

Text: 1 Corinthians 3.16-23
St Stephen's

Oct 26th, 2008
Sun

He Giveth and Giveth and Giveth Again

In 1 Cor 3 we are looking at the question of **'who owns the church?'** **Paul's answer** in the chapter is that **God owns it**. The church is his idea, his creation, his possession. In 1 Cor 3, Paul uses **analogies** to make this point, telling us that the church is like **a field** and like **a building**, and in our text today he tells us what kind of building it is like. He says the church is like **a temple**. Actually he says **we are a temple**, a special temple, God's temple...

"Do you not know that you are God's Temple...?"

1 Cor 3.16

The Corinthians **knew all about temples** because there were a lot of them in Corinth. They had been in many of them, maybe most of them! The temples in ancient Greek culture were **a central part of the social and religious fabric** of life.

Anytime people **got in over their heads** in life, they went to the temples to seek the favor of the gods. Need a good harvest? Pray to the gods. Having trouble conceiving? Seek the help of the gods. War threatening? Turn to the gods. **Life and death, the present and the future** were hard for people. And when things got hard they went to the temples.

The temples were often **distinguished from one another** by the authority of one of the gods over **a particular realm of life**. There were certain god's who ruled the harvest, others ruled reproduction, some presided over war and peace, and others ruled the sea or the land. Some ruled your health and others ruled the affairs of your business. And in Corinth there was one Temple that stood above all the rest. Behind the city some 2000 feet above sea level was the rocky mount called the Acrocorinth. On its flat summit was **the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love**. From her temple each night hundreds of female slaves roamed

the city's streets as prostitutes. She made Corinth famous as the red light district of the ancient world.

Often it was at the temples that people would **see their friends**. They would make an offering to a god, often bringing an edible animal, and when the sacrifice was made, and the prayers were said, they would be able to **share in the feast**. The temples served as the **social center** of much of Greek life. So in ancient Greece they didn't have restaurants or movie theaters or hospitals or clubs or even houses of prostitution; **they had temples**.

When the gospel came to Corinth, they must have thought long and hard about all those temples and all those sacrifices and all those gods. Because the gospel brought what the temples **had been unable to deliver**. The gospel brought forgiveness and grace and a fresh start and a new life that was stronger than death and would outlast the world – and the gospel brought **an end to the sacrifices**. In fact, what Paul says here is that with the gospel came a new temple, **a special temple, unlike any other temple** in Corinth. The church is **God's temple!**

What Makes This Temple Different Is Its Foundation

"According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation... For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

|(1 Corinthians 3:10-11, ESV)

The **foundations** of every temple in the ancient world were of supreme importance to their builders. If the foundations were laid well, the temples would last. If not, within years these great structures would begin to crumble. God wants his work to last.

Life is like that. If you build your life and family on something that will bear their weight and weather life's storms, it will last. If you don't, it won't.

Much of the stuff that we build on today is **fluff**. I was thinking last week of the number of different philosophies we have seen over the years of our child raising. It seems like every other month a new idea takes the culture by storm. Our poor kids!!

The brokenness of **human nature takes stronger medicine** to heal than a snappy sentence from the pop psychologists. Life needs a stronger foundation.

The remarkable thing is that what is built on the foundation of Jesus, upon his life and his words, upon his death and his resurrection, upon his presence and his leading – will last. It will outlast the world, we are told.

You are God's Temple.

What Makes This Temple Different Is Its Material

"Do you not know that you are God's Temple...?"

1 Cor 3.16

The temples of Corinth would compete with each other for beauty and design and material. But this temple was different because it was not made out of stones or timbers. It was **made out of people**. When Paul writes in vs 16 that "*you are God's Temple*", the word for "you" in that verse is **plural**. He is saying that 'you all' are God's Temple. Or, "Y'uns" are God's Temple, as we might say it here in Pittsburgh.

The church is **the people, not the steeple**, as the saying goes. And it is good to say it over and over again. This gives the church a particular set of **values** and a wonderful kind of **adaptability**. The church can be alive and healthy without any buildings at all. The church in China is like that. No buildings at all – but millions of people who meet in house churches every week for worship and fellowship and teaching and prayer. God made his church in a way that makes us adaptable and **able to travel through life lightly** if need be. And because the church is made out of people, not out of buildings it is easy to remember what matters. **People matter**. More than anything people matter. That is important to remember. Christ gave his life for people.

