

**United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity**  
**Studies in 1 Corinthians**  
**A warning to those who tear down God's temple**

**Intro:** In our lessons so far we've seen that the Corinthian church was divided because they were being influenced by values that were a part of their culture. Because they weighed the wisdom of their teachers by human standards (what they knew and how they spoke) they had resorted to comparing preachers and divisions resulted from their loyalty to those who had taught them. As we have seen so far, Paul has met their issues methodically and powerfully. He had to correct their whole mindset piece by piece.

They needed to understand that God did not save them by human wisdom but by what human wisdom could have never conceived, by the message of the cross.

They needed to understand that God saved them in that way in order that He might eliminate the kind of human glory and boasting that they were practicing.

Consequently Paul points out that his preaching was in harmony with God's purposes. He determined to knowing nothing but Christ and to speak not with words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power.

However to say that men like Paul and Apollos did not speak with human wisdom did not mean that the message they preached was not wise. The Corinthians needed to understand that the message that Paul and Apollos preached was God's wisdom revealed by the Holy Spirit.

Likewise they needed to understand that the messengers of the gospel were God's servants and they should not divide over them. Or to put it another way, they were plants in God's field; they were stones in God's temple.

**All of this then would lead Paul to give a practical word of instruction and warning to both those who would seek to build the temple of God or to those who would seek to tear it down:**

**Last we considered Paul's word of warning to those who build**

*According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it. (1 Cor. 3:10)*

**But now Paul immediately follows with a word of warning to those who tear down**

*Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)*

How should we understand Paul's language about the temple and how would one tear it down?

**How should we understand Paul's language about the temple?**

*Do you not know that you are the temple of God...*

Paul begins with a characteristic formulation “do you not know?” The implied answer is “Yes, we know; but we have failed to make proper application this truth.”

The church at Corinth was a temple of God.

We are used to the idea that the universal church is God’s temple.

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)*

The whole church made up of Jews and Gentiles could be called a spiritual temple of God indwelt by the Holy Spirit; but Paul now makes a local application. Since they are the church of God in Corinth, they might be as a local church considered a temple in that city.

Such an idea would not be foreign to the Corinthians who could see all around their cities, temples built in honor of various Greco-Roman deities. And they realized that such temples were to be found in most all cities throughout the whole province of Achaia.

Perhaps the second phrase is a bit more enigmatic.

***...and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?***

Already we’ve seen the conception that the whole church is the dwelling of God by the Spirit. The reference is to the Holy Spirit who was sent by Christ to lead the church. The Spirit’s presence with the Corinthians would have also been a self-evident truth. After they heard Paul preach and obeyed the gospel, Paul laid his hands upon them (as he customarily did wherever he preached) so that they could receive the Holy Spirit.

*But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:7)*

*But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. (1 Corinthians 12:11)*

*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13)*

So through the various gifts of the Spirit they had clear evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence in them as God’s temple.

But now Paul makes a powerful application of these two truths!

***If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. (1 Cor. 3:16-17)***

Probably everyone in the ancient world would have been horrified by the prospect of the destruction of a holy temple. Imagine for example someone in Corinth taking a hammer into the ancient temple and

whaling away at its marble walls and columns, seeking to tear it down. In Greco-Roman thought such an act would have been considered a consummate act of sacrilege; and would have probably resulted in their immediate death.

But the Corinthians were a local group of people, perhaps meeting in someone's home. And the images of a temple may not have fully dawned upon them. Aren't we just a group of people serving God? Aren't those people who are sitting around the room with me just ordinary Corinthians, some of which might not be living so well. So what difference would it make if the group is broken up into fragments? Paul answers; it matters a lot!

The person who builds God's temple will have his work judged by God; but the person who tears down what others have built will be himself destroyed!

Why? Because those people, even those that may not be so impressive, are "holy" because they are stones in God's temple and they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And the whole temple likewise!

### **Application**

#### **Why the Corinthians needed to hear this message?**

It might not have dawned upon the Corinthians how destructive their attitudes were. And they may have even wondered, "Why would Paul say such a thing to us. How are we destroying God's temple?"

The answer is to found in the context:

By their selfish competition

By their personal agendas

By their exaltation of preachers

By exalting themselves one over another

By reducing the power of God's wisdom by relying upon human wisdom

By replacing the appeal of the cross with another message

#### **Why we need to hear it?**

It is easy even in our own time to lose the sense of holiness that attaches to the Lord's church and to any particular congregation. It is not a trivial thing to tear it down. God's warning still applies.

We are the dwelling place of God and His Spirit continues to instruct and empower God's people, not through miraculous gifts of the Spirit, but what those gifts produced, the written revelation of His apostles.

Because we are the product of God's plan and the result of the great sacrifice of His Son, we are holy to him.

**Conclusion: Paul's message is not a particularly pleasant one to think about; but was then and still is an important message to remind us of how important unity is to God. Let us always see the church as God sees it and honor it holiness by striving for unity at all times.**