

Touch Not the Apple of His Eye

There is a phrase used in the OT that is very unique, one which is probably not understood by anyone without an explanation. It is used several times with the most applicable to tonight's lesson being in the minor prophet Zechariah (see also Deut 32:10; Psalm 17:8; Prov 7:2; Lam 2:18):

“For thus saith the LORD of hosts; After the glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye.” — Zech 2:8

The term ‘apple of his eye’ is a reference to the pupil of one’s eye. Some theorize in ancient times the pupil (the black center) was thought to be a small hard ball, of which an apple was a natural symbol. It is used metaphorically in several different manners:

- the pupil is the most sensitive part of the eye, one which immediately makes your head jerk back if touched; therefore **to ‘touch the apple of his eye’ is to touch that which is most sensitive and tender.**
- some consider it as something important, critical, held in high regard; a blow to the pupil would immediately inflict blindness; therefore **to ‘touch the apple of his eye’ is to touch that which is held in high regard, central to that person’s affections, something precious.**

The phrase is used by Zechariah to describe Israel as central to the affections of the Lord, precious, cherished above all others, that of which God is most sensitive and tender.

While that exact phrase is not used in the NT, the sentiment is definitely there. I would like to focus our thoughts this evening on the Lord’s love for the local church and what He is doing through His churches. Lord willing before the lesson is over, we all will see how the churches today are the ‘apple of His eye’.

The Lord Jesus Christ Established His Churches During His Earthly Ministry

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF OUR ENGLISH WORD ‘CHURCH’? — How is it “church” is so commonly used today? Though not without debate, it is generally accepted the word “church” originated from the Greek word κυριακός (kuriakos), an adjective meaning “pertaining to the Lord, the Lord’s.” The word is actually used twice in our Bibles: “When you come together, it is not the **Lord’s** Supper you eat ...” (1 Cor 11:20) and “On the **Lord’s** Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ...” (Rev 1:10).

This word is derived from the Greek word κύριος (kurios) meaning “Lord, master,” frequently used of Christ. As early as the third century the word began being used to refer to the building where Christians worshiped, the people calling it “the Lord’s ___” with the word “house” understood. From thence over the centuries it was passed into various European languages as Christianity spread throughout Europe: in English it is church, in Anglo-Saxon or Old English cirice, in German kirche, in Danish kyrke, in Swedish kyrka, in Scottish kirk, in Old Scandinavian kyrka, and in Old Gothic kyreika.

ECCLESIA WAS A COMMON WORD — When Christ spoke “Upon this rock I will build My ecclesia” He was using a term familiar to each disciple. “**The New Testament writers neither coined this word nor employed it in an unusual sense.** The apostles and early Christians were more familiar with the Septuagint than with the Hebrew Version. From it they generally quoted. They wrote in Greek to a Greek-speaking world, and used Greek words as a Greek-speaking people would understand them.... [It is] fiction that *Ecclesia* was used in any new, special sense. **The object of Christ’s ecclesia, and terms of membership in it, were indeed different from those of the classic or Septuagint ecclesia. But the word itself retains its ordinary meaning.** In determining this meaning we look to the common, literal usage. If occasionally we find it used in a general or figurative way, these few instances must be construed in harmony with the common, literal signification.” [Carroll, *Ecclesia*] “Thus, although ἐκκλησία [ecclesia] is from the very first a secular and worldly expression, it expresses the supreme claim of the Christian community in face of the world.” [Kittel, *Dictionary*]

HOW WAS ECCLESIA USED IN CLASSICAL GREEK? — The word ecclesia came from the combining of two Greek words ἐκ (ek = out of or from) and καλέω (kaleō = to call or summon). The typical Protestant definition therefore states “the church are those ‘called out’ from the world, meaning every Christian.” **This over-generality does great injustice to the word ecclesia!**

In its most basic sense, ecclesia may be defined as follows: “**Originally an assembly of citizens, regularly summoned.**” [Vincent, *Word Studies*] The ancient Greek nation was composed of a number of small city-states embracing usually but a few thousand inhabitants. It was governed by the qualified citizens; i.e. they were autonomous and democratic. Not all the inhabitants however possessed the rights of citizenship (in some cases scarcely half) so the matter of qualification was quite important. This body of citizens called-out to assemble and discuss civic affairs was a Greek ecclesia (a NT example of that may be found in Acts 19). Therefore when the Lord Jesus used this word, He used it in the sense commonly understood by those with whom He was talking. In essence what Jesus said was this: “**The Greek Gentiles have their assemblies which regularly meet to discuss things of a secular nature. I too will start and build My own ecclesia, an assembly of believers which will meet on a regular basis, not to discuss secular matters nor for social purposes but to honor and glorify My name. This assembly will be built using you apostles as the foundation (it is with you I will begin) and hell itself will not destroy this program — when I return, there will still be those assemblies meeting for My name’s sake.**” **Thus during His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus Christ started a work which**

continues to this day.

