

## The Temple of God

Scripture Text: 1 Corinthians 3:1–17

### Introduction

I mentioned last Sunday that over a few weeks I hope to look at several passages from the book of First Corinthians. I believe that letter has much to say about the church, what the church should be and what it should be doing. The letter of First Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul to the church in the city of Corinth in ancient Greece. Corinth had a reputation for many things that were not, well, very good – like sexual immorality, religious diversity, and corruption. So widely known was the immorality of Corinth that the verb “to Corinthianize” came to mean “to practice sexual immorality.” We read in Acts chapter 18 that the Apostle Paul planted a church in Corinth. This church, however, floundered under the worldly influences of the city and began to divide over various issues. There were factions that had developed in the church. There were moral problems in the church. Paul takes the opportunity to write to the church in Corinth to address these issues.

Last week we looked at First Corinthians chapter 1 and saw several things God had called the church to be and to do:

- The church is a group of people called out from the world
- The church is to be holy and distinct from the world
- The church is to be unified with all Christians who call upon the name of Christ
- The church is to go out into the world and be a witness for Jesus Christ
- The church is to be in fellowship with Jesus Christ

In some ways, the church in Corinth had an **identity crisis**. They forgot who they were, so Paul reminded them what the church is. Paul addresses some of that again in the passage we read today. He also speaks about divisions of a particular kind – divisions that result from following the wrong person. Three things that I will point out from the passage this morning are as follows:

1. The church should have spiritually mature people
2. The church should follow the right Person
3. The church is the Temple of God

### Be Spiritual People

Earlier in chapter two of the letter, Paul compares the wisdom of this world (the age) and the wisdom of God.

**1 Cor. 2:6–7** “...among the **mature** we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.<sup>7</sup> But we impart a secret and hidden **wisdom of God**, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.”

Notice that Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world from the wisdom of God, and says the mature person receives the wisdom of God. This wisdom of God is revealed by the Spirit of God, it is not something learned by human means. Paul goes on to say the following:

**1 Cor. 2:14–16** “The **natural person** does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. <sup>15</sup> The **spiritual person** judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. <sup>16</sup> For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But **we have the mind of Christ.**”

Paul contrasts the **natural person** and the **spiritual person**. He then mentions about having the mind of Christ, and he **expects the Corinthians to have this**. In chapter three verse one of our passage this morning, Paul says he wants to address the Corinthian church as “spiritual people” but he can’t. Why can’t he address the church, God’s people, as spiritual people? Is the church not spiritual? It is because they are not acting like spiritual people. Instead of acting like spiritual, mature Christians, the church in Corinth was behaving like people of the flesh, like babes in Christ. That is probably not a flattering thing to call someone. What does it mean to not be spiritual people?

The invitation to become a member of the church is **believing in Jesus Christ** as Lord and Savior. One must first place his trust in Jesus as Lord over his life and Savior of his soul to become a part of God’s church. After one repents of sin and accepts Jesus Christ, one must be baptized, not for salvation, but as a personal testimony and in obedience to Jesus’ instruction to the church. The Corinthian church had apparently done these things. They believed in the good news Paul had preached to them. They even enjoyed the blessings of various spiritual gifts as Paul mentions later in the letter. However, the church had not progressed much further than this. Although the Corinthians were Christians, their divisive and immoral behavior showed that they were acting like the unbelieving world around them. Under the influence of the corrupt city of Corinth, the church was acting like those outside the church and not like the people of God.

