

## Christ Hath a Garden Walled Around

*Isaac Watts (1674–1748)*

Christ hath a garden walled around,  
A Paradise of fruitful ground,  
Chosen by love and fenced by grace  
From out the world's wide wilderness.

Like trees of spice his servants stand,  
There planted by his mighty hand;  
By Eden's gracious streams, that flow  
To feed their beauty where they grow.

Awake, O wind of heav'n and bear  
Their sweetest perfume through the air:  
Stir up, O south, the boughs that bloom,  
Till the beloved Master come:

That he may come, and linger yet  
Among the trees that he hath set;  
That he may evermore be seen  
To walk amid the springing green.

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### Those Little Churches

*Kevin T. Bauder*

My father's first pastorate was in Cambridge, Iowa. Other fundamental Baptist churches were located nearby. Slater had one less than ten miles to the west. Both Ames and Nevada had churches of like faith and order, each about twelve miles away. Ankeny had a regular Baptist church about twenty miles down Interstate 35.

Skip ahead. My first senior pastorate was in Newton, Iowa. Immanuel Baptist had at least three other Bible-preaching Baptist churches within about a twenty-minute drive, the closest of which was less than ten miles away. None was very large. The other churches were all older congregations, yet decades prior Newton had been specifically targeted to be a church plant.

These facts have occurred to me over the past weeks while I have been preaching in a little, rural Minnesota church. It is located near three other fundamental Baptist churches: one is about ten miles to the north, another about ten miles to the south, and still another perhaps eight or nine miles to the west. It is without a pastor and, thanks partly to COVID and partly to job transfers, can no longer afford to call a man full time.

The first time I visited this church I thought, "Is this church really necessary? It's just a handful of people. They could easily drive to one of the other churches in the area. Wouldn't they do better just to merge?" But then I remembered Cambridge, Newton, and the sprinkling of little, fundamental Baptist churches across the state of Iowa. I do not believe that these small churches are a waste of time, money, or effort. In fact, I think that far more ministry *per capita* takes place in them than in big churches.

I remember the Sunday that my father's Bible college sent him to fill the pulpit at the Bible Presbyterian Church in Cambridge. Since it was close to home he took my mother and all five children. The seven of us accounted for somewhere between a third and a half of the congregation that morning. At the end of the service the church's two elders approached Dad and asked, "Would you be our pastor?"

When my father recovered from the surprise, he reminded them that he was a Baptist, not a Presbyterian. He told them that he would preach New Testa-



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ment doctrine, including believer baptism. They responded, “We’re willing to learn.”

He then observed, “I’m a dispensationalist and your church believes in Covenant Theology.” The two elders looked at each other for a moment, then responded, “We don’t even know what that means.” Long story short, my father accepted the pastorate and led them through the process of becoming a Baptist church. Interestingly, the presbytery readily accepted this change. They had not been able to support the church adequately for some time. Their attitude was that they would rather see a thriving Baptist church preaching the gospel than a dying Presbyterian church closing its doors and preaching nothing.

For compensation the church could offer a moldering parsonage and a pittance of a salary. My father had to work multiple jobs so that he could simultaneously feed his family and pastor the church. But the little congregation began to blossom. After many professions of faith, even more baptisms, a building renovation, and a strong pastoral presence in the community, it became a healthy, vibrant church. Dad went on to pastor bigger churches, but I doubt that he ever had a church respond more fruitfully to his ministry.

Well, there might have been one. It came after he had otherwise retired. He was living in northern Wisconsin. A little church an hour or so away in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula was without a pastor. Like the church in Cambridge, the church in Wakefield could offer a parsonage but not a living wage. Dad was able to minister without a living wage. He accepted this church’s call and went to work. Again the ministry blossomed with professions of faith, baptisms, some building renovation, and a strong pastoral presence in the community. It has flourished even more under its present pastor.

These little congregations are precious in the sight of the Lord Jesus. They are temples in which the Holy Spirit dwells. They deserve good, sound, careful, caring, thoughtful pastors. To serve them is an honor. The men who pastor them almost never receive much recognition on earth, but someday they will stand to the applause of all heaven.

I know of a small group—almost a cadre—of young men who have earned good seminary degrees. In fact, most of them have earned doctorates. They have deliberately taken pastorates in small churches like these, investing themselves in ministries that will never make them famous. Some of them have had to seek outside employment for the privilege of laboring in these tiny congregations. To my amazement, I have heard others disparage them as men who “do not pastor churches that matter.”

Let me tell you something. These churches matter to God the Father, by whose election they exist. They matter to Jesus Christ, who died to present

them to Himself. They matter to the Holy Spirit, who indwells them. Their members are Christ’s lambs who need under-shepherds. Thank God for learned, skilled, trained men who are willing to spend themselves in little ministries. To me they are genuine heroes.

Sometimes churches have good reasons to merge—especially if their separate existence was the result of an unbiblical division. Sometimes churches need to go out of existence, especially if they dwindle as the result of mere idiosyncrasies. Nevertheless, we should not permit a church to die simply because another church is within driving distance. Nor should we conclude that a church does not deserve to survive simply because it is small. Instead, we should pray and work to prepare the kind of men who will devote themselves to serving these congregations. May God raise up more of them.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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