

Sermon follow-up
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5/9/10
1 Cor. 3:5-17

We spent the last couple weeks unpacking some of the things bound up in Paul's identification of the church as God's temple. We saw the temple gives us at least three perspectives on the church: [1] worship; [2] mission; [3] community. Looking at these three dimensions allows us to review many of the core aspects of our vision at TPC. We long to be a full representation of God's field and God's temple in the city of Birmingham.

A helpful treatment of the temple's missional aspect is Greg Beal's *The Temple and the Church's Mission*. Towards the end of his study, Beal writes

[E]xtending the boundaries of the temple by witnessing and strengthening those receiving the witness is a priestly sacrifice and offering to God. God's presence grows among his priestly people by their knowing his word, believing it and by obeying it, and then they spread that word to others by living their lives faithfully and prayerfully in the world. For example, a persevering and joyous faith in the midst of trial is an amazing priestly witness to the unbelieving world. It gets the world's attention. Such a witness either sparks more persecution or it influences some who persecute to join the church. This is what 'missions' is all about...

The mark of the true church is an expanding witness to the presence of God: first to our families, then to others in the church, then to our neighborhood, then to our city, then the country and ultimately the whole earth. May God give us grace to go out into the world as his extending temple and spread God's presence by reflecting it until it finally fills the entire earth, as it will according to Rev. 21-22...

[W]e need to get out of our own little fishbowls and manifest the presence of Christ through our words and lives, so that the boundaries of the temple, the church, will grow until the whole earth is encompassed with and manifests the presence of God. Through us God will fulfill his promise in Hab. 2:14, 'For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.' The mark of the true church is always to be outward-looking and expanding God's presence and not obsessively introspective...

[O]ur task as the covenant community, the church, is to be God's temple, so filled with his glorious presence that we expand and fill the earth with that presence until God finally accomplishes the goal completely at the end of time!

There is also a very good of the survey of the temple's missional's theme in Chris Wright's masterful *The Mission of God* (see index).

Gordon Fee captures the thrust of Paul's temple imagery very well (emphasis mine):

The church as God's temple is pregnant imagery – for both the Jewish Paul and the Gentile Corinthians. Paul's word refers to the actual sanctuary, the place of a deity's dwelling...In its first instance, therefore, the imagery picks up the motif of God's presence with his people, which begins in the book of Exodus and runs throughout the OT...God's presence, Moses argues with God himself, is the crucial matter for Israel's existence (Exod 33:15-16)...For Paul, therefore, the temple imagery first of all echoes this OT motif: God is now present among his people in Corinth by his Spirit...Paul's unique contribution lies with his remarkable, but understandable, transfer of images: the believing community themselves are God's temple in Corinth. In the OT the Israelites are never called God's temple as such, although they are God's people among whom God chose to "dwell" by tabernacling in their midst...The Spirit was how Isaiah 63 understood God to be present among his ancient people and how Paul now understands God to be present among his newly constituted eschatological people...

...as God's temple in Corinth, they are intended to be his alternative to Corinth, to both its religions and vices. In contrast to the "gods many and lords many" of pagan religion with their multiplied temples and shrines, there was now a temple of the living God in Corinth – and they did not so much as have a building; they were the building. And in contrast to the sexual immorality, greed, enmity, and broken relationships that marked Corinthian society, they were the people of the living God, where God by his Spirit had effected purity, compassion, forgiveness, and love. What made them God's alternative, his temple in Corinth, was his own presence in and among them. By his Spirit the living God had made his abode in Corinth itself!...

Since their unity as a people was created by the Spirit, their disunity in the form of strife and division had the effect of banishing the Spirit and thus of dismantling God's temple, the only alternative God had in their city. Hence, following the rhetoric that calls attention to who they are, Paul solemnly warns those who were thus wreaking havoc in the church: 'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.' One can scarcely circumvent the awful nature of the warning. God obviously takes the local church far more seriously than did the Corinthians – and most contemporary Christians.

What the church is cannot be separated from what the church does. What the church is – the temple of God, the dwelling place of the Spirit – shapes what the church does – namely, making God’s presence known in a particular place, bringing God’s presence to bear on world’s brokenness all around us. To apply this to our situation: The church is the presence of God in Birmingham; therefore it is the church’s vocation to make God’s presence *known* and *visible* in the city of Birmingham. The key, of course, is continually coming up with creative and engaging ways to do this.