Further definitions:

- H. E. Dana, Greek scholar, co-author of an advance Greek grammar and professor of NT Interpretation at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote this concerning the Greek background of ecclesia: *“It was commonly used in reference to bodies of qualified representatives ‘called out’ for legislative purposes.... When this governing body of those who held the qualifications of citizenship assembled for deliberative purposes they were known as an ecclesia. In its bearing upon the New Testament idea of the church the important significance of the classical usage is that the term referred to a body of persons having definite qualifications, assembled to carry out certain organized aims on democratic principles. To be more specific, there were in the classical usage of this term four elements pertinent to its New Testament meaning: (1) the assembly was local; (2) it was autonomous; (3) it presupposed definite qualifications; (4) it was conducted on democratic principles.”* [Dana, *Ecclesia*]
- Thayer’s Greek lexicon: “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly” [J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*]
- Liddell and Scott: “an assembly of citizens regularly summoned; the legislative assembly” [R. Scott and H. G. Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*; q.v. Overbey, *Ecclesia*]
- Trench’s Synonyms: “the lawful assembly in a free Greek city of all those possessed of the rights of citizenship, for the transaction of public affairs” [R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*; q.v. Overbey, *Ecclesia*]
- Seyffert’s Dictionary: “The assembly of the people, which in Greek cities had the power of final decision in public affairs.” [Oskar Seyffert, *A Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*; q.v. Overbey, *Ecclesia*]

The Local Church is the Primary Means of Propagating Truth Throughout the Ages

While times have changed and there are today a multiplicity of para-church organizations, I believe the Lord still uses His local churches (assemblies, gatherings, congregations of believers as we are doing tonight) as His main means of propagating (used in the sense of ‘transmitting from one generation to another’) His truth throughout the ages.

- to the church was given the Great Commission since only a church can properly disciple and baptize converts (Matt 28:19)
- Paul wrote to Timothy that the church was the ‘pillar and ground of the truth’ (1 Tim 3:15)
- to the church was given the ordinances: baptism and the Lord’s Table
- to the church is given the responsibility of discipling and disciplining an erring member (Matt 18:15-18)
- the church is one of only four institutions of divine appointment: the family, government, Israel and the church
- when the glorified Lord appears to the Apostle John on Patmos, His messages were given to seven churches (Rev 2,3)

This is not to discount the para-church organizations nor deny the Lord uses such means; to do so would be to deny the hand of the Lord in such ministries at these:

- mission agencies
- the Dobson-type ministries, J. Vernon McGee, Back to the Bible, et. al. radio programs
- city-wide evangelistic meetings and city-wide prayer meetings
- translation agencies
- printing ministries
- individuals outside the church to reach others

I believe it an error to limit the work of the Lord to only the local church when it is so obvious He is working in many different manners. But I also believe the backbone of it all is still the local church and it will be the local church that will be here in the next generation, and the next, and the next. It was believers gathered in small congregations which God used to bring forth the truth to our present generation. *This makes the local church a critical part in the program of God.*

It Is a Dangerous Things to Hurt a Local Church

I would like to look at the third chapter of 1 Corinthians for the rest of tonight’s lesson. I believe this to be one of the most misinterpreted portions of Scripture of which I am aware. The typical interpretation:

- the “trial by fire: wood, hay and stubble vs. gold, silver and precious stones refer to the individual standing at the Judgment Seat of Christ, all of which relates to an individual’s personal growth in the Lord (vv 12-15; cf Rom 14:10; 2

Cor 5:10)

- the “temple of the Holy Spirit” refers to the individual believer (v 16; cf 1 Cor 6:19)

For a long time I also held that interpretation since it is commonly held and one can use these verses in that manner without difficulty. But my understanding changed some years back while I was gathering material for a lesson on the Bema Seat of Christ. After setting forth my general thoughts and outline on the passage, I began to open the commentaries. The first commentator I read did not speak of the Bema Seat of Christ but rather directed his thoughts towards ministers and the church. My first response was “Wow, is this guy missing the boat!” I picked up another trustworthy source but much to my surprise, his comments coincided with the first commentary. A third source said the same and at that time I began to question my own position on these verses. I then went through the passage verse-by-verse while considering what these other sources said and I too saw how the context demands a church / minister interpretation rather than a general Judgment Seat of Christ interpretation. ***When we keep these verses in its strict context, I believe what Paul has to say is much neglected and highly important.***