This is one of the reasons why the litigation strategy of the national church continues to stun me. Over and over again they have said to us, “Leave if you must – just leave the keys, leave your money and leave” – as though the buildings and the money are what matters most. They are not, and buildings and money are just one thing – **servants of the people of God and of the purposes of God**. It is the people and the purposes that matter.

You are God’s Temple.

What Makes This Temple Different Is Its Spirit

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?

1 Cor 3.16

The Greek temples, so the thought went, were the meeting places between people and their gods. The ancient stories were known by everyone about how the gods would come down from their pantheon in heaven and visit people, or stir up trouble. Many of the stories were so disastrous that people weren’t sure they wanted to meet these gods face to face. But ancient stories like that have often proven to be hints of the real things to come.

The **presence of the Holy Spirit** in the middle of the Corinthians when they gathered for worship was powerful. People who were brand new believers were given **prophecies and visions and supernatural capacities** way beyond what they were normally able to do. And this happened in a special way **when they came together** for worship or ministry. Jesus had said that...

Wherever 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

We will see this again and again in this letter. For Paul, the distinctive mark of the church of Jesus Christ is the Spirit of Jesus upon and in the people of Jesus – making us like him, and making us able to continue his ministry in our own day.

I loved **the visit last weekend by Nigel Mumford**. He brought us a vivid reminder of the power of the Holy Spirit to move among people and bring God's healing. When we had the healing mission on Sunday afternoon, I came in right at the start at 5 PM and Grace Commons was flooded with people. 2.5 hours later, the line for healing prayer was all the way out to the back. Why would hundreds of **hurting people** come for prayer? Because they knew that Jesus was here, that his Spirit was moving, and that healing was happening in all kinds of ways.

I often think that we set our expectations far too low when we come to worship...

There is no power on earth that can do what God's Spirit can do. You are God's Temple.

One more difference:

What Makes This Temple Different Is Its Wealth

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.

1 Corinthians 3:21-23

Paul lists five words in these verses that to the Corinthians were **the tyrants over their existence**: "the world, life, death, the present, the future". These things were sources of fear and anxiety. These were the things that drove them to the temples of the pagan gods in the past.

He says in effect that these tyrants, these things you used to fear, have now been **made your servants** –They have been **tamed by the Lord of the temple and given to you** - gifts to you for your life in the temple.

Look carefully at his words. These are **not empty promises**; they are real.

I had a dream about our buildings a few weeks ago... I had been **worrying** about the future, afraid about it. **God said this** to me... *"The lawyers opposing you are instruments in my hands to help you open your hands, and release your grip on things that you are holding too tightly."*

I thought, "That is a hard saying, Lord!"

I suspect that we will end up with these buildings, but I don't know. We will find out in a couple of years. But I do know this; God has spoken to me about releasing my grip, about **carrying all things in open hands**, so that if he wants them, he doesn't have to pry my fingers open to get them. About living light... and giving large... that's the way of Jesus.

When this kind of word comes to me, I think, "What about..." and I think "What if..." I have a list of "What abouts" and "What ifs". A long list. "But Lord, what about the recession... What about our future, what about my retirement"? "But **what if...** lose my job, there is a medical emergency, the economy turns down?"

If you give it a serious thought, do you find that **worries and fears** begin to flood in? Do you know about the '**what abouts**' and the '**what ifs**'? In the middle of that he says something to us: "The whole world is yours! I give it to you. Life, death, today, tomorrow – they are yours! And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. Open your hands. Live light and give large. That is my way."

You are God's Temple. He will provide.

I want to finish with a hymn written by Annie Flint, called "He Giveth More Grace." She captures the Apostles' thought well...

He Giveth More Grace

Annie J. Flint

He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater, □
 He sendeth more strength as our labors increase; □
 To added afflictions He addeth His mercy, □

To multiplied trials He multiplies peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance, □
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done, □
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources □
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

Fear not that thy need shall exceed His provision, □
Our God ever yearns His resources to share; □
Lean hard on the arm everlasting, availing; □
The Father both thee and thy load will upbear.

His love has no limits,
His grace has no measure, □
His power no boundary known unto men; □
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus □
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.