

October 7, 2007

The Church (#2) – The Temple of the Holy Spirit

Romans 8:9-11 / I Corinthians 6:18-20 / I Corinthians 3:16-17 / I Peter 2:4-6

In the circles I've been familiar with it has been common to speak of the physical bodies of individual believers as "temples of the Holy Spirit." And that is true. Scripture does declare that our individual bodies are the temples in which God's Spirit has come to take up His residence.

That's what I tried to stress in my first message on the church two weeks ago.

But you know, as long as I've been in those church circles, very rarely have I ever heard people stress that the local church / the local congregations of believers (collectively, as a whole) — are also temples in which His Spirit dwells.

Yet Paul stresses that repeatedly. In I Corinthians 3:9 where he says of himself and Silas, "We are God's fellow workers..." Then he goes on to say of all the believers in the church in Corinth (as a collective whole) "you are God's field, God's building."

It's a point he emphasizes again only 7 verses later (in the same chapter) where he says, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you (and in the Greek, the word "you" is in the plural — that is, God's Spirit lives in you as a group)." You as a collective group form the "temple" that God lives in, Paul says!

Now, part of reason that the image of the CHURCH as a temple in which God's Spirit dwells has not been stressed as much as it should be is simply that we as Americans tend to read the Scriptures with our individualistically colored glasses on! Our culture (and even our church culture) has trained us to apply texts personally and not corporately — as individuals and not as communities, spiritual families, or groups.

But that's not all. The emphasis of this verse was essentially lost to the church for many years because the older versions (like the RSV, and NASB) failed to adequately reflect the plural nature of the Greek pronouns Paul uses. Something that is understandable since the English language (unlike Greek and so many other languages) doesn't really have a plural form for the word "you" (except down south where they use the slang word "y'all").

Those older versions translated it, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Holy Spirit dwells in you?" And most people (like myself growing up) read that text and simply

thought that Paul was making the same point he makes in 6:19 where he says: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God..."

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The King James Version did translate it in the plural form "ye" — "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God..." But many people I've talked to weren't taught that "ye" was the subjective plural form for the pronoun "you!" They simply thought it was the antiquated or archaic way of saying "you" and figured Paul was speaking of our BODIES being the temples of the Spirit and not the entire CHURCH being a temple in which His Spirit dwelt.

That's why the NIV translation is most helpful in this case, because it uses the dynamic equivalent "you yourselves" to translate the plural Greek pronoun "umin." "Do you not know that you yourselves (that is, you as a collective group) are God's temple, and that the Holy Spirit lives in you (plural — you as a collective whole)." Which, of course, changes the whole meaning of the next verse where Paul goes on to say, "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him."

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I've heard pastors mistakenly take the word "you" to be singular, and thus to mean that, if believers were to destroy their own bodies (by smoking, drugs, excessive drinking or sexual immorality whereby they might contract sexually transmitted diseases) God would judge or destroy them, making it more of a "reap what you sow" type of message.

But that's NOT what Paul's talking about! The "temple" he's talking about is the church, and in the context, he's saying to the Corinthians that anyone who destroys the church there in that city by purposely sowing seeds of discord, or causing division, or destroying the unity it has in Christ, or replacing the foundation Paul had laid (which was Christ) with a false foundation of human invention, God would destroy that person (1:1 - 2:15).

It shows how zealous God is for the health and unity and well-being of His church, which He guards with a protective love that is so strong that He would destroy the one who seeks to destroy her — the Temple He is building on earth for His Spirit to dwell in.

It's a stern warning that more people need to heed! "If anyone destroys the church (by sowing discord, dissension, division and strife within the Body of Christ), God will destroy him or her. For God's temple (that is, His church) is holy, and that temple you are (you plural, you as group, all you believers in Corinth as a collective whole)!"

Now, why does Paul speak in such stern tones of warning?

Because the Church is God's vehicle for furthering His saving purposes on earth! It is the church that is given the task of proclaiming the message of His forgiveness, and the righteousness that comes by faith.

It's the Church who is commissioned to further the interests of His kingdom, reach out to a lost world, speak out against injustice, and minister the needs of the poor and oppressed — liberating the enslaved, defending the widow and the orphan, and setting the captives free!

It's the Church who is to display the riches of His grace and be a people that live to His glory.

That's why Paul speaks in such stern tones: Because the one who seeks to undermine and destroy the Church, makes himself or herself an enemy of the saving purposes of God by trying to thwart what God is doing in the world. God's church or His temple is holy, not simply because He resides in it, but because He has "set it apart" to carry out His saving purposes in the world.

