who was for brown. The subject occupied most of the conversation at the corner café, when the blueberry pie wasn't burned.

As the time for the meeting grew closer, emotions reached a fevered pitch. Whenever the "white" side was asked to bring a devotion, it would be about washing our sins white as snow. They had a doctrinal advantage, since it is hard to find good things in the scripture about brown. But when it came time for singing, such was not the case. No songs could be found that could provide a nullifying effect to "The Church in the Wildwood." Ah, now there was a great song. It has been several decades since I heard a congregation sing that song, but I remember every word because the song leader was on the "brown" side, and we sang that song every week:

*There's a church in the valley by the wildwood,
No lovelier spot in the dale;
No place is so dear to my childhood
As the little brown church in the vale.*

Then the "brown" basses would boom out:

*Oh, come, come, come, come . . . 3 lower parts
continue this while "brown" sopranos come in with:*

*Come to the church in the wildwood,
Oh come to the church in the dale;
No spot is so dear to my childhood
As the little brown church in the vale.*

Then on to the next verses for good measure.

*Oh, come to the church in the wildwood,
To the trees where the wild flowers bloom;
Where the parting hymn will be chanted,
We will weep by the side of the tomb.*

*From the church in the valley by the wildwood,
When day fades away into night,
I would fain from this spot of my childhood
Wing my way to the mansions of light.*

The chorus might be sung several extra times for emphasis, or if the organ player got his pipes stuck. Everyone could just imagine themselves winging their way to mansions of light from that large, majestic, BROWN church. Seemed like it must be the scriptural thing to do, or someone wouldn't have written such a nice song about it. It was hard for the "devotionals" to match the "singers" when it came to emotional support for their cause. Seems like it's always been that way. Emotions are difficult things to conquer, especially when they have a cause to uphold. It's hard to tell folks they can't sing something just because it happens to be contrary to scripture (I realize there is a lot of diversity of opinion involved here), especially when it feels so good. It's hard to keep Santa out of the church when emotions say that you're depriving kids of something important to their upbringing. It's hard to tell folks that writhing on the floor in ecstasy is not a good thing in the house of God, whether it's a white house or a brown house, no matter how "spiritual" it might make one "feel." It's hard to tell someone that he's not called to preach because his kids are uncontrollable, when he "feels" the "call of God." Feelings have been the foundation of many an earth-moving doctrine. After all, most people are just looking for a little justification - but that's another doctrine, as well.

And so it was that our church met, argued, fought, and voted over this most important issue. We sang, devoted, and hollered. We passed the secret ballots, after the children and those with heart monitors were excused. And, guess what? The majority of those present at the business meeting voted for the white metal siding. There were some who left the church because it "just wouldn't be the same any more." There were some who wouldn't speak to one another for a time. And the basses still sang "Come, Come, Come" because the song leader was a sore loser, and the choir knew the song so well they couldn't just stop singing it. That's why I still know that song today.

But that song taught me a lot about what was important in a church. Both the song and the siding have lasted in that church for over forty years now. A few changes have come around now and then. Some have scriptural foundations, and some have emotional ones. The emotional ones will eventually give in to other emotional ones. The scriptural ones give in to nothing, and provide a sure foundation. I think sometimes we forget about the foundation and are too concerned about the siding - and singing about it.

*For other **foundation** can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. I COR. 3:11*

When the siding is gone, and you can't sing any more, make sure the foundation is still there. It will outlast your emotions - and stay forever.

DOC TRIN