

Text: 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Coronavirus Sunday #2 – church closed

Title: The Church is the Temple of God

Truth: Make every effort to protect the holiness of the church.

Date/Location: Sunday March 22, 2020 at FBC via Livestream

Introduction

The modern ear would hear what Paul says in verse 15 as harsh and awful, even immoral. “What do you mean, ‘his work will be burned...he will suffer loss...be saved as through fire...’” The modern man consoles himself with the thought, “A loving God would not do that!” On the other hand, a Christian who has been in the faith for a while is not fazed by the idea of judgment. The following verses tell us exactly why Paul speaks so sternly about the matter.

What he said in the prior verses is that he is planting/building churches. So are Peter and Apollos and all other faithful ministers of the gospel. The foundation of all churches is Jesus Christ—His person, work, gospel, word, everything about Him. To bring the church to maturity requires labor that is in accord with the word of Christ (the New Testament instruction, that is, of the apostles). The “building materials” one must use are gold, silver, and precious stones. Burnable things and weak building products will not cut it to build upon the finest foundation that ever existed.

That is reason enough for the harsh word of judgment. Even more than that, the Bible says here, the church is not only built on the foundation of Christ, but it is also the place of residence of God the Holy Spirit. That is a huge reason to treat the church with extreme care.

I. The Church as a Temple, v. 16

A. What is a temple? It is a dwelling place or place of worship of a deity. In the Hebrew faith of old, the Tabernacle was the place where God’s special presence was manifested (Exodus 40:34). Then Solomon’s temple replaced the tabernacle. God’s Spirit took up residence there according to 1 Kings 8:10. After leaving Solomon’s temple during the days of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, God did not make His presence to dwell in the second temple nor Herod’s temple in the first century. The word for temple here refers to the temple building itself (Luke 1:9), not merely the temple mount or surroundings. According to Acts 7:48-49, we should *not* think of the temple as the only dwelling place of God. A finite temple made with finite and sinful hands cannot contain the infinite God.

B. Today instead of in a temple building, God is pleased to dwell in a newly formed family of people that includes Hebrews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ. That people is called the church. He dwells in them by means of His Spirit, the third person of the divine Trinity.

C. Note: this passage speaks of the church people as a whole, with a focus on the plural number of people in the church. This text does not teach that the Spirit dwells in individuals. That is taught in other passages, such as 1 Cor. 6:19-20. This text teaches that the Spirit also dwells in the church as a whole. This is especially expressed when the church congregates to worship and receive instruction. But it is always true that the people of God are the temple of God whether gathered at the particular moment or not. It will be even more gloriously expressed when the raptured church gathers to worship Christ and participate in the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Spirit of God lives in the Christian community as a corporate body.

The Lord's body is also a temple of sorts according to John 2:21. In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form (Col. 2:9).

D. The opening phrase of verse 16 emphasizes this truth with the phrase "Do you not know...?" This is roughly equivalent to the parental phrase, "Don't you know better than that?" It is incredible to Paul that they do not realize that the Spirit of God lives in them—and the implications of it.

E. What are the implications of the church as a temple? Consider two:

1. The church is therefore a holy "place" = people. Shenanigans like what were going on in Corinth—divisions, pursuit of worldly wisdom, not to mention lawsuits, idolatry, immorality and mishandling of the Lord's Table among other things—were so out of place to be totally embarrassing. The people should have recognized it! We should "get it" also when embarrassing methods of worship or bad teaching or silliness is in the church.

2. The church=temple idea is a major distinction between Israel and the church. The nation of Israel was not a temple despite the fact that God dwelt in their midst in the land (Numbers 5:3, 35:34)—but he did so in a specific building first called the tabernacle. He dwelt with the people, but not *in* them. God dwelt in a building but not the people. Today, God does not dwell in a building, but He does dwell in His redeemed people.

F. In the pagan temples, there were idol statues. In the Christian temple, there is the Spirit of the living God.

II. Ruining the Temple? v. 17

Remember, the church is the temple of God. The people of Christ as a community are the church.

- A. The key word of verse 17 is “defile.” Translations use either “defile” or “destroy.” The key point to understanding the nuance of the verb is that the word is used twice in the same verse: defile the church and God will destroy you. Destroy the church and God will destroy you. The latter option fits much better. It doesn’t need to be that a person actually *destroys* a church. Perhaps “ruin” is a better word because it can mean destroy or severely damage. Ruin the church and God will ruin you. This is like the *lex talionis* of the Old Testament law: an eye for an eye. The punishment fits or is commensurate with the crime. See for example Genesis 9:6.
- B. Why is this? The temple of God is holy. It is not something you mess with. Ruining the church sins against the set-apart people in the church; it sins against the Spirit of God because it damages His house; it sins against Christ as the foundation as well as the purchaser of the church.
1. In western society there have been times when there is a notion that sacred things were to be left alone. You steal from a church or defraud a pastor or similar, and you won’t only have to deal with human authorities, but God himself.
 2. In other societies, that idea is completely absent. Secular governing officials in such countries destroy churches, imprison pastors, harass church members, refuse churches their right to gather, etc. These officials will face devastating judgment from God.
 3. The church is set apart to God, and if you touch it, you touch the apple of His eye in this age (Deut. 32:10, of Israel). God is very sensitive about His holiness and those things set apart to Him. His people are important to him. Burning churches, banning Bibles, imprisoning Christians, and the like will only result in those perpetrators being burned and banned and imprisoned themselves. This is not a threat that Christians will somehow gain the ascendancy and take revenge on their old enemies. I am talking about the judgment of God after death. Retribution will not necessarily occur in one’s earthly life.
 4. I wish I could communicate how bad it will be. Destruction. Everlasting destruction from the presence of God. All the goodness that you enjoy today is a gift of God. There will be *none* of that in Hell.

C. But Paul is not primarily speaking to those outside of the church doing damage to it. Rather, he is speaking to professing Christians who are tearing down *their own house* (Prov. 14:1). Crazy! The church was in danger of splitting. This is tantamount to destroying the church. In the Old Testament situation, this would be like desecrating the temple.

III. What is Your Attitude about the Church?

- A. "I'm not into organized religion." So, you prefer *disorganized* religion? You prefer to be at a distance from the very dwelling place of God through His Spirit? That is not a righteous attitude, nor a wise one. Look at David's attitude in 1 Samuel 26:19. Check out the Psalmist's desire in 84:10.
- B. "I participate as I please." Does *God* have anything to say about how you participate or are you the little lord of your life?
- C. "I am a liberal/progressive/communist/pagan/wiccan activist and I am going to infiltrate the church and get it to believe and practice what I think it should, and to use it for the advancement of *my* cause." If that is your attitude, do note verse 17. God will destroy those who ruin the church.
- D. "I go, but I really don't care for many of the people. I'm following some very good teachers, but not this pastor. I want to change how they do things." Notice the word "they"? That is a bad sign. The me-vs.-them mentality is exactly what Paul is talking about. Serving (?) with that attitude is not building with gold and silver, but with wood and straw. The church is not "me-them" but it is "us."

Conclusion

Sometimes it is necessary to clean out a church or church institution that has become infected with false teachers. Such "dis-unifying action" on the part of godly Christians is not destruction but improvement and God is pleased with it.

But when the church is fractured by behavior like carnal sectarianism, cliques, petty inter-personal squabbles, or those who bring in false teaching and similar things, God is highly displeased. The Ephesian church left its first love for Christ and emphasized other things; God threatened to take away their lampstand, i.e., close their church.

Do what you can to protect the holiness of the church, even if it is not yet perfect. God is pleased with such work.

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