Peter takes up the same theme of the Church as God's temple in [1 Peter 2:5](#), where he says of believers, "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house..." — a temple of sorts in which God dwells.

Each believer, says Peter, is like a stone (a living stone) added to the wall of a building, house or temple which God desires to come and dwell in. That's why many churches start their service with an invocation. They are calling upon God to come and dwell in the temple that has come together to be the building in which He dwells.

It is true that our physical bodies are temples in which the Holy Spirit has come to dwell. I stressed that two weeks ago. But it is also just as true (and I intend to stress this today), that this local body of believers (this church and every church of believers in Jesus that gathers across the face of the globe each Lord's Day) is also a "temple" in which the Holy Spirit comes to dwell. God doesn't just dwell in us, He dwells among us or in our midst.

So let me ask you: Is that how you see this fellowship every Sunday morning? As a temple constructed for the purpose of allowing God to come and reside in our midst? Do you perceive yourselves to be pieces of a temple coming together to erect itself each week so that God can come to dwell in the midst of His people as they worship? Some being a door, others a window, or a stair —but each piece being fitted into a "temple"?

You see, sometimes the building looks pretty complete — walls, roof, furnishings and all! But other times, the walls aren't very complete, because a few bricks overslept! Some of the window

treatments didn't show up / two or three of the stairs got sidetracked on the way to church / and one or two of the pillars went away on vacation!!!

So often we worry about how THIS building looks to visitors on any given Sunday. And yet we rarely give equal consideration to what the spiritual temple we erect every week (by our presence or lack of it) looks like to God when He comes to reside in our midst — a few bricks missing from one wall, a few panes of glass or an entire window missing from another, the carpet forgot to set their alarm, and some pillars didn't remember to show up out front.

Things we would never permit in the physical sense, we often overlook in the spiritual sense.

So today, let me give you the **FOUR things** Scripture equates with the idea of the Church being the Temple of the Holy Spirit and you as believers being living stones the walls of that building.

The **FIRST** comes from I Corinthians 6, and II Corinthians 6! In both places Paul equates being the Temple of God with holiness, godliness, and righteousness. In I Cor. 6:19, Paul calls the men in the Corinthian church (some of whom are continuing their former practices of sleeping with prostitutes) to cease from their activity on the basis of their physical bodies being temples of the Holy Spirit.

"Flee sexual immorality," says Paul. "All other sins a man commits are outside the body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body." **WHY?** Because the bodies of believers are God's temples! Christ dwells in them by His Spirit which He has given to us. Therefore, to unite our body to a prostitute is to use for sinful purposes, the body which God by His Spirit has sanctified and set apart for holy, godly and righteous purposes.

Paul states it as obvious: *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own, you were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God with your body."*

How? By using it to do godly things and not ungodly things; in godly ways and not ungodly ways.

And in II Cor. 6:16 Paul conveys the same message, except this time he frames it in the context of the church as a whole being a temple of the Holy Spirit, and not just the bodies of individual believers.

In this II Cor. 6 passage: *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers (and here he doesn't mean in marriage — he means in your activities, and priorities / the things you crave, pursue and*

*clamor after / in your goals and actions and deeds). For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial (or Satan)? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God and they will be my people.' 'Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord....Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.'*

In the context he's talking to the church as a whole and not just certain individuals in it. "We," he says — that is, "me and all of you there in Corinth ARE the temple of the living God." All of us together make up the temple God lives in.

And what is a Temple for? It's a house of worship! The temple was the place where God's Name dwelt. His presence was there. His glory dwelt there. Thus it was a place of holiness, reverence, gratitude, joy, repentance, prayer, and godly activities.

That was something the Corinthians had apparently lost sight of. For as we know, their gatherings were disorderly / they put up with blatant immorality (the likes of which the heathen didn't even engage in) / people were being rude and selfish at their love feasts and getting drunk at the Lord's Supper! / They were split into competing factions / and false apostles had come in and successfully lured people away from their pure devotion to Christ – convincing the Corinthian believers to look to them instead of Jesus.

It was all sin, plain and simple. And what is the root of all sin? Idolatry! All ungodliness and all sin stems from idolatry. And where do you practice idolatry? In a heathen temple, not the temple of the living God!

That's Paul's word to them (and vicariously to us through them). The thought that the gathered church is a temple of the living God should cause us as a group to be sure that all that we do as a group is fitting for a temple which houses the holy presence of God.

