

THE CHURCH AS THE TEMPLE OF GOD

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INTRODUCTION

One of the temptations we often fall into in the Church is to think of the Church as a building. In the New Testament the Church is never a building. It is always a group of people gathered to worship God and to build each other up as the Body of Christ. Most of the churches of New Testament times met in houses or rented rooms, though some met outside. For several centuries the Church did not have legal status. Illegal organizations do not build buildings and put their names on those buildings.

The New Testament uses a variety of images to describe the Church:

- the people of God
- the Body of Christ
- the Bride of Christ
- the believers
- the saints
- the elect
- the field of God

The New Testament also speaks of the Church as the Temple of God. It uses the metaphor of a building to describe the Church, but it is not the building as building that describes the Church. It is the purpose and function of that building—the Temple of God—that describes the purpose and function of the Church.

Temples were noteworthy for several reasons in the biblical world.

1. They were thought to be the dwelling place of the deity. They were sacred spaces where sacrifices were offered and worship was given.
2. Temples brought people together for a common cause greater than local or even national interests.
3. Often temples were the largest and most beautiful buildings in the city. They were monuments to the great devotion given to the god worshiped there.

These characteristics of ancient temples suggest reasons the apostle Paul described the Church as the Temple of God even though he knew very well that the Church was a people, not a building. This metaphor of the temple is similar to Paul's use of the metaphor of the human body to describe the church. But when the temple was used for the metaphor to describe the church what was the picture that came into the minds of those who heard the metaphor used in those days? The Jews would have pictured the temple of Solomon and their current temple in Jerusalem. Today we would call it the...

The Former Temple: It would be impossible to describe the original temple in all of its beauty and detail in the amount of time we have together this morning. I want to read to you a portion of what happened the day the first temple was dedicated.

1 Kings 8:1-11 (NIV)

[8:1] Then King Solomon summoned into his presence at Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the LORD's covenant from Zion, the City of David. [2] All the men of Israel came together to King Solomon at the time of the festival in the month of Ethanim, the seventh month.

[3] When all the elders of Israel had arrived, the priests took up the ark, [4] and they brought up the ark of the LORD and the Tent of Meeting and all the sacred furnishings in it. The priests and Levites carried them up, [5] and King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted.

[6] The priests then brought the ark of the LORD's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim. [7] The cherubim spread their wings over the place of the ark and overshadowed the ark and its carrying poles. [8] These poles were so long that their ends could be seen from the Holy Place in front of the inner sanctuary, but not from outside the Holy Place; and they are still there today. [9] There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt.

[10] When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. [11] And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple.

Of all the passages I could read to you about the description of the temple you might wonder why I choose this passage. I choose this passage because it shows the most important aspect of the temple and that was the indwelling presence of Almighty God. It is important to note that the presence of God was in the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place behind a great curtain shut off from the people. Only the high priest could go in and only once a year to offer a sacrifice there for the sins of the people.

The Transition: This original temple was a foreshadow of what God had in mind for the future. God wants a personal relationship with man and indwelling a temple building was just not personal enough. So God sent His Son to open the temple of God up to all the people, all of the time.

Matthew 27:45-53 (NIV)

[45] From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.

[46] About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, *"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"*—which means, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

[47] When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

[48] Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. [49] The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

[50] And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

[51] **At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.** The earth shook and the rocks split. [52] The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. [53] They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

In his writings Paul explained this transition of the dwelling place of God in a temple building

Hebrews 9:1-15 (NIV)

Worship in the Earthly Tabernacle

[9:1] Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. [2] A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. [3] Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, [4] which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. [5] Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.

[6] When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. [7] But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. [8] The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. [9] This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. [10] They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

The Blood of Christ

[11] When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. [12] He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. [13] The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. [14] How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

[15] For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

The New Temple: From an old covenant with its temple building, to a new covenant which did away with the physical restriction of the curtain separating the presence of God from common man, there came the day of Pentecost. The day God came to dwell in the hearts and lives of all individual believers. We are the temple of Almighty God.

Acts 2:1-4 (NIV)

[2:1] When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.
[2] Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. [3] They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. [4] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

It is important for us to understand these two aspects of the indwelling presence of God because it helps us see the foundation laid for our present relationship with God. We are the temple of God today. As the church is described as the Body of Christ, it is also described as the temple of God.

The Temple of God: (From design – to model – to completion)

1. **The Former Temple** – A shadow of things intended, a shadow of things to come, a design.
2. **The Transition** – A plan to move from the former to the new. The model brought to completion in the one perfect sacrifice.
3. **The New Temple** – The completion of the plan for the temple of God – The hearts of individual believers.

