

*1 Corinthians 3:16-17***PREFACE**

One of the things I am coming to appreciate about this letter to the Corinthians is how it has given me a new and deeper understanding of “the church.” How it is to operate, its critical importance in God’s economy, its necessity in the life of every believer. I have certainly read and studied, even taught other NT letters to first century churches, but through this one the Lord has been particularly instructive about the vital, essential role the church plays in God’s plan for man.

I confess that there have been times in my earlier life when you might have heard me utter such foolishness as, “I don’t need to belong to a church. All of nature is my church.” Well, we all have periods of stupidity in our lives, somewhere. Happily for most of us, by God’s grace and longsuffering He keeps us alive long enough to learn from our transient stupidity—to grow *out* of it and grow up in Him.

But the passage before us in this session does not speak of the practical importance of the church; it does not speak—at least directly—of how we as individuals are better together than apart, how we are to encourage each other as part of a corporate body, how we are to share our lives with each other.

This passage, vv16-17 of Chapter Three, speaks of the holiness of our God, and the holiness of the corporate church that worships Him. The full wonder of these two verses is meant to cause the believer to reconsider, to reevaluate the purpose of our gathering together. Quite frankly, it is meant to take our breath away.

v16

In the paragraph we have just concluded, the counsel—indeed, even end-times prophecy—is directed toward individuals in the church.

- v10: each man (one)
- v11: no man (one)
- v13: each man’s work
- vv14 & 15: any man’s work

On the surface of most of our translations we might think that in the next paragraph, which begins with v16, Paul is continuing that focus on the individual.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.

Most of us are familiar with what Paul *does* address to the individual, later in this letter, on the same topic.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:17-20.

But the two “you”s in v16 of our current text are plural; Paul is speaking of the church as a whole. The NIV tries to suggest this.

Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16 NIV)

Realizing this change in focus, from the individual to the community, has the benefit of smoothing the transition from the previous paragraph to this one. In vv10-15, although he addresses the individual, it is for the purpose of building up the church as a whole with sound construction. Thus v16 continues this by referring to the church now “built” in vv10-15 as “a temple of God.”

Do you not know that...

We prize this book in our hands for its holiness, for it being the very words of God. But we also prize it for its frank *humanity*. Not just that the characters written about, such as King David, or Moses, or Noah, are revealed warts and all, but at times even some of the individuals that were the Holy Spirit’s amanuensis.

I had always read the first few words of v16—“Do you not know that...”—as little more than just another rhetorical flourish by the apostle Paul. But I can see Gordon Fee’s point that there is probably more than that going on here. I believe we have evidence here and elsewhere in the letter that Paul was truly exercised over the conduct of the Corinthians, and that the opening phrase of this verse was spoken with real annoyance—even exasperation. Consider:

- In only one other of his letters, in Romans 6:3, does Paul employ that phrase—and that to set up a point that may *not* have occurred to the Romans: “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?” That’s a fairly esoteric pronouncement that may have indeed been a brand new concept for the Romans
- But in this letter to the Corinthians he uses the phrase *ten times*—this is the first occurrence.
- For the most part Paul does this in passages where he is clearly exercised—perhaps even at his wits end with these believers. Take for example the next occurrence in Chapter Five.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.

I think it is safe to conclude that with his usage of this phrase in this letter we hear Paul’s exasperation with the Corinthians—and perhaps more: This could be rather pointed sarcasm. Remember how earlier—especially in the latter half of Chapter One into Chapter Two—Paul spent so much time on the topic of “wisdom” and “foolishness” because of the Corinthians being so enamored with the Hellenistic concept of *sophia*. He could very well be saying here something like, “Are you telling me that you, who boast in being so *wise*, do not know this?” Jesus himself took much the same line in His conversation with Nicodemus.

Read John 3:9-10.

...you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

This is an extraordinary statement recognizing one of the more mind-boggling, supernatural aspects of the corporate church.