Therefore, when we gather as the temple each week, with God in our midst, we are to strive to ensure there is no idolatry, no sin, no selfishness, no competition, no ungodly attitudes or practices. For we as a church are God's temple, and God's temple is holy.

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Then **SECONDLY**, in Ephesians 2:18-22 Paul writes this: "Through (Christ) we both (Jews and Gentiles) have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners

and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too (all you believers in Ephesus) are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit."

The imagery is almost identical to that which Peter used — Jesus is the Chief Cornerstone, the Apostle's and Old Testament prophets are the foundation stones laid upon the chief cornerstone, and you and I are the smaller stones who make up that walls that rise to be a holy temple in the Lord.

(And please, don't think in terms of the type of cornerstones that were used around here in the 17 and 1800's. When Paul uses the image of Christ being the cornerstone of the temple "in which God dwells by His Spirit" he is surely thinking of the type of corner-stones used as the base of the foundation of the temple in Jerusalem, the largest stone found to date being 36 feet long, 12 feet high, and 16 feet wide, and weighing 400 tons or 800,000 pounds!)

So when he writes Jesus is the "chief cornerstone," think in those terms! Massive! Powerful! Indestructible! So big that when the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 AD they left them alone! They were too big! The apostles and prophets being much smaller stones, and we the smallest of all, being the stones used in the walls!

And here, I need to point out that Paul is NOT thinking in terms of the local church being a temple. He's thinking in terms of the universal, invisible church – the innumerable multitude of people made up of every believer in Jesus including the Old Testament saints, New Testament saints, and every believer that has ever lived since then — from every tribe and nation and people and language group on the face of the earth!

Myriads upon myriads of blood washed, justified souls (both living and dead) — who have been and still are daily being built together into one massive, spiritual, mega-temple!

Every time someone comes to Christ in faith one more stone is added to one of those walls! They continue to grow daily as each new convert (made alive by the Spirit and justified by faith in Jesus) is added to that enormous super-structure!

(In fact, some people believe that's what the "New Jerusalem" coming down out of heaven in Revelation 21 represents — the Church Universal and Spiritual (having been built into a massive

structure, building or city as we read in Hebrews 12:22-23) coming down out of heaven to dwell on the new earth.)

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And what does this image of one massive temple made up of every believer from every age and every place tell us? It tells us we rest upon our Lord, and upon our spiritual ancestors! We are just not built upon the chief cornerstone and foundation stones, but all those who have ever gone before us as well.

Fitted into the wall below me and you are millions and millions of other stones from every age and every place. Right on top of the apostles are those first martyrs that were fed to the lions in the coliseum or smeared with tar and lit on fire to be used as torches to light Nero's gardens. They're way down there at the bottom of the wall!

There are the saints that met at the Council of Nicea to hammer out the truth about the Trinity, and decide which books should be included in the Canon of Scripture. I rest upon them too. There's St. Augustine and William Tyndale / Martin Luther and John Calvin / Bunyan and Owen / Brainerd and Edwards / Wesley and Carey / Spurgeon and Moody / Fanny Crosby, and Christina Rossetti, and Amy Carmichael, and Corrie ten Boom / Andrew Murray, and C. S. Lewis, and A.W. Pink and soon Billy Graham along with millions upon millions of others whose names are forgotten to all but God!

There are — Presbyterians and Anglicans and Independents. Baptists (from all 52 denominations of them!) and Pentecostals and Methodists, and Lutherans, and Brethren, and Mennonites and Nazarenes, and Coptics and Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox, and yes, contrary to the opinion of some, some dear Catholic brothers and sisters.

There will be Africans and Asians and Arabs and Persians / Australians and Indians and Germans and Russians / Chinese and Hondurans and Canadians and Swedes, as well as tribal peoples from the Amazon basin — all who are washed white in the blood of Jesus.

There will be red, yellow, black and white — long hairs and short hairs — speaking Yiddish and Hungarian / Japanese and Mandarin / Swahili and Spanish! Illiterates and Phd's / day laborers and successful professionals / truck drivers and teachers / beggars and presidents — men, women, children, and even still-born or aborted babies.

They'll all be there, and I can't divorce myself from a single one, because they're built into the same wall that I am and I rest upon them just as much as the apostles and prophets.

And knowing that should kill my pride, and prejudice, or any sense of cultural, financial, ethnic, educational or linguistic superiority. For in the Kingdom of God, diversity does not detract from the beautiful mosaic worked into the walls of God's massive temple, it accentuates it!

