

The Church You Can Read About in the Bible

The Nature of the Church

Intro: This year one of our themes is "The church you can read about in the Bible."

In our first lesson we looked at what the church is, arriving at these conclusions:

The church always identifies the people who have been saved.
The saved who assemble together are identified as the church of Christ in that place.

In our second lesson we looked at the promise of Jesus to build His church arriving at these conclusions:

Jesus would die to provide a sacrifice for the sins of the world.
On the third day He would be raised victorious over the powers of Hades proving that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God.
On the basis of His sacrifice and resurrection, the foundation would be laid to build His church, a group of people who belong to Him.
The apostles of Jesus would be given ruling authority over the church through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
The Lord's church was established on the Day of Pentecost as people responded to Peter's proclamation of the gospel.

In our third lesson we learned how people can become a member of that church you can read about in the Bible.

We saw that people were added by the Lord to the church when they responded to the gospel by believing in Jesus as the Son of God, by repenting of sins, and upon the confession of faith, by being baptized in Jesus' name.
Those who were being saved were added by the Lord to His church.

But now that we know what the church is, when the church was established, and how to become a member of it, what did God intend that the church be and do? What was His purpose for establishing the church? What is their mission or work?

Let's begin to answer that question today by looking at the way the church is described in Scripture. There are a number of synonyms if you please for the church of Christ that gives us special insight into God's intentions for the church Jesus built. This will give us a correct picture of what we should seek to be and do both as members of the universal body and as members of a local congregation.

The church is the temple of God

It may very well be that Jesus' initial promise to "build" the church was based on the figure of a temple, since he made the promise near the place where there were temples to both Greek gods and Roman emperors. But

whatever may be implied in that promise is explicitly revealed in other NT passages about the church.

Paul wrote of God's union of Jews and Gentiles into one body, describing them in this way:

“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)

Paul would take this image and apply it to the local congregation at Corinth since they were the temple of God at that place.

“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)

The image of the church as a temple had special meaning to the Corinthians because it was a city full of temples to Greek gods; yet Paul assures them that they are the real temple of the living God who created all things:

“Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. (2 Corinthians 6:16–17)

Finally Peter writes to the Christians who lived in northern Turkey and describes them in this way:

“And coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4–6)

What should we learn about the church from this description?

The church as a temple suggests the transition from the physical temple to the spiritual temple in God's overarching purpose.

The physical temple had been the pride and joy of the Israelites for many centuries; but that temple was but a type and shadow of God's NT people.

Moreover the church as a temple suggests that the physical nation of Israel is no longer God's covenant people; but rather the church is the new Israel of God, God's covenant people. Peter takes the language that God has spoken to Israel at Mt. Sinai and applies it to the church:

“But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE

PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.” (1 Peter 2:9–10)

In addition Peter also makes clear that the true temple of God is made up only of those who believe in Jesus as the Christ.

For this is contained in Scripture: “BEHOLD I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM SHALL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.””

The church as a temple suggests that God is living in us and walking among us as His people.

When redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he brought them to Sinai and made His covenant with them to be their god. As a symbol of that covenant, he had them construct a dwelling (mishqan) for Him among them, i.e. the tabernacle. This tent housed the Ark of the Covenant and the cherubim which symbolized the throne of God in their midst. God's glory, the shekinah, shown from that place to indicate God's acceptance of the tabernacle as His dwelling. The temple which Solomon built replaced the tabernacle with a more permanent structure; but with the same fundamental meaning and furnishings.

But when we say then that the church is the temple of God, we are being reminded that:

God dwells in us through the Holy Spirit!

in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:22)

“Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? (1 Cor. 3:16)

just as God said, “I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. (2 Corinthians 6:16–17)

Thus He is glorified through us!

“to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:21)

The church as a temple reminds us that we must be a unified people.

Throughout history God chose one temple in which to dwell to declare His unity as the one true god and the unity of His people in worshipping him. In the OT the physical temple was a symbol of the national unity of the Israelite people. However the prophets looked forward to a time when not only Jews but also Gentiles would unite together in worshipping God at His temple. Paul found the fulfillment of that hope in the church:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might

reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.” (Ephesians 2:13–16)

It was on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice that Paul would later say that both Jews and Gentiles were built together into a holy temple.

Paul applied the image of the church as a temple to Corinth locally as we've already seen; but he does so with this solemn warning:

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)

Paul's concern was that the carnal attitudes of the Corinthians about who taught them was leading to schisms among them. To foster division was to deny the essential unity of the temple of God and the essential unity of the God who dwelt in it!

Paul used powerful words to describe this division; it was destruction of the temple of God. To envision anyone walking into a temple and simply destroying it was horrifying and a great offense against the god who dwelt in it.

And so the church as temple reminds us that God's true people are essentially one through their faith in Jesus Christ. And there is no legitimate basis to divide the people of God into groups--whether it be on the basis of race, sex, social status, education, or any other earthly standard. To make these distinctions is to destroy the unity of God's temple.

The church as a temple reminds us that we must be a holy people suitable for God's indwelling and presence.

God in the OT strongly communicated to Israel the need for holiness in their approach to God.

He carefully delineated sacred space and forbade defilement to come into his presence.

By such rituals He was teaching His people that He was a holy God who could only be approached by holy people.

When Paul explained that the church was the temple of God, he likewise called it "a holy temple."

...in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord;

Not surprisingly Paul follows the statement to the Corinthians that they are God's temple with the exhortation to live worthy of that description by living in holiness:

“THEREFORE, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1)

He took this theme all the way down to the individual level:

“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 6:19–20)

The church as a temple reminds us that we are a sacrificing people.

“you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:5)

Peter describes Christians as living stone in the temple of God. He affirms that we are also a holy priesthood that offers spiritual sacrifices to God, acceptable through Jesus Christ.

We present our bodies as a living sacrifice.

“I URGE you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (Romans 12:1)

We sacrifice through worship.

“Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. (Hebrews 13:15)

We sacrifice through doing good and sharing with others.

And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” (Hebrews 13:16)

Conclusion: The description of the church as a temple will give us real clarity about the nature of the church--what it is to be and do. I regret that so many people today have lost sight us what the church is all about.

The Lord's church is about the desire to save all without distinction, to let God live in us through His word and to glorify Him by holy lives. It is to worship Him in thankfulness and to do good and share with others as an expression of His character.