Paul was not disputing their salvation. He was disputing their witness. Their behavior was inconsistent with disciples of Jesus Christ. So, this is a reminder again that the church is different from the world. The church is distinct from the world. The church is called out of the world, into fellowship with Jesus Christ, to be His chosen and holy people. As such, the church ought to **represent Christ** in this world. The church should be **full of spiritual people**. Spiritual people are not some elite group of Christians. Paul is not talking about a special members-only club within the church. This is a description that all Christians should have. Spiritual people are mature Christians – Christians with a mature faith. They are Christians with the evidence of a growing influence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

I mentioned this last week. The business of the church is to **make disciples**. It is not to become a big congregation, or have a lot of programs, or a lot of work in the community. These are all good things. We should want this building full of people, but they should be a particular kind of people. The **primary mission** of the church is **to make disciples**. The church needs to be full of spiritual people, not just people. It needs to be full of disciples

who are making more disciples. The Corinthians were believers who had accepted the good news Paul had preached to them. They believed in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and by virtue of the Holy Spirit, they were spiritual people. However, Paul could not speak to them as spiritual people since their behavior was so inconsistent with the true church of God. Paul had to treat them as natural people, as infants of Christ. Evidence of the Corinthian church's immature faith was the division in the church. When the church is divided and not focused on Jesus Christ, they are not being the spiritual people they were called to be.

### **Follow the Right Person**

There is a children's game called **Follow the Leader**. In this game, a leader is chosen, and the rest of the children line up behind the leader. The leader then moves around and all the children have to mimic the leader's actions. Any players who fail to do what the leader does are out of the game. The last person standing becomes the new leader. In a very real way, the church is also following a leader and we should do what our leader says. It can be problematic, though, if the church follows the wrong leader, or doesn't even know whom the leader is. In the Corinthian church, there was such a problem.

Some in the church said they followed Paul, others said they followed Apollos (someone who had ministered to the churches in Ephesus and Corinth). Others in the church said they followed the Apostle Peter (named Cephas in some translations). This created division in the church as different groups followed different leaders of the church. This doesn't mean the church should not have leaders. Every church needs leaders. Every church needs people to lead and serve in different ways. Ephesians 4:11 tells us that God has given to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers in order to equip the saints for the mission of the church. These are leaders of the church, but they are not the Leader the church should be following. They were not the leaders the Corinthians should have followed. Rather than saying they followed Paul, or Apollos, or Peter, the Corinthians should have all said they **followed Jesus**.

I think it is interesting that Paul calls the church God's building. In verse 9, Paul says, "You are God's building." Several times in Scripture, Paul refers to the church as something that is built, like a building. Every well-built structure, however, needs a solid foundation. It needs a sure footing to support the building. God's people, the church, the building of God, also need the right foundation. Without the **right foundation**, the church will fail. Along with the right foundation, the church also needs the right builder.

**Psalms 127:1** "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

If a church is built on anyone other than Jesus Christ, and is built by anyone other than the Spirit of God, **it will fail**. If the church is founded on anyone other than Jesus Christ, or follows anyone else other than Jesus Christ, it will fail. **We must follow Jesus**. That may sound strange, as I am sure we would all say we follow Jesus. Sometimes, like the church in Corinth did, a congregation will follow the wrong person, or focus too much on a person. Many have been called to this church to serve God's people. Many have come and gone, men and women who have contributed to the work here. Paul asks this question:

**1 Cor. 3:5-7** “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup> I planted, Apollos watered, but **God gave the growth**. <sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

Those who have served here were God’s fellow workers, His servants. You, the church, are God’s building. God uses people to serve Him and His church, but God is the One who is at work, using those He has called. Another description Paul gives for the church is “God’s field.” (v. 9) A field is an area of land used for growing something. You, the church, are God’s field, where He **grows disciples of Jesus Christ**. Like a field, a farmer plants the seed, and waters the crop, and cultivates the crop; however, the growth is still within the purview of God. Paul mentions about those who plant, and those who water. One of the things this emphasizes is that those who serve God and His church are involved in a **partnership** with God and with each other. There should not be any rivalry. There should not be division. There should not be groups within the church who follow one person or another. No one is of any use without the blessing of God. God is the One who grows a church, and He will still give growth to this church, if we remain faithful to Him.

One of the devil’s tactics is to urge God’s people to turn something good, like godly leaders in the church, into something bad. Following a person in the church rather than following Jesus is bad. I have been to churches where the church was referred to as so-and-so’s church. No, the church belongs to God. It is His building and His field. God is working in us, building His church, His people, if we follow Christ. The Corinthians should have been united and not have boasted about their favorite Christian leader. This underscores the need to focus our energies on what really matters – faithfulness and obedience to God. The reason Jesus Christ is the foundation and the Leader we should follow is because He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. No other name under heaven is given to men whereby they can be saved. Follow Jesus!

