

“You Are God’s Temple”

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 3:16-23; Exodus 40:17-38

Growing up in fundamentalism, I recall hearing a number of sermons stressing the fact that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit. While this was the reason usually given us as to why we shouldn’t smoke cigarettes or drink alcoholic beverages, we were never told what it means to be the temple of the Holy Spirit, nor were we told how this doctrine should inform our view of the church. But for Paul, the fact that Christ’s church is the temple of the Holy Spirit (who indwells each one of us) should be fundamental to our conception of the nature of the church. This is why the divisions and factions in the Corinthian church were so destructive. To divide Christ’s body (God’s spiritual temple indwelt by the Holy Spirit) is to attempt to destroy that which God is building through the preaching of Christ crucified. Paul must warn the Corinthians of the serious consequences of tearing apart that which God is building in their midst.

We return to our series on 1 Corinthians, and we are discussing this very important letter to a church struggling with a multitude of problems, many of which are facing the church again today. Most of the members of the Corinthian church were recent converts to Christianity. They were struggling to leave behind pagan ways of thinking and doing. The Corinth of Paul’s age was a city with a Roman ethos, a Greek history, and dominated by pagan religion. Although they had come to faith in Christ, the Corinthians faced their pagan past on a daily basis. Paganism was everywhere they went. Under these conditions, no doubt, it was very difficult for the Corinthians to learn to think and act like Christians.

As we have seen in previous sermons, Paul has been using irony to make a point. The Greeks think Paul’s message of a crucified Savior is only so much foolishness. The cross makes no sense to someone steeped in Greco-Roman culture. Yet Christians know that Christ’s cross is the power of God unto salvation. In the preaching of Christ crucified—a message which the Greeks regard as foolishness—the wisdom of God is revealed. And this revelation of God’s wisdom exposes the so-called wisdom of the pagans for what it truly is—foolishness. In making this point, Paul has skillfully exposed the fact that the Greek quest for wisdom is not a quest for wisdom at all. Rather, the philosophers, prophets and sages reject the very wisdom they claim to be seeking. While they mock God, God mocks them. They claim to be seeking the truth. Yet, they are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.

The new Christians in Corinth must understand that God’s wisdom is revealed through the proclamation of the cross, even though that message offends Greek sensitivities. Paul sees the root of the problem in the fact that many of the Corinthians were still devoted to the worldly wisdom of their recent past. It was this typically Greek love of celebrities, entertaining public speakers, and philosophers who had all the answers, which led the Corinthian Christians to devote themselves to those individuals in the church who had taught them when they first came to faith (Paul, Apollos and Peter).

Sadly, the Corinthians quickly divided into cliques centering around these teachers—even though those who taught them would never have encouraged the mantras being heard in the Corinthian church. “I follow Paul.” “I follow Peter.” “I follow Apollos.” According to Paul, this mind-set demonstrates the sad fact that even though the Corinthians may have thought themselves to be mature and making good progress in the Christian life, the reality is that this only demonstrates their spiritual immaturity and shows how deeply pagan ways of thinking and doing still dominate this church.

In the opening chapter of his letter, Paul exhorted the Corinthians, *“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”* The Corinthians are to be united around a common faith and common doctrine. As Paul fleshes out his point in the next several chapters, he reminds us in the first half of chapter 3 of the organic nature of Christ’s church. Christ’s church is not club or some sort of voluntary society, like one of the pagan guilds which dominated Corinth. According to Paul, we are all part of God’s garden of which Christ is Lord. Some are called to plant seed, some are called to water the seed once planted, while others are called to tend various portions of the garden.

Paul introduces the metaphor of the church as a building, making a theological connection between the temple as that place where God dwelt in the midst of his people under the old covenant, and the work of the Holy Spirit, who indwells believers, forming us into a living temple under the new covenant. This spiritual temple has been built upon the unshakable foundation of the cross of Jesus Christ, that foundation which Paul laid down when he first arrived in Corinth and preached the gospel to them. As Paul puts it in verse 11, *“For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”*

Since the foundation has already been laid, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to consider the fact that human wisdom is only so much wood, hay and stubble. To try and build Christ’s church upon the sinful expectations of human wisdom, is to build a church that cannot withstand hard times, nor the judgment of God. Instead, Christians must build on the foundation of the gospel, using those elements given by God which reflect the wisdom of God (i.e., silver, gold and precious stones). These are the things which withstand both difficult times as well as the judgment of God.