If the church is God’s temple, it should be obvious why things like formal church membership are important. If the church is what Paul says it is in 1 Cor. 3, how could any true believer stand to be apart from the church? How could a genuine Christian see association with the church as something optional rather than essential?

The communal dimension of the temple got the least attention in the sermons, so let me shore that up here.

In 1 Peter 2, Peter says we are living stones in the temple God is building on the foundation of Christ Jesus. As stones stacked together on top of Christ, we share a common life. We rest upon one another, and ultimately on Christ. We are mutually dependent and mutually supportive.

In 1 Cor. as a whole, Paul’s makes edification a rule of church life (e.g., 1 Cor. 14). All things are to be done for the sake of edification, and every member has the responsibility of edifying the whole body. Edification is an architectural/construction term. In other words, all of us have a role to play in building the temple of the church. Paul’s temple language informs us about the true nature of church life and Christian community.

The ancient Israelites instinctively treated the temple as a place of gathering. Temple worship was not a private event, but a social event. Jews did not go to the temple alone, but to take part in the communal life of the nation (e.g., the three major festivals of the Israelite calendar).

If corporately the church is God’s temple, our relationships must reflect that reality. To attack another Christian with harsh words or gossip is not just a social sin, it is an act of sacrilege, an assault on the holy place of God (1 Cor. 3:17). Will we be like the Babylonians and tear down God’s house? Or will we be like Bezalel and Solomon, dedicated to building God’s house?

That's not to say we can never be negative; after all, the prophets gave scalding criticisms of the temple when the institution and its leadership were corrupt (Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Jesus, etc.). There is a place for constructive criticism of the church. There is a place for railing prophetically against the sins of the church. Sometimes pastors may even have to threaten the church with *ichabod* – the glory of God will depart from us if we do not pursue holiness, and we will be left as a desolate, empty house.

Furthermore, sometimes love requires us to be firm with the brother or sister who is in sin. Just look at this letter: Paul is speaking firmly to the entire Corinthian temple/church. He's touching on different pressure points in the Corinthian congregation because they need to shape up and live right! He fights against their infighting with the goal of getting them to repent.

But if the church is truly God's temple, the institution must be treated with respect and honor at all times. The casual, indifferent, take-it-or-leave-it approach that many modern American Christians have towards the church simply won't do. Each of us should ask: Can my attitude towards the church be squared with all that Paul says about what the church is in God's program?

Eugene Peterson reminds us that community is where we find Christ:

I often found myself preferring the company of people outside my congregation, men and women who did not follow Jesus. Or worse, preferring the company of my sovereign self. But soon I found that my preferences were honored by neither Scripture nor Jesus. I didn't come to the conviction easily, but finally there was no getting around it: there can be no maturity in the spiritual life, no obedience in following Jesus, no wholeness in the Christian life apart from immersion and embrace of community. I am not myself by myself. Community, not the highly vaunted individualism of our culture, is the setting in which Christ is at play.

Christ is not only at play in the community, he is at work there!

Just as we build our week off the Lord's Day gathering, so we must build our community off of our Lord's Day gathering. Worship is a springboard for mission as well as community; mission and community both summon us back to worship. These different facets of the church cohere with one another. If we worship the Lord faithfully and build one another up, when outsiders come to check us out, they will stick like Velcro. Our worship and community will have truly made the gospel attractive, and outsiders will come to join us in the work of worship and mission.

We are called to invest in one another – no matter the projected return. Involvement with one another is often messy and costly because Christians are sinners and still

have “issues” to deal with – money issues, grief issues, marriage issues, loneliness issues, etc. Dealing with one another’s issues is a way bearing one another’s burdens, which Paul calls us to do elsewhere. Sometimes stones in the Christian temple fall out of place; it is our job to try to put them back where they belong, integrated into the rest of the community. We are called to walk with one another through good times and bad, to walk alongside one another through both the high places and the valleys.

It is vital that we understand how tightly the church is integrated into the gospel. To be a Christian is not just a matter of a new (private, personal) relationship with God. It also means we have become part of the people of God. Many of our traditional evangelical gospel presentations leave the church out – or, at best, tack the church on at the end. But the church is more than a “salvation club.” The gospel is about much more (though never less!). The gospel means God is forming a new a people, a new humanity, a new community – the church! We invite people not only into a new relationship with God, but a new relation ship with his people. By definition, Christians are people have joined themselves to God by faith, But they are, by definition, also people who are community oriented. By definition, Christians are part of the church. We belong to God and to each other.