As we consider chapter three we must understand the over-riding context of the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians is the matter of divisions within the church. This begins in chapter one:

“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (1 Cor 1:10)

This continues until chapter five when Paul addresses the incestuous church member and the lack of church discipline. Paul’s thinking is developed in this manner:

1:10-17 the problem: division over leaders in the name of “wisdom”

1:18-2:16 the Gospel, which contradicts human wisdom and is revealed by the Holy Spirit

3:1-23 the carnality of causing division, proper views of the ministry, ministers, and believers

3:1-4 on being spiritual and divided

3:5-17 correcting erroneous views of the church and its ministry

3:18-23 conclusion of the matter: all are Christ’s

4:1-21 the Corinthians and Paul

Let us walk through chapter three to see the flow of the context:

ON BEING SPIRITUAL AND DIVIDED — ¹ *And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ.* ² *I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.* ³ *For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?* ⁴ *For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?*

- Having argued the nature of the gospel and the true ‘wisdom’, Paul transitions to a direct attack on the carnality of being divided over spiritual leaders. ***Paul states being spiritual and divided are mutually exclusive; one cannot exist within the other.*** If by our attitudes or gossip we are causing division within the church, then we cannot be spiritual regardless of how often we attend, how much we may give to the church, or how many duties we may have within the church.
- Paul begins speaking (‘and I’ ‘I have fed’) to the Corinthian church (‘brethren’ ‘you as unto spiritual’ ‘fed you with milk’ ‘ye are not able to bear meat’ ‘ye are carnal’ ‘there is among you envying and strife’).
- This cannot be spoken to all Christianity as a whole because not every Christian is carnal, not all believers are unable to eat the meat of the Word, not all believers are causing strife and divisions. But these were things characteristic of the church members at Corinth.
- Paul gives a further example, ‘one church member says he is following Paul, another church member says he is following Apollos, both of which are evidences of being carnal’. This is a situation particular to the church at Corinth, not Christianity as a whole.
- Gordon Fee’s summary of Paul’s argument thus far: ***“Although at times it may seem otherwise, the argument to this point has nonetheless been dealing with the problem of strife in the church, strife being carried on in the name of wisdom with their leaders as reference points. The argument in chap. 1 is determinative: The cross, God’s wisdom, precludes all human boasting, including boasting in men. Since this wisdom is available to those who have the Spirit, the Corinthians themselves should have known it. Instead they have been carrying on from the point of view of the ‘flesh,’ as those who have missed the meaning of the cross. Their quarreling represents the old ways — living as mere humans.”*** [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 128]
- Practical: “[S]o the Devil when he cannot destroy souls by stirring up wicked instruments, he will endeavour that men should think of good instruments more than they ought.” [Wilson, *1 Cor*, p 51f]

LEADERS ARE MERELY SERVANTS (PAUL LOOKS BACKWARDS) — ⁵ *Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but*

ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? ⁶ I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. ⁸ Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are laborers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building.

- **The divisions within the Corinthian church were being caused by the church members attaching themselves to the individual teachers, as if they 'belonged' to them. Paul attempts here to disabuse them of this perception. Both Paul and Apollos are 'only servants' and therefore not 'masters'.** Paul continues his example by using the metaphor of a farm where God is both responsible for growth and the owner of the field. "Between two gardeners, one of whom plants and the other waters one and the same garden, who would think of setting up any rivalry? Would not the labour of the one become useless without that of the other? What folly, then, to disparage the one and exalt the other!" [Godet, q.v., Wilson, *1 Cor*, p 53] "This illustrates two points; first, the diversity of service on the part of ministers, spoken of in v. 5, one plants and another waters; and secondly, the entirely subordinate and instrumental character of their service." [Hodge, *1 Cor*, p 52]

- In this metaphor the workers (the 'servants') are those God uses to minister to the church, for example, Paul and Apollos. **This is not a reference to all believers but to ministers** ('I have planted, Apollos watered' ... 'he that plants is nothing, he that waters is nothing' ... 'he that plant and he that waters are both just servants of the Lord').

- **Although widely misinterpreted, the 'every man shall receive his own reward according to his labors' is still a reference to ministers, not all believers standing before the Judgment Seat of Christ.** Note verse 8: 'Now he that plants (Paul) and he that waters (Apollos) are one (the mutual concern of both Paul and Apollos is singular: the growth of the crop to a rich harvest with God giving the increase): and every man (i.e., every minister who works in the field of souls) shall receive his own reward according to his own labor (every minister serving the Lord will receive his reward according to how he serves the Lord in ministry).' Verse 9: 'For we (ministers, Paul and Apollos in this case) are laborers together with God: ye (the church at Corinth) are God's husbandry, ye are God's building' (the church is pictured here as both a farm and a building which God owns and to which God sends forth laborers or ministers).