That brings us back to the...

THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF ANCIENT TEMPLES:

I. THE CHURCH IS A DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD.

Paul declares in Ephesians 2:22 that in Christ “you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” The root idea of the word “dwelling” is house or home. The Church is to be a place where God is at home. This implies several truths.

First, if the Church is God’s home, then God must be present in the Church. This means that Church is not primarily a place to talk about God or to do things for God. Church is a place where we are with God. And since Church is not a building, it is a group of people among whom God is present. If we gather for Church but God is not present, the fundamental reality of the Church as Temple has not happened. In 1 Corinthians 14:25 Paul describes what should happen when an unbeliever or someone who does not understand meets with the Church. That person “will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” When neither church members

nor visitors recognize the presence of God, then Church as the Temple of God has not happened among us.

A **second** implication of God being at home in the Church is that God must be host rather than visitor. Because Church—the gathered people, not the building—is God’s home, He is in control of the activities and sets the agenda. One might think we are confused about whose home it is because we often treat God as the guest and act as if the Church belonged to us. If God is the homeowner, then His values will be those that are lived out in the Church. If God is the homeowner, the Church will become a reflection of His character and interests, not ours.

A **third** implication of God being at home in the Church is that the Church must be a place where God is comfortable. We do not have to prove ourselves at home. We are accepted for who we are. If God is at home in the Church, we will not ask Him to prove himself. We will accept Him for who the Scriptures reveal Him to be.

II. THE CHURCH IS BUILT WITH PEOPLE.

[Ephesians 2:20](#) declares that the Church is “[built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.](#)” The chief cornerstone was the first stone put in place in an ancient building. Its length and width edges had to be straight and perpendicular because the walls were laid out by sighting along the edge of the cornerstone. Its vertical edge had to be straight and perpendicular because the walls were aligned to that edge. If the cornerstone was not perfect, the walls of the building would not be straight and might collapse. Paul’s point is the Church always looks back to Jesus for our bearings. If we align ourselves with Him, the Church will be straight and will last. If we become out of alignment with Jesus, the Church will become mis-shapen and liable to collapse.

[First Peter 2:5](#) further describes the Church as built of “[living stones.](#)” This describes the individual believers that become part of the Church. This means the Church must be highly personal and relational. We exist as people in a relational structure, not as occupants of a building.

We are not free to determine the shape of the Church. Its dimensions and shape were laid out in alignment with Jesus by the apostles and prophets of the first Christian century. Each successive generation consists of more people placed as living stones in the building called the Church. Inanimate stones fit quietly beside each other in a physical building. Being living stones set together in the Church can be more challenging. Sometimes we are put in the wall beside other stones we would prefer not being with. It is not our task to change them or to seek another place on the wall. Our task is to align ourselves with Jesus and to live in grace and peace with the other stones seeking to be together the dwelling place that pleases God.

III. THE CHURCH IS A HOLY TEMPLE.

[First Corinthians 3:17](#) declares, “[God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.](#)” It is hard to be clearer than this. The Church must be holy because it is the Temple of a

holy God. A holy God cannot be at home in an unholy temple. A holy God who builds His Church with living stones demands that those stones be holy. Because the Church is God's and not ours, the Church's holiness must be God's holiness.

As the Temple the Church is designed to display God to the world. A church that is not holy provides false advertising about God. We might despair of ever accurately portraying God to the world except for the fact that we have a living example of what such a life would look like. It would look like Christ. Thus the holiness required of the Church means submitting to the discipline of allowing the Spirit to form more and more Christ in us, Christ among us, and Christ through us. The ultimate purpose of the Church as God's Temple is to bring glory to Him.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION

God has called us to be a holy Temple in which He is at home. The Church is not a building; it is a people. But the Church is a people where God is at home and where people know that He is really among us. That can happen only when we are a holy people. The question you (*each of us*) must face is whether our holy God would be at home in you (*each of us*). If there is anything that is part of your life (*our lives*) that would make a holy God uncomfortable dwelling within you (*us*), He is able to help you (*us*) deal with it. (*We*) Open your (*our*) heart to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you (*us*) now about any sin or impurity within you (*us*) that would keep God out of you (*us*), His holy Temple. As the Spirit speaks to you, I invite you to come forward and to pray that God would make you His holy Temple.

—Roger L. Hahn

(Modified by Rev. David G. Bostick)