Tim Chester on community:

The church is not a building you enter. Nor is it a meeting you attend. It is not what you do on a Sunday. To be a Christian is to be part of God’s people and to express that in your life through belonging to a local Christian community.

Our belonging

We belong to one another (Romans 12:5). If a car belongs to me then I am responsible for it and I decide how it should be used. If a person belongs to me then I am responsible for them and I am involved in their decisions.

Our home Peter says Christians are ‘foreigners’ = ‘without home’ in the world (1 Peter 2:11). But we are being built into an alternative ‘home’ (2:5).

Our family

Families eat together, play together, cry together, laugh together, raise child together provide for one another. Families argue and fight, but they do not stop being families and they don’t join other families because they have different tastes in music or reading. With family you can take off your shoes and put your feet on the sofa. They provide identity and a place of belonging. Family is one of the most common New Testament images for the church. So try re-reading the paragraph above, substituting the word ‘church’ for ‘family’ ...

Our community

The New Testament word for community is used to describe sharing lives (1 Thessalonians 2:8), sharing property (Acts 4:32), sharing in the gospel

(Philippians 1:5; Philemon 6) and sharing in Christ's suffering and glory (2 Corinthians 1:6-7; 1 Peter 4:13). Helping poor Christians is an act of 'community' (Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 9:13). Christians are people who share their lives with one another.

Our joy

How would you answer this question? 'For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes?' Paul says to the church in Thessalonica, 'Is it not you?' (1 Thessalonians 2:19)

Implication #1: 'We' not 'I' We need to say *not* 'I am planning to ...' or 'this is my ministry', *but* 'we are planning to ...' and 'this is our ministry'. We need to say *not* 'you need to ...' or 'the church doesn't meet my needs', *but* 'we need to ...' and 'why don't we do this'.

Chester on being missional through community:

Jesus said: *'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'* (John 13:34-35) We need to be communities of love *and* we need to be seen to be communities of love. People need to encounter the church as a network of relationships rather than a meeting you attend or a place you enter.

Mission must involve not only contact between unbelievers and individual Christians, but between unbelievers and the Christian community. We want to build relationships with unbelievers. But we also need to introduce people to the network of relationships that make up that believing community so that they see Christian community in action.

People are often attracted to the Christian community before they are attracted to the Christian message. The best place for belief to emerge is in a context where people already feel that they belong. If a believing community is a persuasive apologetic for the gospel then people need to be included to see that apologetic at work.

Our approach to mission should involve three elements:

- building relationships
- sharing the gospel message
- including people in community

1. Building Relationships It's all too easy for us to put on events that suit us at locations that suit us and at times that suit us. But to reach a neighbourhood or community of people, we need to eat their food, play their games, hear their stories, walk their streets, enter their homes, follow their timetable and inhabit their spaces.

2. Introducing to Community This does *not* necessarily mean inviting people to a Sunday church meeting or to your church building. It means introducing them to our network of relationships in the context of ordinary life: inviting both Christian and non-Christian friends round for a meal or for an evening out.

We should not try to behave differently around unbelievers – be, as it were, on your ‘best behaviour’. We want to be authentic, vulnerable, real with them. We will share our struggles as well as our joys. We are witnesses to grace, not to good works. If we project a façade of shiny, happy or good people then either they will see us as hypocritical fakes or they will assume we are reconciled to God through living a good life. So people will see us falling out, but being committed to one another and forgiving one another. For this reason, it is much easier to communicate grace (as opposed to works) in community than on our own.

Unbelievers often experience a significant culture gap when they first attend a church meeting. One way of overcoming this is to ensure that our ordinary life together is gospel-saturated so that ‘God-talk’ to be normal. At the same time we want our meetings to feel less religious so unbelievers feel comfortable in them – more like a family gathering than a religious service. The result is that when people come to a meeting it is not a big culture shock for them. At the same time, because we have introduced to the network of believing relationships, they should already know half the people here. It becomes a much less threatening occasion.

3. Sharing the Gospel

A key aim is to invite people to read the Bible with us or explore the Bible story with us. But sharing the gospel usually begins with talking about Jesus in conversation. (This is easier if talking about Jesus is also a normal part of conversation with believers.)

