

You Are God's Temple

1 Corinthians 3:9-17
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^{9b} *You are God's field, God's building.* ¹⁰ *According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.* ¹¹ *For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.* ¹² *Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw--* ¹³ *each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.* ¹⁴ *If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.* ¹⁵ *If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.* ¹⁶ *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?* ¹⁷ *If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

1 Corinthians 3:9-17 (ESV)

Beloved church, you are God's temple. You are not *a* temple. You are *the* temple. You are not a *metaphorical* temple. You are the *real* temple of God. As we gather together as members of Christ's church for corporate worship, we constitute the holy temple of God in which God is truly present, meeting with his people. In v. 16 Paul reminds the Corinthians of this very same truth, "Do you not know that you are God's temple?"

Apparently they did not know. If they had known, they would have never acted out with such jealousy and strife. If they had known, surely they would have never brought such unholy division into such hallowed grounds. If they had realized that they were indeed God's temple, they would have stopped profaning God's name by boasting in mere men, and instead they would have stood in silent, humble awe in God's presence. The Corinthians were bringing all kinds of unholy ideas and behavior into the church. They were profaning the very temple of God, and as we will see, endangering their very own lives.

As Paul reminds them that they are indeed the true temple of God, he forces them to take a step back, open their eyes, see the immeasurably glorious nature of the church, and then consequently see the hideousness of their sin. Paul is basically saying, "Take a look around. You are in the very heart of the holy of holies and your blatant sin is the equivalent of seeking to destroy God's temple." Thus Paul says in v. 17, "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him." Paul does not want to see the Corinthian church, nor any of the Corinthian Christians destroyed. So Paul writes to offer a detailed alternative building plan for the Corinthian church, a plan that is grounded in this very simple and far-reaching truth that they are the true temple of God.

I wonder how many problems and difficulties and sins and divisions within God's church would truly be done away with if we only realized the scope of this truth, that we are God's temple? I wonder how much more serious and intentional we might be in serving the church, and preparing for worship, and striving for holiness, if we really knew this? I wonder how much more encouraged we might be, how much more weighty and

joyful our worship might be if we knew with all certainty that, as we gather together, God himself meets with us, and speaks to us as his beloved children, and invites us to commune with him in close fellowship and real love?

All of us, by virtue of our membership within Christ's church, have become temple builders. In this passage, Paul tells us how to build God's church well.

God's Church, God's Temple

First, in order to truly build well we must understand that the church is *God's* church, *God's* temple. Paul writes, "**You are God's field, God's building**" (v. 9b). It is not your church, it is not my church, it is God's. The first and most direct application of this truth is quite simple. This means that we don't build according to our own plans, we build instead according to God's plans. It is his church, after all.

Absolutely everything we do to build the church must be by the book, by God's Word – the Bible. I would hope that if you came to my house, and you decided you did not like the drapes, that you would not just tear them down. Likewise, we must not treat God's church as if it were our own, as if our ideas for building and adorning the church should trump God's Word.

Nadab and Abihu provide a perfect (albeit tragic) example of the error of church-building by man's rules. Nadab and Abihu, two sons of Aaron, worshipped as priests in God's holy tabernacle. For whatever reason, they sought innovation in worship. Perhaps they were seeking to improve worship, to make it more engaging, to make it more attractive and palatable to their human hearts. We do not know why, but we do know that they introduced their own ideas to worship in God's temple. We read their brief story in Leviticus:

¹ Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. ² And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD (Lev. 10:1-2).

In a very powerful way, God reminded them, and all others, that the tabernacle was his house, his temple, his building, and therefore his instructions alone were to be followed.

Friends, as members of this church you need to know that as much as is humanly possible, our own church elders strive to build God's church according to God's Word. If I bring a new idea for this church to our elders, the very first thing they are going to ask me is to justify my idea from God's Word. If I can't, they simply won't hear me. Why? Because they don't care one iota about my ideas – what they really care about are God's ideas, God's instructions, God's blueprints for his church! We have all seen or even been a part of churches that do just the opposite. They care a whole lot about everyone else's ideas but disregard God's. We must never forget that the church is *God's* building, *God's* temple, and we must therefore build by God's Word.

Properly speaking, we may say that the church is the inaugurated form of the eschatological temple.¹ From first to last, the Bible tells the story of the establishment of the true temple of God. The Garden of Eden itself was a temple.² There, God engaged his people and communed with them until Adam and Eve profaned that temple-garden

and were expelled. Over time, God directed his people to build a new temple in Jerusalem. Solomon's temple looked back to the garden temple. It was decorated with a "garden" theme. Huge quantities of gourds and pomegranates and flowers and lilies were incorporated into the architecture of the temple.³ Solomon's temple recalled the garden temple, but it also looked forward to the great latter-day temple of Revelation.