As we come to the closing verses of chapter 3 (vv. 16-23) Paul now makes explicit what was implied in the previous. The building of which he has been speaking is the temple of God, which is the mystical body of Jesus Christ. This spiritual temple (the church) is that place where God’s Spirit dwells with his people.

Throughout Paul’s epistles, whenever he speaks of the temple, he is referring to Christ’s church. This is quite remarkable when we consider that when Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians in the mid 50’s of the first century, the Jerusalem temple was still standing. The temple was not destroyed by the armies of Titus until A.D. 70, another dozen years or so after Paul composed this letter. When Paul points out that the church—not the building, but its members who are indwelt by the Spirit—constitutes the true temple of God, this must have come as quite a shock to those Jews who may have heard Paul’s preaching. For Paul, the coming of Jesus Christ changed everything in that this allows us to see that the earthly temple and the tabernacle which preceded it, were not an end in themselves, as Jews had come to believe. Rather, these structures should have served to point Israel ahead to the age of the new covenant in which God will dwell in the midst of his people in a way that transcends anything found in the Old Testament.

For a Jew, however, the Jerusalem temple was very the center of Jewish religious life. The temple was that place where the high priest offered the sacrifices in the Holy of Holies, and to which the faithful journeyed during the annual Passover. Not only that, but the Jerusalem temple was also the political and cultural center of all of Israel—like Big Ben in London, or the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The Jerusalem temple was a magnificent building and dominated the entire city. To say, as Paul does, that the temple was no longer that place where God was present with his people, was to challenge one of the fundamental tenants of the Jewish religion. And to say that the Jerusalem temple had been superseded by a crucified Messiah, was a huge stumbling block to any Jew.

But that is exactly what Paul had been preaching. The Jerusalem temple was superseded by the coming of Jesus Christ, who declared himself “*greater than the temple*” (Matthew 12:6). No matter how magnificent, the building in Jerusalem was now obsolete. In fact, Jesus even went so far as to proclaim that he was the true temple. In John 2:18-22, we find the following discourse between Jesus and the money-changers in the temple. “*The Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*”

As John points out in John 2:22, this did not become clear to Jesus’ disciples until after his resurrection and Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh. In light of the events associated with the Day of Pentecost as recounted in Acts 2, Christians have now become living stones in a spiritual temple. As we read in 1 Peter 2:4-5, “*As you come to him [Jesus], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*” Christ’s church is that spiritual house, composed of living stones (us) who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

If Paul’s doctrine that Christ was the true temple was a shock to Jews, it is also an important response to the paganism which dominated Corinth. The Corinthians lived in a city filled with pagan temples which were dedicated to the individual members of the pantheon of pagan Greek or Roman gods. These temples were shrines to that particular “god” for whom they were named, and they were that place where those who worshiped a particular god went to make the obligatory sacrifices to receive the blessing and protection of that deity. Paul must respond to this pagan notion that the “gods” were like super-humans who resided in these holy spaces built for them by their followers. He does so by pointing out that the true and living God is not bound to a particular building or place. God dwells in us.

So, in verses 16-17, Paul writes, “*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*” From a Christian perspective, God, who is everywhere, resides with his people whenever and wherever they assemble for worship.¹ This fact not only separates Christian worship from Judaism—Christians need not have a geographical center for their faith—this also distinguishes Christianity from paganism, who view their gods much like the super-heroes of American pop culture. The pagan gods are petty and angry, and must be placated through the offering of sacrifices (food, incense, coins). They must be venerated through the building of elaborate temples, and through the performance of very specific ceremonies and rituals. Paul’s doctrine undercuts all of this. Our God dwells within his people. We are his temple.

The history of redemption reflects Paul’s point. After God delivered his people from Egypt, when he made a covenant with his people at Mount Sinai, he commanded that Moses to build a tabernacle in which God would be present in the midst of the Israelites. As we saw in Exodus 40:34-38 (our Old Testament lesson), that after Moses finished the tabernacle, “*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out.*

¹ Hays, First Corinthians, 57.

