

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

When I was a little boy growing up in Marshalltown, the official name of our church was “Baptist Temple,” with that name emblazoned over its entrance. I always found that a bit odd; every other protestant church in town was called a “church,” not a temple. But now I realize that that name was smack on: the congregation that met in that old and imposing building was indeed “a temple of God.” The group of souls that met in that old (and now gone) building comprised a holy temple unto God.

**Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.**

I confess that earlier this week I struggled with v17. What was it talking about? *Who* was it talking about? and to what extent? Could a *Christian* destroy the temple of God? And if he did, would God actually destroy him? That wouldn't fit with the rest of Scripture, would it? Or is it talking about *external* forces—non-Christian individuals corrupting the church?

I had to find at least partial answers to these before I could really dig into the text. And once again I discovered that there was no consensus. This one says one thing; that one says something else; and far, far too many of them say nothing at all.

**Sidebar:** For example, Alexander MacLaren (1826-1910), a preacher and man of God whose work I respect, comes to his sermon on 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and says, in essence, I know the text is talking about the church as the temple of God, but my three points will be about the *individual* as the temple of God.

**CONTEXT**

In the course of this session we will address all these questions and more. But I would say right now that, as is so often the case, the *context* of Chapter Three is our best guide to discerning the truth of this text. Put succinctly, the context is the building of the local church.

In vv5-9 Paul speaks of the various leaders who were instrumental in forming the church.

**Read 1 Corinthians 3:6.**

And he cues up, in v8, the later discussion about the workers in the church receiving their due reward.

**Read 1 Corinthians 3:8.**

Then Paul emphasizes, in v9, the brotherhood of the leaders, working together with each other as they all work for and under the guidance of God. In this he refers to the members of the church as “God's field.” He searches for another, suitable metaphor and comes up with “God's building.” We can hear the wheels turning in his head after he says that. “And speaking of a building, let me tell you...” So he launches into the next paragraph, vv10-15, which is about *all* the church—not just the leaders—coming together to build the church on the foundation Paul set in place: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As we know very well by now, vv10-15 are all about the quality of the work each individual turns in for the church: If it is shoddy work, worth little, then it will count for nothing in The Day and will be burned up in the day of judgment; if it is work of good, lasting quality, it will *not* be burned up and the individual will be rewarded by the Lord.

In v16 Paul grabs the Corinthians and says quite forcefully, *Don't you realize how important this is? This church you are building is a holy sanctuary in which the Lord God dwells!*

## v17

Now note the progression of thought here. Paul has just spoken at length about, first, the laying of the foundation for the church, then, second, the quality of the workmanship in the building of the church upon this foundation—which includes the warning that anyone who turns in shoddy work will receive no reward from the Lord. Verse 17 takes this one step further, making reference to individuals who do not stop with just turning in poor quality work, but actually work to corrupt, defile, and ultimately destroy the holy temple of God.

The KJVs use “defile” instead of “destroy” at the beginning of the verse (“If any man defile the temple of God”) but the Greek is the same word used in “God will destroy him.”

**destroy** = *phtheiro* = probably strengthened from *phthio* (to pine or waste); properly **to shrivel or wither, i.e. to spoil** (by any process) or (genitive) **to ruin** (especially figurative by moral influences, to deprave) :- **corrupt (self), defile, destroy.**

This raises a host of questions for the astute reader and student of God's word. Right off the bat we wonder, at least, *What does it mean to “destroy” the temple of God? to what extent? Who is Paul talking about? And perhaps even more troubling, What does it mean that God will “destroy” him?* Let's consider these together, for it is difficult to examine the one—the offense—without examining the other—the punishment.

### *How should we understand the word “destroy” (phtheiro) in this context.*

The commentary by A. T. Robertson and A. Plummer, cited by Gordon Fee, summarizes it well—especially pertaining to God's response.

R-P: *phtheiro* here...must [not] be pressed to mean annihilation [i.e., non-existence]. Nor, on the other hand, must it be watered down to mean mere physical punishment. The exact meaning is nowhere revealed in Scripture; but terrible ruin and eternal loss of some kind seems to be meant.

Also, the tense of this verb is such that it means “if anyone is, or keeps on, destroying...”

### *Who is it that would try to “destroy” the sanctuary of God, and be destroyed by God?*

We have established that the temple, or sanctuary, of God refers to the communion of saints as the local church. In its midst dwells, just as in every individual believer, the Spirit of God. Thus it is a holy place, a sacred place, and this communion of saints is precious to God.

### **Read 1 Peter 2:4-5.**

A few verses later Peter describes those that make up this sanctuary.

