

BELIEVERS (THE CHURCH) AS GOD'S TEMPLE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 3:1–23

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 3:11)

Daily Bible Readings

M	July 28	Ezek. 47	The River of Life
T	July 29	2 Cor. 6:1–18	A Holy Temple
W	July 30	Matt. 16:13–20	Christ Will Build His Church
Th	July 31	Ps. 24	Seeking God's Face
F	Aug. 1	Ps. 63	Behold God's Glory in the Sanctuary
Sa	Aug. 2	1 Cor. 3:1–9	God Grows Us

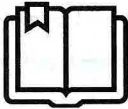
STEPPING INTO THE WORD

With this lesson we step into the work of Paul, whose letters to churches and individuals around the Roman world make up the earliest written testimony to the Christian gospel. Always brilliant, Paul was frequently prickly when encountering deficient understandings of the Christian message. This prickliness is nowhere more evident than in his letters to the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians he deals with multiple challenges, including an inappropriate sexual relationship within the church's fellowship and well-off members hoarding their food when the congregation comes together for a meal. In 2 Corinthians, Paul alternates between anger and hurt as he deals with those who question his authority to preach the gospel. In our reading for this lesson, he criticizes the Corinthian Christians for their partisanship. Some of them brag about being Paul's followers; others claim Apollos, about whom we read in Acts 18; still others want to be associated with Peter. Paul characterizes this as an exercise in missing the point. One of us might have planted the seed while the other one watered it, he says, but growth comes

only from God. The Corinthians were focusing on secondary things while forgetting that which is primary. It's a lesson that we, in our hyper-partisan political environment, might do well to learn.

History records an interesting postscript to Paul's struggles with the church at Corinth. Sometime around the year 96 CE, the bishop of Rome wrote a letter to the members of a church in another city. That bishop's name was Clement. Word had reached him that this other congregation had broken into factions and kicked out its own pastoral leader. Where was this troubled congregation? Corinth. It was the same church to which Paul had written, apparently still experiencing the same problems some decades later.

Lord of the Church, forgive us our divisive and headstrong ways. Lead us into harmony and a unity of spirit that will draw the world to your message. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 3:10–23

3:10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Let each builder choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³the work of each builder will become visible, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. ¹⁴If the work that someone has built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a wage. ¹⁵If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁶Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

¹⁸Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written,

“He catches the wise in their craftiness,”

²⁰and again,

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

“The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise,
that they are futile.”

²¹So let no one boast about people. For all things are yours,
²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death
or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are Christ’s,
and Christ is God’s.

THE NECESSARY UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Paul begins this chapter (vv. 1–4) accusing the Corinthians of being spiritually immature and “fleshly,” squabbling about lesser things when they are called to a higher, more spiritual purpose. By the end of the chapter, he has implicitly called them worldly (v. 18). What have the Corinthians done to merit such treatment? They violated the unity of the church.

It might be easy to miss that Paul’s concern here is for the church because the word “church” never shows up in the chapter. Clues point strongly in this direction. First, every time in this chapter Paul uses the pronoun “you,” it’s a plural form, indicating that he is thinking about a group rather than an individual. Second, he uses three metaphors to speak about those whom he addresses, each of which indicates a communal rather than individual identity. He begins with an agricultural image: the Corinthians are God’s field which Paul planted and Apollos watered. It might be one field, but it is comprised of a multitude of crops. Second, he speaks of them as God’s building, implying a dwelling place for a family or even a large clan.

Finally, he calls them “God’s temple.” Good Jewish teacher that he is, Paul does not refer here to just any local temple. He is thinking of the Jerusalem temple. When Paul wrote the letter, the destruction of this temple was fifteen or so years in the future. Like the Jerusalem temple, God’s Spirit dwells within the Corinthian church. Violating its unity, as Corinthian factions are doing, is to risk serious consequences (v. 17).

Also like the Jerusalem temple, the church is where God’s people come together to worship. Their “coming together” is not simply physical. It means that worship is the fullest embodiment of the church’s unity. Regardless of the things on which we don’t agree, we can always lift up our hearts together to God. Don’t want to worship with someone whose political opinions put them outside the bounds of Christian belief (or so we think)? Not to worry. God will be happy to judge the deficiencies of their

commitment to the gospel—right alongside ours. For now, it's enough to join with them in praise of the God who has a good reason for wanting us both in the room together. Maybe we already know that God wants us to learn something from them and them from us, and worship can be the way God cracks open that door.

? Do you find more or less difference of opinion in your church than you did ten years ago? Is this a good or bad thing? Why?