The word translated “temple” does not refer to the entire temple *complex*—which would be *hieron* (hee-er-on)—but specifically to the *sanctuary* of the temple, or “holy of holies.”

temple = *naos* (nah-os’) = from a primary *naio* (to dwell); a fane, **shrine**, **sanctuary**, temple. Compare <G2411> (*hieron*).

That is, the imagery Paul is using here of the church is *not* as the open courtyard of the temple complex, where at any one moment hundreds of people (even Gentiles) could be milling about, conversing, arguing, teaching. Nor is he speaking of the first inner court—the Court of Women—or the next inner court where the priests received and butchered the sacrifices. He is not even speaking of the interior holy place, where only the priests could go. The word he chooses (*naos*) refers specifically to the holiest room in the temple, where Yahweh Himself dwelt on the mercy seat—the room that only the high priest could enter, and then only once per year, to make atonement for the sins of all Israel.

So if we were to superimpose the architecture of the modern church onto that of the Jerusalem temple, we are not speaking of the parking lot, we are not speaking of the foyer; we *are* speaking of the sanctuary—the room in which we meet with and worship God.

But of course Paul is not speaking of architecture. He is speaking of something mystical, supernatural that takes place when the individuals of the church come together. It is apparent now that the apostle is still on-topic; he is continuing with the thread he began at least back in the middle of Chapter Two.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:12-13.

And notice how the enigmatic statement in v9 of Chapter Three is now beginning to make more sense.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:9.

And what is that building? The temple of God!

We're not talking about framing materials, bricks and mortar, windows and a roof. We're talking about the mystical union of believers called "the church." And that church is where the Spirit of God "dwells."

dwells = *oikeo* = from <G3624> (oikos); **to occupy a house, i.e. reside** (figurative inhabit, **remain**, inhere); by implication to cohabit :- dwell. See also <G3625> (oikoumene).

I beg you not to pass lightly over this. We dare not just nod our heads in agreement, saying, "How nice." Remember how in the book of Hebrews Christ is portrayed as filling multiple roles? He is at once the lamb killed—it is His blood that is spilled—and He is the high priest that carries *in* the blood. Then too, Christ is the mercy seat, upon which the blood is sprinkled (**Romans 3:25**).

Just so, every believer, individually, is the temple of God, and in that individual temple the Spirit of God lives; He has taken up permanent residence. That is, every believer is the sacred holy of holies; we do not *have* it—we *are* it. But at the same time we are, individually, the priest worshipping God and His Christ before the mercy seat.

Then we add to *that* astounding truth the truth of this verse, which says that the church corporate, because it consists of individual temples becomes, in this sacred union of souls, as it were, a super-sanctuary, a super holy of holies where the Spirit of God dwells.

Verse 17 reminds us that “the temple of God is holy.”

holy = *hagios* = from hagos (an awful thing) [compare <G53> (hagnos), <H2282> (chag)]; **sacred** (physical pure, moral blameless or religious, ceremony **consecrated**) :- (most) holy (one, thing), saint.

Every believer in Christ Jesus for his or her salvation is a holy temple in whom dwells the Spirit of God—much as the Shekhina glory of God dwelt in the Jerusalem temple—until, that is, the rebellion and sin of Israel drove It away (Ezekiel 10).

Let that sink in a for a moment: *You and I are holy sanctuaries of God, for in us dwells permanently His Holy Spirit.*

Now, I don't know about you, but for me that is a sobering, convicting realization. Verse 16 reminds me of the truth of 6:19, and that verse cuts into me like a knife, for it causes me to recall all the times *this* holy sanctuary has behaved as if it were *not* a holy sanctuary.

But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.
(1 Corinthians 6:17-20)

What is equally convicting is the truth of v16 that when all of these individual temples come together as the church, they become *one*, larger holy temple, or sanctuary of God. And we, as a body of believers, unified as the church, must be willing to examine and appraise our behavior in and for Christ, both *as* a body, and as individual members *of* that body—and especially in what is to be the most sacred activity of a holy temple or sanctuary: the corporate worship of God.

This is what we will be examining in our next session, on v17.