### **Be the Temple of God**

In our passage this morning, there are several things which Paul called the church. He called the church God’s building that is built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. Paul also called the church God’s field, where others plant and water, but where God gives the growth. Another description Paul called the church was the **temple of God**. Paul calling the church the temple of God points back, I think, to the first two points of this sermon, that the church should consist of spiritually mature believers in Jesus Christ, and the church should be following Jesus Christ and not those whom God calls to serve the church. Later in the letter, in chapter 6, Paul says the following:

**1 Corinthians 6:19-20** – “Do you not know that your body is a **temple of the Holy Spirit** within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, <sup>20</sup> for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

In chapter six, Paul is addressing the sins that people commit against their own bodies, specifically sexual immorality. He calls our bodies the temple of God, and since they are

temples of God, we ought to glorify God with our bodies. How we conduct ourselves, what we do with our bodies should bring glory to God. Here in our passage this morning, in chapter three, Paul is not talking about our individual bodies, though, but the whole church. So what does he mean by calling the church the temple of God? What is a temple?

The words “Temple of God” may bring to mind images of the temple in the OT. That temple was built by King Solomon and was a place of corporate worship and ritual sacrifice in the nation of Israel. The temple of God was also where God’s presence dwelled among the nation of Israel. It signified the presence of God, where God dwelt. Paul is not speaking of that temple, but he does refer to the church as the temple of God. God’s Spirit has moved from a building of stone and wood like in King Solomon’s day to a heart of flesh and a group of people who are called out of the world to be in fellowship with God as His holy people. The temple of God, the church, is where God’s Spirit dwells. Paul writes the following:

**1 Cor. 3:16-17** “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.”

There are several things to note about this:

- God’s temple is where His Spirit dwells, where God lives!
- God’s temple is holy.
- God is jealous of His temple, and will destroy the one who destroys it.
- You (the church) are God’s temple!

Being called the temple of God should cause us to reflect upon whom we are. We should be extremely thankful for we are profoundly blessed to have God’s very presence among us. We no longer have to go into a physical structure made of wood, brick or stone. The church, God’s own people, has the very presence of God with them. We should also take heed, though. As God’s temple, we should act according to the Spirit that dwells here. When the world sees the church, this church, they should see the very presence of God Himself. There should be no question that this church is God’s people with His Spirit. How we treat one another, how we treat those outside of this church, and how faithful we are to God and His Holy Word indicates how much we represent Him. Our Sunday School lesson this morning included the following passage:

**1 Peter 2:9-10** “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people...”

You are a chosen people. You are a royal priesthood. You are a holy nation. **Chosen, Royal, and Holy.** Because God has called us out of the darkness of this world into His light, we ought to act like the people of God who have His spirit dwelling with us. We need to be the church. We are the temple of God. We are the church!

## Conclusion

Whatever issues we experience, the church should not lose sight of whom we are, of whose people we are, and whose building this is. The church is the people of God who were called out of the world into fellowship with Christ to be the saints of God. In our passage this morning, Paul reminds us that the church should be spiritual people, believers who are mature in the faith. Paul also reminds us who, as God's people, we ought to be following – not preachers, pastors, deacons, and teachers. All of these are servants of the One we ought to be following – Jesus Christ, the very foundation of His church. Lastly, Paul reminds us that the church is the temple of God. It has the very presence of God's Spirit. As such, it should be evident to everyone, here and out there, that God lives here. In the book of Ephesians, Paul summarizes pretty much what we have seen here in First Corinthians chapter 3. Paul tells the church in Ephesus:

**Ephesians 2:19-22** "...you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

We are God's field, God's building, and God's temple. Let us go forth and be the church. Let us fulfill our calling and true identity. Let us go out and make disciple of all nations. This is good news, thanks be to God. Amen!