GOD'S LOVE IS ALL THAT MATTERS

When the Israelites escaped Egypt, they came to Mt. Sinai, where they entered into covenant with God to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). Holiness here means being set apart, singled out for a special purpose. For Israel, this purpose was to give witness to God's grace and goodness. In time, the idea of holiness was localized; Jerusalem was God's holy city, and the temple was God's holy place. God's presence was made known there in a special way. The temple was itself set apart, as Israel had been set apart, to bear witness to God among the nations.

When Paul says that the church is God's temple, comparing it to the Jerusalem temple, he implicitly says that God's presence in the church is what sets it apart and makes it holy. As a student of the church's history, I can tell you that when the church has tried to live into its calling to be holy, the attempt has succeeded far less often than we would hope. The reason, it seems to me, is that time and again the church has tried to define *holiness* in terms of *moral purity*. Think about it: if someone were to call you “holy,” would you hear that as a compliment? I doubt that I would. The term has come to mean someone who abstains from a laundry list of vices for the purpose of considering themselves better than the rest of us. At least since the Victorian era, those vices have primarily had to do with sex.

But there is a better way to think about the church as the place where God's holiness can be found: in terms of the *holiness of divine love*. Throughout Scripture, God's love shows up in acts of healing, acceptance, and reconciliation. As we saw when we looked at texts from Genesis 12–50, God chose the mothers and fathers of the Israelite people, not because they deserved to be chosen, but because the world needed to see that God would call and accept any of us. The same truth could be seen in Jesus'

ministry. If the church is to be God's temple, as Paul tells us, then the purpose will be to see God there. This will only happen if the church chooses to love, forgive, and accept the way God does in Christ. The only way the church will truly embody the presence of God will be to show the world God's extravagant forgiveness and reconciliation.



When have you witnessed a Christian congregation showing radical love and acceptance? What makes this holy work?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

God calls the church to be a new kind of temple, modeled after the temple in Jerusalem. What would this look like today? Here is one suggestion.

To be a new temple would require the church to become more diverse. The Jerusalem temple of the New Testament era drew together a surprising diversity of persons. Acts 2:5 tells us that when the day of Pentecost arrived "there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem." Why were so many faithful followers of Israel's God gathered from around the world in Jerusalem on that day? They were there to worship in the temple. Judaism was an international religion by that point, one of the most broadly dispersed in the ancient world. When circumstances allowed, members of the ancient Jewish diaspora returned to Jerusalem, lending worship in the temple a global character.

Today, Christianity is also a global religion with profound cultural differences enriching worship from one point on the globe to another. Yet rarely do most of us draw on that diversity, or even know much about it. Inviting music, liturgy, and preaching from other branches of the church into our own worship spaces would help us experience God in new and unexpected ways.

While global Christianity is becoming more diverse, congregations in the U.S. are becoming more homogenous, even when it comes to political affiliation. Not that long ago, almost every church was "purple," representing the diversity of views within the congregation's surrounding community. Now congregations are becoming more "red" and "blue," self-selecting into separate political tribes. The damage this does to the proclamation of the gospel is real. Scott Black Johnston addresses this problem in his excellent book *Elusive Grace: Loving Your Enemies While Striving for God's Justice*.

Recognizing that the sad state of political affairs in our country leads us to consider those on the other side of the aisle as “enemies.” Johnston speaks to the necessity of diverse viewpoints in the congregation. Most especially, he offers a roadmap to certain virtues that could help us reclaim the diversity we’ve lost. He suggests for example temperance, not simply as moderation of what we consume but also of what we say. “Temperance calls us all to speak with charity and to act with respect. It calls us to debate with integrity and humility. . . . Without humble engagement, without temperance, our ability to talk with each other, to care about and for each other, and to work together for the common good atrophies.”¹

? God calls the church to be a new kind of temple, modeled after the temple in Jerusalem. What do you think this could look like today?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today’s Scripture.

1. In 3:1–23, Paul discusses the original and continuing problems of the Corinthian Christians concerning divisiveness (vv. 1–9), the role of the founding apostle and the immediate care needed to build the church because of future judgment (vv. 10–17), concluding with correction of their misunderstanding of the relationship of teachers to the people of God (vv. 18–23).
2. Gold and silver were used to decorate a finished building. Wood, hay, and straw were essential building materials. Paul is not comparing a structure made of gold, silver, or costly stones with a building made of wood, hay, or straw. He is comparing a building built on a solid foundation with one built with disregard for the existing foundation. The former will survive a catastrophic event, while the latter will likely collapse. See also Matthew 7:24–27.
3. The Greek word *naos* (“temple”) also means “sanctuary,” a reference to the inner part of the temple where God dwelled. The concept of God dwelling among his people comes from the Torah (Exod. 25:8–9). Verse 21 contrasts declaring loyalty to other people (Paul, Apollos, Cephas) with the heritage belonging to all believers in Jesus Christ.

1. Scott Black Johnston, *Elusive Grace: Loving Your Enemies While Striving for God’s Justice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022), 14.