## Read 1 Peter 2:9-10.

How can anything so “precious in the sight of God” be destroyed by any man? And who would be doing this? As mentioned earlier, the jury is still out on this. And I do not want to get bogged down in hashing out the fine details of the perseverance of the saints; we did that in Session 26 in our discussion of that inflammatory topic, “carnal Christians.” But we should not forget two things:

- that no man can be certain of the condition of any other man’s soul,
- and that not everyone who passes through the front door of a church building on a Sunday morning is a believer in possession of the Spirit of God.

A perfect real-life illustration of v17 was brought to my attention this week by Albert Mohler in his daily *Briefing* for August 21, 2018. He cites the extraordinary pace at which secularism is taking over Scotland. Last year the BBC reported that a majority of Scots now say that they are not religious. Just under a quarter, that's 23.6%, of Scots said they are religious, while 72.4% said they were not. For example, “Last year, Humanist Society Scotland conducted [more weddings] than any other religious group, including the Church of Scotland” (the Scottish branch of the Church of England).

**Sidebar:** “Humanism is not synonymous with secularity. It’s not synonymous with secularization. Secularization can take many forms, but when we talk about humanism, we’re talking about a particular form of a more secularized worldview that has specific cognitive, intellectual content, and that places it in what we might consider to be the left edge of the more secular worldviews. Because it’s not just based in something like agnosticism, it’s based in a very clear argument about the absence of God. That is, an atheism that is joined to the elevation of human beings. That’s the very issue of humanism.” (Mohler)

What makes this news pertinent to our text is the reason *why* Scotland has so dramatically and quickly turned secular. I quote Albert Mohler:

*Mohler:* Now as we’re looking at Richard Holloway, we’re looking at a man who from 1986 to 2000 was the Bishop of Edinburgh of the Scottish Episcopal Church. Between 1992 and 2000, he was the primus, he was the chief cleric. That is, the chief leader, ministerially speaking, of the Episcopal Church in Scotland. But what we read about...is Bishop Holloway’s “declension of belief.” What does that mean? It means the Bishop’s abandonment of the faith *while* he was the Bishop of Edinburgh, *while* he was the primate of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

During that period, he abandoned not only all the historic doctrines of Christianity, not only any claimed biblical inspiration or authority, but he abandoned, by any normal definition, theism, which means belief in God. So here we’re talking about a nation that has experienced a decline of belief which oddly enough...runs just about parallel to the loss of belief of one of the nation’s most important...most famous religious leaders who’s now mostly famous or infamous for being nonreligious.

Now that he has left the church, Holloway’s every work—whether spoken or written—is meant to undermine, corrupt, defile, even destroy the church. Here are just a few of his book titles.

- *Dancing On The Edge: Faith In A Post-Christian Age* (1997)
- *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics* (2000).
- *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity* (2000)
- *Looking in the Distance: The Human Search for Meaning* (2004)
- *Waiting For The Last Bus* (2018)

We could debate whether Holloway lost his faith, or never had it in the first place. But for this discussion that is beside the point. To all appearances, Holloway *was* a believer; he was the head of the church in Scotland and the bishop of Edinburgh, for crying out loud! Yet for the last twenty years he has been doing everything he can to actually *destroy* the church—and with great success: just look at the frantic pace with which his country is abandoning God.

The temple of God, whether in Jerusalem, Edinburgh, Scotland, or Martensdale, Iowa, is precious to God—and it is to his great peril for any man to do anything that imperils the church. Zane Pratt, dean of The Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism, puts it eloquently and succinctly: “You don’t mess with God’s stuff.”

We can’t say with certainty what Paul means by “God will destroy him,” but it is safe to say it will not be pleasant. We *can* say with confidence that Richard Holloway, in the day he stands before the judgment seat of Christ Jesus, will indeed be “destroyed.”

*Fee:* The theological question as to whether a true “believer” could be destroyed by God lies beyond Paul’s present concern. In any case, one must be careful not to let the “logic” of one’s system...prejudge the plain meaning of Paul’s words. That these people were members of the Corinthian community seems beyond reasonable doubt; that Paul is also serving up a genuine threat of eternal punishment seems also the plain sense of the text. The theological resolution of such tension will lie either with the concept of the visible church being composed of more than the real church, destined for God’s glory, or with the supposition that some, who by all appearances do belong to the community of faith, have, for reasons beyond our understanding, opted out and are once again pursuing a path leading to destruction. The nest result is the same in either case.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Any difficulty we have in nailing down the specifics of Paul’s warning should not preclude us drawing from it valuable application.

- As believers and part of the holy temple of God—not just *in* it, but a component *of* it—we must continually be on guard to protect its integrity from deceitful threats from without and from within.
- As believers and part of the holy temple of God, we must continually be examining our own behavior: Do our words and actions *strengthen* this sanctuary—or *weaken* it? Are we encouraging unity—or division? Peace—or strife?

Paul in this text has given us fair and sobering warning.

**Read Ephesians 4:11-16.**