In Revelation 21 we read about the establishment of a new city of enormous proportions. The city is a giant cube, 1,380 miles (in modern terms) long and wide and high. It is adorned with gold and precious stones.

² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.... ²² And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb (Rev. 21:2-3, 22).

New Jerusalem needs no temple within for God himself dwells there directly with his people. The entire city, in fact, is portrayed by John in Revelation as the temple proper.⁴ New Jerusalem, this perfect golden cube of a city, matches perfectly with the only other cube in Scripture, the holy of holies, which was itself a perfect cube inlaid entirely with gold at the heart of Solomon's temple. While the garden-themed temple recalled Eden, its central chamber, the holy of holies, looked forward to New Jerusalem, that great temple that will one day come.

As the inaugurated form of the final New Jerusalem temple, the church is not just a part of God's plan, it entails the whole of God's plan. When Paul tells the Corinthians that their church is God's temple, he is telling them that their particular congregation, with all of its faults, sins and divisions, is in reality the in-breaking of the eschatological New Jerusalem. Today, as members of God's church, we must see that the whole program of God's redemptive plan for creation is being realized through us. As God's temple, we are literally an alternative community in the midst of a rebellious and sinful world. One day, God's temple will entail all of creation, all things will be made new, and God will dwell with his redeemed people in the New Jerusalem. Today, the church is an outpost of that city, a visible, tangible sign that God's temple is coming, and in fact is already here. We are God's temple on earth.

How we live as members of God's church ought to reflect this reality. When we gather together for worship we must truly be ready to meet God as he dwells with and engages us as his people. Jason Stellman writes:

When your minister faithfully expounds God's Word, *that is Jesus talking*. When he declares forgiveness of your sins, *that is Jesus forgiving you*. When he administers the bread and cup, *that is Jesus feeding you His own body and blood....* It is by means of the official ministry of Christ's church that He meets with us, cares for us, speaks to us, and feeds us. Though we cannot understand this principle fully, Jesus nonetheless taught that when the church does it on earth, it is therefore done in heaven (Matt. 18:15-20).⁵

Here we should also pay close attention to the fact that Paul is speaking to and about the local, particular expression of God's universal church. The Corinthian church itself is God's temple. At times we may need to be reminded that God's church is bigger than our own local congregation. We must not be so narrow in our focus that we miss the glorious picture of God's global, universal church. But we must also not miss the fact that our local church itself is nothing less than the very temple of God. Paul was astounded at how carelessly the Corinthians handled God's temple in Corinth. May we not be so careless.

Careful Building

Paul continues in v. 10, **“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.”** Notice Paul's language about himself. He calls himself a “skilled master builder.” It potentially sounds arrogant. It potentially sounds like he is boasting in himself, the very thing he is charging the Corinthians not to do. But in reality, Paul is simply saying that he is called and qualified for the job of planting and building up churches, and he is not sloppy about his work.

Paul's language of the “skilled” builder calls to mind the numerous skilled laborers who were employed to build the Jerusalem temple in Solomon's day. Paul clearly desires to build well. He clearly sees himself as qualified for the task, and his great care in offering thorough biblical correction to the Corinthians is itself evidence of a true master-builder at work. Like Paul, we are called to build well. Anything less than great care, thoroughness, skill, attention to detail, and devotion to God's Word will not do. One commentator says:

Ours is the day of causal ministers preaching trivial sermons to nonchalant church members. How we need Paul's words! They ought to shake us and drive us to our knees! It could be that the spiritual awakening we so desperately need will begin with preachers realizing afresh the awesome responsibility that is theirs!⁶

We need pastors that are master builders, zealous and devoted to God's Word. We need elders that take extreme care in their work as shepherds. We need deacon who do their job thoroughly and well. And we need members who are just as careful in building up Christ's church as are their leaders. Each of us ought to strive to be master builders in Christ's church, using the gifts God has given us to faithfully build up his church.

Christ as the Foundation

Paul next teaches that the way we become master builders is by making Jesus Christ our foundation. **“For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ”** (v. 11). There are, of course, many possible foundations for the church to be built upon. Some churches are built around pastoral personalities. Some churches are built around programs. Some churches are built around social causes. Some churches are built around buildings. But Jesus is the only legitimate foundation for God's church to be built upon. He alone meets God's building code.

