

Building the New Temple – 1 Corinthians 3:5-23

Introduction – ““Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Then the Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” But He was speaking of the temple of His body” (John 2:19-22). The temple was everything to the Jew. The structure itself was breathtaking, a wonder of the world. Annual pilgrimages to it were undertaken to meet with God (Psalm 63:2, 65:1-2, 84, 122, etc.). The theology around the temple was that its foundation belonged to the creation itself and would last forever (Psalm 78:69, 125:1). The destinies of all the nations would be determined at the temple (Amos 1:2ff, Psalm 99:1-5), and the whole earth depended upon the one who sat on its throne (Psalm 29:10, 110:1-2, 5-6). In 55AD, it would seem ludicrous to tell a small band of Corinthian gentiles and Jews that they were replacing that temple.

God’s Field Hands (vv5-9) – Wrong-headed attachment to strong personalities is nothing new in the church and Paul has made clear that such childishness is the mark of lousy Christians (3:14). We ought to be grateful for good pastors and teachers while giving all glory to God. Because, while Paul planted, and Apollos watered, all the increase is due to God alone (vv5-7). The ministers (deacons, field-hands) are laborers for God; they are working for one purpose (v8) and each will be judged for how well they served to that one end. Faithfulness, not increase, will be judged.

God’s Building Project (vv10-11) – Paul switches metaphors. Now, he is the master architect (only by the grace of God given him), who laid the foundation which is Jesus Christ (that is, the gospel of Christ crucified, cf. 2:2). That is the only foundation that can be laid for this new building without incurring the wrath of God (Gal 1:8-9).

Building According to Code (vv12-15) – The sub-contractors, Paul warns, better build upon that foundation with the right materials. Now it’s important to note that this passage is not talking about the Roman doctrine of Purgatory. He is talking about ministers and ministries, not Christians and their venial sins. The minister’s work will be judged by God by whether it was avoiding worldly wisdom and instead adhered to the wisdom of the cross. For us, today’s worldly church-building sophistry might include modern philosophy, pop-psychology, compromising approval of gender-blending and marriage defining, assenting to scientific “facts,” or shared religious experiences. These will not pass through the fiery judgment. The Word of God will endure forever (1 Pet 1:24-25), not these faddish teachings. Those who are building upon the Word will see their work endure through trials – and they will receive a reward (v14, 1 Thess 2:19-20).

The Living Temple (vv16-17) – Here is what Paul has been building up to. “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” These are the precious living stones of the new temple (1 Pet 2:4-5). We, corporately, are that place where God’s Spirit dwells with His people. We are the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and when Paul says this inflammatory statement, claiming that God is now dwelling in the gentile Christians, it is scandalous to the Jews and it is foolishness to the Greeks. But he pushes even more: “if anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him” (v17). John 2:19-22 should be looming in the back of your mind.

Fire, Judgment, the Day (v13), and 70AD – Some interpret “the Day” of v13 with the final judgment at the end of human history. First, remember that there are many “days” of the Lord. Isaiah 13:6, Obadiah 1:15, Zeph 1:7 all refer to “the day of the Lord” which was near in their day. Second, remember what was said about 1 Cor 1:7-8. The revealing of the coming of the Son of Man’s power would occur in His resurrection, which declared Him to be the Son of God with power (Rom 1:4), His ascension which was the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, taking His seat upon the throne (Matt 24:30), and the day of vengeance which would occur in the generation to which Jesus spoke (Matt 24:34). The fall of the old temple signaled

the end of the old covenant and the old creation. Jerusalem destroyed (crucified) the temple. In His resurrection, God brought the destruction of the old temple – or in the days of this letter – was about to. The Roman sword that the Jews turned in order to conspire against the Messiah would turn out to be the sword which would turn on them. For the old order, that was the Day of the Lord. And so, Paul warns, “*let no one deceive himself...*” (vv18-20). There is always a way that looks wise, that looks like you don’t need Christ, that you don’t need to follow the way of the cross with Jesus. But God is not mocked and only His way and His Christ will persevere. As will His church.

A Benediction Upon the Temple of God (vv21-23) – The church is not the property of the apostles and ministers. The apostles and ministers are the servants and property of the church. Let’s work through these verses from the conclusion. Christ belongs to God and we belong to Christ. And absolutely everything in the world belongs to us. Outside of Christ, “*the world, life, death, things present, things to come*” are the ultimate tyrannies to the human condition and we will enslave ourselves to all kinds of fads out of fear. But in Christ, in His temple which we are, all is dispensed and administered with kingdom perfection (Rom 8:32, 37-39).

Summing up the Argument: Don’t deceive yourself with worldly pettiness. You are in Christ, you have the mind of Christ, you have the Spirit of God, you have everything in your God. Don’t despise it for a bowl of foolish worldly porridge. In other words, because we are in Christ, we participate in the reality of God’s dominion and are therefore set free from anxiety and petty scrambling for human approval. And set free to do His will, wherever He puts us.

Dave Hatcher – June 3, 2018

Notes for Little Saints

1 Corinthians 3:16 – “*Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*”

All of us, all Christians together, make up one temple of God where the Spirit dwells.

Draw a picture of a temple – or a beautiful church building – with gold, silver, and precious stones. Then point an arrow to one of those stones and label it “me.”

Then read 1 Peter 2:4-5