Chester on community as integral to the gospel:

There is a summary of the gospel message which runs like this: ‘God made you to know him, but your sin cuts you off from God. God sent his Son to die in your place and reconcile you to God. Now you can know God and look forward to being with him after death.’ It is the story of an individual out of relationship with God brought back into relationship with God. This version of the story is true. But it is not the whole truth. At the heart of the Bible story is the story of a community. The foundation of missional church is an understanding of the Bible story. The Bible is the story of God saving not individuals, but a people, a community, a new humanity. The Christian community is not an add-on. It is integral to the gospel.

Creation We are made in the image of the communal God as relational beings to live in community. (Genesis 1:26-27)

Fall Our rebellion creates conflict both between us and God and between one another.

Abraham The promise to Abraham is ‘the gospel announced in advance’ (Galatians 3:8), setting the agenda for the whole Bible story and at its heart is God’s promise of a people (Genesis 12:1-3).

Exodus Because of his promise to Abraham, God sets his people free to know him. Through Moses he says: ‘I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God’ (Exodus 6:7). God lives among his people (the pillars of cloud and

fire and the tabernacle), but the people keep their distance and offers sacrifices because of their sin and God's holiness.

Israel 'The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy' (1 Kings 4:20; see Genesis 22:17; 32:12). But the people turn from God and the nation divides.

Prophecy God promises a new people: 'I will be their God, and they will be my people' (Jeremiah 31:31). He promises a faithful remnant (Zechariah 13:7-9).

Jesus Jesus is God with us (Matthew 1:23; John 1:18; Colossians 2:9-10). But he is also the faithful people of God, the true vine who bears fruit for God (Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:1).

The church In Christ we are God's faithful people and the true children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7, 27). The cross reconciles us to God (Mark 15:38) and to one another (Ephesians 2:11-3:13). Christ did not die for ad hoc individuals, but for his people, his bride (Ephesians 5:25-27).

New creation 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God ...' (Revelation 21:1-4)

The individualistic version of the gospel makes the church a useful help to individual Christians, but not an identity. But community is central to the Bible story. People are invited to not simply to an individual relationship with God (though that is one implication), but to become part of the new people of God, the bride of Christ. You become a Christian when by faith you become part of the people for whom Christ died.

Paul identifies himself as a builder and a gardner; the people are the building and the garden. Thus, Paul clearly distinguished between the clergy (apostles, pastors) and laity (the people, the congregation). Many have regarded 1 Cor. as a "congregational" letter (e.g., more compatible with an egalitarian or congregational form of government), but nothing could be farther from the truth. Paul presupposes that churches will have identifiable leaders. In 1 Cor. 9 he even draws an analogy between pastors and old covenant priests, who were supported with tithes from the people. So 1 Cor. as a whole definitely supports a class of officers who act as authoritative leaders and representatives of Jesus within and to the community as a whole.

We can glean more insight by looking at how the building analogy is used elsewhere in Scripture. The old covenant church had "builders" as well, that is, men who were leaders and were therefore responsible for the growth and health of the community. Look at Acts 4: In v. 11, Peter applies Psalm 118 to the leaders of Israel. The "builders" have rejected the stone, but that stone has now become the chief cornerstone of the new temple. Who is the stone? Jesus. What is the new temple? The church. And who are the builders who rejected the stone? The leaders of Israel,

the priests, scribes, elders, and Pharisees. In other words, the very people Peter is addressing as he speaks to the Sanhedrin (4:5, 8).

Paul is identifying himself as a true priest and elder by building on the true cornerstone. He has received the heavenly blueprint in his vision of the rise and ascended Lord, and is now constructing a house for God to dwell in. Just as the church is the replacement for the temple, so Christian pastors are replacements for the Jewish Sanhedrin.

While this passage in 1 Cor. especially addresses the responsibilities (and judgment) of bishops and pastors, it is also, by extension, relevant to ruling elders and deacons. And by further extension, it is applicable to all Christians since we all have a duty to edify (= build up) one another in the church, as Paul will show later in the letter. We all need to take heed how we build. Are we strengthening one another on the foundation of Christ? Or are we tearing one another down? God will judge, and punish or reward accordingly.

It's worth pointing out again that the word for temple in 1 Cor. 3 is not the word for the whole temple compound, but specifically for the most holy place, where God dwelt. Those who mess with the church mess with the apple of God's eye. They attack his inner sanctuary. This is a warning to teachers, who refuse to teach pure doctrine, either out of laziness or fear. But the warning also applies to church members who tear the church down by being hyper-critical, gossiping or lying about other Christians, etc.