And so, unlike many contemporary churches who are trying to divorce themselves from church history, refusing to sing the old hymns or instruct people in the church's heritage, it should be our goal instead to treasure and relish it!

Did they make mistakes? Yes, many of them did — some shameful. But so have I, and so have you. Yet God will not pull you out of the wall because of them! It would weaken the structure and fail to magnify the riches of His grace to us in Jesus. It should be a reminder to us, that if they are there (imbedded in the walls below us) we should not question God's wisdom in including them.

When Jesus said "I pray that they may all be one, as You Father and I are one," He surely had this picture in mind. The image of us being built into the walls of one single massive temple is probably the best illustration of our unity and interconnectedness. Think about it, and let the image have its sin-killing, pride-killing, prejudice-killing effects!

Then **THIRD**, Jesus says in **Revelation 3:11-12**: "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. He who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on Him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

In light of those verses it seems some will not merely be stones, but some, even though not apostles or prophets, will be made "pillars" in the temple God is constructing. Those who are faithful and persevere through persecution and tribulation; those who hold on to what they were given, says Jesus, "will be made pillars in the temple of My God." Pillars with God's name inscribed on them, and the name of His city.

Remember, there are rewards in heaven. Grace does not nullify reward.

Some will be pillars, others will be posts, and others will be stones in the walls or the floors!  
(I'll be happy just to be there, even if I'm just a tile Jesus walks on!)

Don't forget: God does reward faithfulness. He does reward perseverance. He does offer incentives to those who hold fast to the faith in times of difficulty and persecution. And He wants us to cling to that hope in times of hardship and trial.

Then LAST, the most prominent message of all, in relation to the Church being the Temple of God, is that His temple is the place where His presence dwells. Revelation 7:13-17 says: "One of the elders asked me, 'These in white robes — who are they and where did they come from?' I answered, 'Sir, you know.' And he said, 'These are they who come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.' Therefore, 'they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their Shepherd. He will lead them to springs of water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"

What a picture! Over and over again the same message is repeated: The greatest reward of all, for any Christian, is simply to be in the presence of God eternally! There is no greater treasure! There is no thing in heaven or on earth that any true Christian could ever desire more than God Himself.

In fact, taped in my Bible (on the page where the NT begins) is this quote by Jonathan Edwards, from a sermon he preached in Boston in the year 1731 at the age of 28 years old. He writes this:

"God Himself is the great good which the saints are brought to the possession of and enjoyment of by redemption. He is the highest good, and the sum of all the good that Christ purchased (for us). God is the inheritance of the saints; He is the portion of their souls. God is their wealth and treasure. Their food; their life; their dwelling place; their ornament and diadem; their everlasting honor and glory. They have none in heaven but God. He is the great good which the redeemed are received to at death, and which they will rise to at the end of the world... The glorious excellencies and beauty of God will be what will entertain the minds of the saints, and the love of God will be their everlasting feast. They will indeed enjoy other things. They will enjoy the angels, and will enjoy one another. But that which they shall enjoy in the angels and each other or anything else that will bring them delight and happiness will be what shall be seen of God in them."

What did David say in Psalm 27:

"One thing I ask of the Lord; this is what I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple"

Islam promises its adherents (at least the male ones!) the reward of lounging on couches in a heavenly paradise, next to streams of flowing water, being fanned and fed grapes by beautiful maidens forever (which may be a paradise to the men, but to the women who have feed and fan men throughout eternity, it may not seem like such a paradise)!

Hindu's are promised liberation from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Buddhists are promised the dissolution of the self, becoming like a drop of water falling into the ocean and being absorbed by it.

But what Christians are promised is GOD, plain and simple! Having Him as our tent, covering or shelter from the storm — eternally.

Having His love as our feast — our incessant food and drink! Having Christ as our Shepherd who leads us to springs of living water or spiritual refreshment — eternally!

Total satisfaction, total delight, total fulfillment and total unending bliss — eternally.

**WHY?** Because we'll have God, and God is all we will need. *"He who has all things without God,"* as Teresa of Avilla rightly pointed out, *"has nothing. But he who has God, possesses in Him all things."*

That's God's promise, my friends: God promises you Himself. He offers you Himself. He offers to satisfy your every need with Himself. He offers to make you deliriously happy eternally by giving you Himself.

Which is why Hubert Van Zeller could say: *"The soul hardly ever realizes it, but whether he is a believer or not, his loneliness is really but a homesickness for God."*

Likewise, unhappiness is but a lack of the sense of God's delight in His redeemed one, and that sense of inner emptiness simply a want of the presence and fullness of God.