But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.” The presence of God—seen in the pillar of fire (the cloud) reappears on the Day of Pentecost when what looked like tongues of fire appeared over the head of each believer.

According to 2 Chronicles 7, when Solomon completed the first temple in Jerusalem, and after the ark had been brought in and the temple had been properly furnished, we read in verse 1, “*As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.’*” Under the new covenant, all believers are living stones who make up God’s temple when we assemble for worship. As God’s glory now fills the spiritual temple when we assemble together to hear the word and receive the sacrament in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to worship the Lord and respond with hearts of gratitude, because “he is good!”

When Paul begins verse 16 with a question, “do you not know?” he is offering a bit of a rebuke. The question itself implies that what Paul is about to ask the Corinthians should be common knowledge, but they still are not grasping his point. All believers are part of God’s temple, not just those who teach (i.e., Paul and Apollos). Believers compose the temple, because the Holy Spirit lives in them, since he indwells each member of Christ’s church. We should notice that “temple” is singular, but the “you” is plural. We should not think that the individual by himself is God’s temple (although Paul does speak that way in 1 Corinthians 6:19). Rather, his point here is that believers are all indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and together form the temple of God. There is an organic nature to the church, and it is important that we not overlook this point because this is why divisions and factions within the church are so serious. Division and schism rip apart Christ’s spiritual temple. For Christians to divide into factions centered around those who teach and preach to them is a dangerous thing. It does great harm to Christ’s church.

As Paul puts it in verse 17, such things and the individuals who participate in them, destroy the temple. And the consequences for this are grave. God will destroy all those who bring about such division! *If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.* This is a very serious warning. It was Jesus who reminds us in Matthew 16:18 that the gates of Hell will not prevail against his church. That said, it must be pointed out that such destruction may not refer to eternal punishment—after all, Paul has just told us in verse 15 that such people escape through the flames. But this warning certainly indicates that there are serious consequences for all those who create division and form factions.² At the very least, their efforts will be frustrated by the Lord of the church himself. God’s temple (the mystical body of Jesus Christ) is Holy, and Paul warns that all who bring harm to it, will indeed, be punished by God himself.

Having made his point that believers form God’s temple, in the closing verses of the chapter, (vv. 18-23), Paul returns to his main point that the divisions in the Corinthian church are sinful because they stem from worldly wisdom, which, in actuality, is from God’s perspective only so much foolishness. Paul began his discussion of true wisdom v. false wisdom back in 1:18, and although he will refer back to this

² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 67.

theme later on in this epistle, this section brings this discussion of wisdom to a conclusion.³ As Leon Morris reminds us, “the things of God are not to be estimated in accordance with the rules of the philosophers.”⁴ And that, of course, has been the root of the problem in Corinth—people are viewing things from the perspective of the philosophers—that is, from the perspective of this evil age.

As Paul writes in verse 18, “*Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.*” Paul now reminds the Corinthians of the importance of seeing things related to the church from God’s perspective, not from the perspective of the world. The verb “to deceive” is used six times by Paul, but is not found anywhere in the New Testament. Paul issues a command here, emphasizing the fact that some of the Corinthians were deceiving themselves by hanging on to the wisdom of this age after coming to faith in Christ, and this self-deception must stop.⁵ And the way it stops is to focus upon Christ and him crucified.

Those who are deceived, Paul says, are using the standards of “this age” to evaluate the way things ought to be done in the church. This is what the Corinthians must grasp. For Paul, this present age is evil (that is, it is fallen), is dominated by Satanic deception, and it and everything associated with it is destined to perish. The sad fact is that the wisdom of this age is still serving as the lens through which the Corinthians viewed Paul’s gospel. Paul’s response to those doing such a thing is to exhort them to see things from the perspective of the age to come (and therefore, to view the church and their behavior in the light of God’s wisdom as revealed in the cross through the power of the Holy Spirit). The Corinthians must do this, even though the world will regard such wisdom as foolishness. Although they face their pagan past and the temptation to return to that past is always present, they must leave these things behind in order to move on to maturity.

