

The Church as the Building of God

Last week, we looked at the image of the church as the family of God. This evening, it's the church as the building of God – or sometimes a special type of building, namely, the temple. As we think about this, I think it's important to remind ourselves there were no church buildings when the New Testament was written.

There are three major passages where this image is used in the New Testament. We'll look at them in the order they appear in the New Testament. We could easily spend a sermon on each one – so my comments this evening will be relatively brief.

First, 1 Corinthians 3:9-17

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

Before we get to the picture in these verses, we need to be clear about a preliminary issue. Many people think of this passage in individualistic terms.

- I need to be careful that I'm building with the right materials in my own life.
- I need to be careful that I'm building with the right materials in the life of that person I'm discipling.

In other words, they read this passage and they think in individual terms – not church terms. Now, it's not wrong to say this must also happen at the individual level, but to miss the group level of this passage is to miss the main point of what Paul writes.

What evidence is there that this passage refers to the local church as a whole?

- The *you* in verse 9 is plural. It's not *you* as an individual that's God's building – it's all of you.
- The general context that goes all the way back to 1:10-12 – the divisions in the church and the various parties identifying themselves with Apollos and Cephas and Paul and Jesus. If you look at 3:4-6, you can see Paul's still dealing with that issue. He's talking about how people like himself and Apollos and Cephas have related to the church as a whole – the sort of materials they've used in trying to build the church.

What are the main points Paul makes here. **First**, Jesus – especially Jesus crucified – is the church's foundation. The people in Corinth were talking as if their particular "party leader" was the foundation (Apollos, Cephas, Paul). Paul reminds them the only foundation is Jesus. If there's any other foundation, it's not a church you're

building. In a different context in Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus speaks of the importance of good foundations – you need something that's solid and strong and enduring.

What are the implications of this? Jesus must always remain central in the life of the individual Christian and the church as a whole. What happens in the building must be firmly based on Jesus – and thus must be consistent with who He is and His purposes.

What other foundations do people try? As individuals, people try church attendance, baptism, being very religious, good works, spiritual experiences. As churches, people try personalities of leaders, particular programs, the latest spiritual fad. There are all sorts of temptations to treat something other than Jesus as the foundation – to rely on some other basis to build the church.

Secondly, people are involved in the work of building the church. It's not that God somehow mysteriously does it all without any human intervention – God uses His people in the process of building His church. In this context, Paul particularly thinks in terms of the building work done by leaders – such as himself and Apollos and Cephas. Yet, he's writing this for their sake. He uses these leaders as an example for them. Anyone else who wants to build must take the same approach.

Thus, it follows that we should expect Jesus will use His servants to build His church. He gifts each of them differently – according to what He considers appropriate. Those different gifts will contribute in different ways. Yet, in it all, people are to use those gifts for the purpose of building God's work in one another – not their own

work.

Thirdly, in their building work, people can use valuable materials or worthless materials. What are the materials being used? In the context, the contrast Paul made in the earlier chapters is between:

- that which is based on God's wisdom – namely, Jesus being crucified; and
- that which is based on the world's wisdom.

It's the same contrast here. What's built must be consistent with the foundation – God's grace to us in the death of Jesus. You can't have a foundation of salvation by grace and a building of salvation by works. Our good works flow out of our salvation by God's grace – they do not add to our salvation.

The focus in building must be on what lasts for eternity. Thus, the focus must be on building godly character and evangelising non-Christians. That's what lasts for eternity. That's what's consistent with Jesus' death to save us from our sins. The focus has to be on growing to maturity in unity – which is why Paul uses strong words in verse 17 for those who destroy God's building work by creating disunity.

And so, we (and especially those in leadership) must be careful how we build. Our focus must always remain on Jesus and His death on the cross. That's God's wisdom. The world doesn't recognise God's wisdom. Paul said that back in chapter 1. It often scoffs. It wants a message in line with its own wisdom. And so we're tempted to do that – downplay the seriousness of sin; offer ways to achieve their own salvation (or at least to make a significant contribution). Or we tell people they get in by

grace – we get the foundation right – but then tell them they only stay in and make progress because of their own effort – we build with shoddy materials.

Fourthly, God's building is holy/sacred – not a physical building, but the people. God has set us apart for Himself. We belong to Him. We're for His purposes. And so we should live as if we belong to God. And we should treat one another as if we belong to God.