The first goal of Paul's pastoral ministry among his churches is to see "Christ being formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). Time and time again, Paul talks about the centrality of Christ in the life of the church and the growth of its members. In Ephesians 4:11-15, for example, Paul speaks of God gifting his church with various teachers and shepherds for the express purpose that his people attain to the "knowledge of the Son of God... to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (v.13). He continues, "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (v. 15). This means that within God's church we must be very, very narrow-minded with our expectations for how God's church is built. We must expect and hope for and long for one thing, that Christ be proclaimed and exalted at our church, that Christ alone be our foundation.

God's Word as the Building Material

In v. 12-13 Paul now says, **"Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done."** The "Day" Paul speaks of is the final day of God's judgment. On that day, fire will come to expose our work. If we built with gold, silver, or precious stones, our work will stand with eternal significance. If, however, we built merely with wood, hay, or straw, God's fire will consume our work, expose its true nature, and ultimately it will carry no significance in God's kingdom. The quality, weight, and eternal significance of our work will be exposed on the last day, therefore we must build skillfully with God's Word.

In Corinth, the immediate concern was that they were building Christ's church with the world's wisdom. This was comparable to building only with straw or hay. Acting as a building inspector, Paul sees the insufficiency of the material they are building with and he stops the operation, demanding that they build with the right material. The right material is God's wisdom, God's Word, which is akin to gold, silver, and precious stones. God's Word is valuable as a building material because it is permanent and abiding. It has an eternal guarantee! We read in Isaiah 40:8, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." God's Word makes for the strongest of temples.

Of course, if it is God's Word that forms the permanent structure of Christ's church, then present appearances do not account for much. Some churches grow and grow and grow in attendance, building, and staff. But if God's Word is not central to their building plans, it is all for naught. When I was in college I remember very distinctly leaving an impressive, large, growing church in shock one Sunday after the pastor stood up with Bible in hand, and then proceeded to deliver an entire sermon without opening or referring to it once. The church looked good by the standards and wisdom of the world, but it obviously was not being built with the gold, silver, and precious stones of God's eternal and abiding Word. If we hope to build a permanent temple, we must use permanent materials. God's Word must be central in the life of the church.

Rewarded or Refined?

Paul now tells the Corinthians that they must build well because they will be either rewarded or refined accordingly. **“If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, only as through fire”** (vv. 14-15). It is a common New Testament teaching that the works of each Christian will be judged by God, not for salvation purposes, but for the purpose of appropriately rewarding those who have served God well.

Paul’s language here is reminiscent of Malachi 3:1-3:

¹ "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.

Indeed, Jesus has come to his temple in Jerusalem upon his incarnation. Jesus did serve as a refiner’s fire for Israel as he entered the temple with a whip and righteous anger and exposed their sin. But that was not the last time Jesus will come to his temple. Jesus will also come to this temple, this church. And when he comes, our work will be tested, and according to Paul, we will either be rewarded accordingly, or refined through fire. We must, therefore, build with our master’s reward in mind so that he might say to us on that great day, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:23).

Holiness

Finally, as we seek to build up God’s temple, we must strive for holiness. Paul asks the Corinthians, **“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”** (vv. 16-17). Anything short of holiness will destroy God’s temple.

As a church, we must be careful to be full of grace and avoid all hints of self-righteousness. But we must also remember that God’s grace is given for a purpose, that we might be holy. When God’s latter-day temple is fully realized on the last day, it will be entirely holy. Revelation 21:27 tells us, “But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false...” God’s temple will be holy. God’s church today, therefore, must be holy as well. We must not treat sin as a triviality or a trifle. We must never abuse God’s grace. Instead, we must always remember that we are called to be a “holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21).

Beloved church, you are God’s temple. You are not *a* temple, you are *the* temple. You are not a *metaphorical* or *symbolic* temple, you are the *real* temple of God. This morning, as we gather for worship, we constitute the holy temple of God in which God truly engages us as his people. This truth serves both as a warning and as an

encouragement. The warning? We must build well. We must build with great care, with Jesus as our foundation, God's Word as our building material, and holiness as our goal. The encouragement? If we are God's temple, God himself is with us. We are truly an alternative community, indwelt with the Holy Spirit, already experiencing the reality of God's eternal plan for his people.

¹ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 245.

² Numerous scholars have made this observation. For an excellent concise explanation see T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 20-31.

³ 1 Kings 6:29, "Around all the walls of the house he carved engraved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms."

⁴ Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, 365-373.

⁵ Jason Stellman, *Dual Citizens: Worship and Life between the Already and the Not Yet* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2009), 83.

⁶ Roger Ellsworth, *Strengthening Christ's Church* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 1995), 59.