Paul elaborates on this further, in the following verses. “*For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness,’ and again, ‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.’*” In 1 Corinthians 1:20, Paul already asked the rhetorical questions, “*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*” Now he makes the very same point a second time. God mocks the wisdom of this age. Although the Corinthians may be impressed by it, God sees it for what it is—foolishness, futile, craftiness. To become truly wise, Christians must embrace the very thing the philosophers they admire regard as foolishness. True wisdom is found in God’s revelation of a bloody savior hanging upon a cross, not in the so-called wisdom of this present evil age. As Christians, the only way we live lives of gratitude before God is to see things through the lens of the age to come, and not of this present age.

Citing from Job 5:13, and then in verse 20, from Psalm 94:11, Paul understands full well that while the craftiness of men may fool others (they may have even fooled themselves), they have not fooled God. The Lord knows their thoughts and the outcome of their thinking. He knows the result of their thinking is futility (literally, “fruitless”). Like everything else associated with this age, such thinking is destined to perish. Why, then, should Christians remain so attracted to it? It only brings damage to the church.

³ Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 93.

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 68.

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 68.

Because this is the case, Paul issues the following instructions in verses 21-23, “*So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*” The first thing we should note is that Paul instructs the Corinthians that there will be no more boasting about mere men, apostles included. To pit Paul against Apollos, Peter or others, as the Corinthians were doing, is to be associated with the worldliness and foolishness of which Paul has been so critical.

But there is an acceptable form of boasting for Paul, which he has already spelled out in 1 Corinthians 1:31. “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*” But the question here is why limit yourselves to boasting about those who teach you, when, in Christ, all things are yours (cf. Romans 8:32-38-39). Indeed, we are heirs of all of the blessings which God has promised us in Christ Jesus.

So, Paul says to the Corinthians, don't boast about Apollos, Cephas, Paul or anything else. A Christian possesses all things, present and future, a veiled reference, no doubt, to possessing all the blessings of the age to come, even now, because we are in Christ. And since we are in Christ (literally, “we are Christ's”), we possess all that he has and is. And as Paul puts it, “Christ is of God,” and therefore, if we are in Christ, we also are of God. And since this is the case, there is no basis whatever for dividing into factions which form around specific individuals. The church is Christ's and we are his. This is why division and schism is so serious to the health and well-being of the church.

In light of Paul's assertion that we are the temple of God, what are the implications for us?

When Paul speaks of the church as the temple of God it is hard for us to realize the shock waves such an assertion sent throughout Judaism. This was also a powerful apologetic against paganism. Even though the Jerusalem temple was still standing when Paul wrote this letter, after the events of Christ's death, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost, it is clear that one greater than the temple has come. When Jesus died upon the cross for our sins, when he was raised for our justification, when he ascended to the right hand of God and then baptizes each of us in the blessed Holy Spirit, the true purpose of the Jerusalem temple (the earthly building) can now be seen. The Jerusalem temple was designed to point us to the heavenly temple and to the kingly, prophetic and priestly work of Christ. This is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples that it was good that he leave them and send to them the Holy Spirit. No longer is God's presence tied to a building or to a particular place. God is present with his people wherever we gather because “you are God's temple.” With the coming of Jesus, the earthly temple has been superceded. It is obsolete. This temple is not static bound to time and space. It is a composed of living stones and will extend into all the earth. We are that temple because God's Spirit dwells in us.

Paul's point applies to the pagan religions in Corinth as well. God does not dwell in temples made by hands. He is not capricious nor arbitrary. He does not require puny sacrifices nor ceremonies to placate his anger. He has already poured his anger upon his own Son, who has taken away the guilt of our sins and turned aside his holy wrath. Not only that, he as poured out his Spirit upon his people. The Corinthians need not make an offering in the temple of Zeus or Aphrodite to appease the gods. The wisdom of God in dealing with sin is seen in the cross. In Christ's crucifixion, God's anger has now turned to blessing and favor. And because Christ has died for us and because God has given us his Holy Spirit, Paul can say to the Corinthians, “You are God's temple.”