- We should work for God's purposes in the way we build.
- We should be careful to build and not to destroy. Destroying God's people is a serious matter.

The second passage is Ephesians 2:19-22

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

The first thing to notice in relation to this passage is that Paul uses the picture in a different way.

- The context is different – it's no longer divisions in the church at Corinth that gives rise to the use of the picture; rather, it's the big division of humanity between Jews and Gentiles.
- The foundation is different – in Corinthians, it's Jesus; here it's the apostles and prophets.

That highlights an important principle of Bible interpretation: the context is always important. This isn't a stand-

ard picture Paul uses exactly the same way every time – it's an illustration Paul varies to suit the context.

What are we to say about the different foundation?

- It's a function of the different way the picture's used – in Corinthians Paul's a workman on the building rather than part of the building as he is here.
- In what sense are the apostles and prophets the foundation? It's their role as the inspired teachers of the divine revelation. It's not so much who they are as people; rather, it's their role in providing God's revelation. In other words, the church is built on God's revelation – which centres on Jesus and the cross.

So where does Jesus fit in this building? He is the *chief cornerstone* – according to the NIV. There are three main suggestions as to the position of this stone.

- It's part of the foundations – a properly tested stone at the corner.
- It's at ground level – and sets the directions or the alignment for the walls of the building.
- It's at the top of the arch – and thus the stone that holds the building together.

Whichever, it's a crucial stone in the building. Giving direction to the building or holding it together so it doesn't fall down are both important functions.

What are we to learn from Paul's use of the illustration in Ephesians? **First**, the centrality of Jesus within the building is still highlighted. He, both as written Word and living Word, forms the basis for the building.

Secondly, the idea of individual Christians belonging

within the building is emphasised. This is done in several ways:

- The context emphasises Gentiles being brought into the building – previously they didn't belong, but now they do.
- There's a mixture of metaphors – the picture of God's household that we looked at last week and that highlights the idea of belonging is part of this passage.
- Verse 22 speaks of individuals being built into the building.

One important implication of this is Christians are being built into God's church. The idea of a lone Christian is foreign to the New Testament. Instead, there's the idea of interdependence – one stone does not make much of a building. We need to be careful of this in our culture – because we have a strong emphasis on individualism.

Thirdly, the building is identified as a holy temple. This is similar to the Corinthians passage – and has similar implications.

Fourthly, Paul introduces the idea that God dwells within His building – that is, within His people. Other parts of the New Testament speak of the Spirit dwelling within individual Christians – and that's also important – but here the emphasis is on God dwelling within the whole building. There's something God does within us as a group of His people that's beyond His work in us as individuals. It's one of the reasons the New Testament tells us not to give up meeting together.

Another implication of this is that the church consists of

holy people, not holy buildings. We are God's true building, not some physical structure of bricks and mortar. We've touched on this a couple of weeks ago in John 2, so I won't go over that again this evening.

The third passage is 1 Peter 2:4-10

As you come to Him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

*"See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame."*

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

*"The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone,"*

and,

*"A stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall."*

They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

What are we to learn from Peter's use of this picture? **First**, Jesus still has the prominent place – with the same

translation difficulties as Ephesians 2 (whether this stone is in the foundations, at ground level or at the top of the arch). Here there is the added dimension that people can either accept or reject Jesus.

- There were those who rejected Jesus at the time of His crucifixion – they didn't recognise Him for the significant stone that He is.
- However, in God's building, Jesus is the crucial stone.
- Thus, those who recognise this (those who come into positive contact with the Living Stone) get built into God's spiritual house.
- Those who fail to recognise this stumble over Jesus – and, in the long run, will be crushed by Him.

Secondly, those who come to Jesus and acknowledge Him become living stones (an interesting concept since stones are usually quite dead!) who are built into God's spiritual building. Thus, once again, there's the idea of belonging within God's house – we become part of something bigger than us as individuals. A stone that's simply lying on the ground by itself doesn't make much of a building.

Something of this also comes out in verses 9 and 10. The communal terms of God's Old Testament people are applied to the people to whom Peter writes, namely, the church.

Thirdly, there's the idea of things being done according to God's desires. It's His house. There are also the concepts of holy priesthood and spiritual sacrifices. Peter doesn't specifically identify these – although there are, I believe, hints in verses 9 and 10 (in terms of declaring

God's praises and taking over the communal terms of God's people in Old Testament times).

There are three other areas that are worth touching on. The first has to do with other New Testament language – and here I want to introduce a bit of Greek to you.

- oikeio" – belonging to the house; members of the household
- oiketeia – household servant
- oiketh" – household slave
- oikew – to live, dwell, inhabit
- oikhma – living quarters, room
- oikhthron – habitation, dwelling
- oikia – house, household, family
- oikodespotew – manage a household
- oikodomew – build, erect, to build up, edify, encourage
- oikodomh – building, edifice, building up, edification
- oikonomew – administer
- oikonomo" – administrator, steward
- oiko" – house, household, family

There are a whole range of words that are related to one another – house, build, and so on.

There are a range of verses in the New Testament that have the idea of *building up* one another – for example: Romans 14:19-20, 1 Corinthians 14:5,12,26, Ephesians 4:16. Should this be considered an extension of the way in which the New Testament uses the building image to speak of the church? Or is it just a happy coincidence of the Greek language? Either way, the concept of us building up one another in our Christian faith is a signif-

icant part of what the New Testament encourages us to do as a church.

The second area has to do with the Old Testament background to this picture – namely, the temple. How does that relate to the New Testament usage of this picture?

- 1 Kings 5-8 tells us the story of Solomon building the temple and how magnificent it was and what happened at its dedication ceremony. Yet, that story has two significant earlier bits of background.
 - First, before the temple, there was the tabernacle – the symbol of God's dwelling with His people.
 - Secondly, before Solomon built the temple, there was an exchange between God and David about its construction (in 2 Samuel 7). David wasn't allowed to build the temple. Instead, God promised David He'd build David's house.
- The New Testament tells us that Jesus fulfils all these things:
 - Jesus is God become flesh and thus God dwelling with us. He fulfils what the symbol of the tabernacle, and later the temple, stood for.
 - Jesus Himself tells us that He Himself is the temple in John 2:19-22.
 - Jesus also fulfils God's promise to David – for He is David's Son who sits on David's throne forever.

In using this image of the building/temple for the church, the New Testament writers aren't trying to contradict all this background.

- They recognise that Jesus is the true temple – thus it's only as we're joined to Him (as we're *in Christ*)

that we're incorporated into the temple God's building.

- They never use the image to encourage physical buildings. God's dwelling with people isn't in some sacred location or some sacred building – He dwells within them through His Spirit.

Thus, our buildings aren't temples – nor are they sacred locations. They're weather-shelters in which it is convenient for us to meet together.

The third area has to do with modern extensions to the Bible's use of the picture. One concept often introduced into this picture by modern preachers is the idea of God shaping the stones to fit into His building programme. God chips off the rough edges in order to fit us into the appropriate place in this magnificent temple He's building. Two lessons are commonly drawn from this idea.

- Each of us has a specific place in God's building – He's made each one of us unique and it's important we find that unique place and thus fulfil the purpose God has for us.
- God's still working on each of us. He's knocking off the rough bits of our character and developing godliness within us so we'll properly fit within the building. Sometimes He even uses other living stones to chip off some of the rough bits in our own lives.

I think they're both great lessons – and they're both true lessons. However, I'm not sure the Bible itself uses the picture that way. That doesn't mean we can't use the picture that way – after all, Paul adapted it to suit each particular context – just that, if we do, we recognise that's what we're doing.

Another concept often introduced by modern preachers is the idea that God's building's still under construction. If you look at the church today, you often see something of a mess – but, they say, that's fairly normal on work-sites. It's not till the building is finished that you see the beauty of the final product. It'll be like that with the church also – we'll continue to look like a construction site until Jesus returns. That too is true – but again, it's not the way the New Testament uses the image.

We've covered a lot of ground this evening – and my comments have been fairly brief. Let me try to draw together the main threads.

- It's God's building work – and it's a work He does in His people. The building belongs to Him – that is, we belong to Him. We're set apart for His use. All building work's do be done in line with His purposes.
- The foundation's important: it's Jesus. It's what He's done in dying for us on the cross that forms the foundation for any other building work that God's doing.
- God involves people like us in the building work. We're to work at encouraging each other to continue to show forth the family likeness