- **Four particulars are here discussed: (1) he who planted = Paul who founded the church in Corinth; (2) he who watered = Apollos who followed Paul with his teaching ministry; (3) the one who made it grow = God to whom they all belong; and (4) the field or farm = the church at Corinth.**

- According to Gordon Fee, **the emphasis altogether is on the Lord** in the Greek: 'God's we are, being fellow workers; God's field, God's building, you are.' "Some have suggested that Paul here intends, as the KJV has it, 'we are laborers together with God.' But everything in the context speaks against it [T]he argument of the whole paragraph emphasizes their unity in fellow labor under God.... Thus the whole paragraph is tersely summarized with these emphatic words. **Everything is God's — the church, its ministry, Paul, Apollos — everything. Therefore, it is absolutely not permissible to say 'I belong to Paul,' since the only legitimate 'slogan' is 'we all belong to God.'**" [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 134]

- Verse 5: 'even as the Lord gave to every man' could refer to the faith given to those Corinthians who trusted Christ or to the differing tasks given to ministers; per Fee, the context demands the latter. Literally, 'and to each one as the Lord gave' meaning the Lord gave the gifts and ministry to each of His ministers as He sees fit. Paul is thus anticipating and leading into the division of labor he will speak about in verses 6-8.

THE CHURCH IS TO BE BUILT WITH CARE (A PRESENT-DAY LOOK) — ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. ¹¹ For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; ¹³ every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

- Paul began a transition in his metaphor in verse 9 from a farm or field to a building; he now builds on that latter metaphor.

- While still dealing with the church and its leadership, Paul begins to shift emphasis from the Lord using different servants for His purposes to the ministers themselves and how they minister in the church, how they 'build the building'. Note as well the absence of Apollos' name and that the paragraph is dominated by indefinite pronouns: 'someone else,' 'no one,' 'each one,' 'anyone'. **Paul is stating he laid the foundation but those ministers presently responsible for the current 'building' of the church needs to be careful how they build; building the church on personalities, 'the wisdom of men' and divisions are in fact building wood, hay and stubble.**

- **While the metaphor changes, the substantial point of Paul's argument does not: (1) he who laid the foundation = Paul; (2) that which is being built = ultimately the church at Corinth but Paul is addressing himself particularly as to how that ministry was being conducted; (3) the owner = still God, v 9. One item is modified from the preceding verses: (4) another who builds on that foundation = those in the ministry, Apollos being one of them but now expanded to include the present-day leaders within the church, those promoting the 'wisdom' of following men.**

- ‘according to the grace of God which is given unto me’ (v 10) could refer to God’s prior act of grace in Christ Jesus as it relates to the apostolic ministry; more likely in this context it refers to those particular gifts of grace given Paul for his duties, the apostolic task of founding churches. This would more pointedly illustrate the foolishness of following men: Paul founded churches because of the gifts and grace given to him by God, Apollos and others would use their gifts also given to them by the Lord to edify the church.
- Paul declares himself to be not just a builder or a carpenter but a ‘wise masterbuilder,’ one who serves as both architect and chief engineer. The foundation, once laid, determines the site and ground-plan for the building. A builder has to *build upon it*, not to shift it or add to it. **This is true ‘wisdom’ in contrast to the ‘wise’ in Corinth presently causing divisions.**
- One must not make read too much into the ‘wood, hay and stubble’ versus the ‘gold, silver and precious stones.’ **Paul’s main purpose for this metaphor is to contrast that which will endure versus that which will pass away; i.e., the materials which are perishable represents a church being built upon human wisdom, that which will pass away with this present age, while the material which will remain is that which is compatible with the foundation, the gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.** While it may be ‘good preaching’ to make further application of these materials, the context will hardly support such application (although it is not irrelevant that ‘gold, silver and costly stones’ are used to describe the building of the OT Temple). I agree with Fausset when he comments, “The ‘gold, silver, precious stones,’ which all can bear fire, are teachings that will stand the test of judgment: ‘wood, hay, stubble,’ are those which cannot, — not positive heresy, for that would destroy the foundation (which all admitted is Christ), but teaching mixed up with human philosophy and Judaism — curious rather than useful.” [Fausset, *JFB Commentary*, vol 3 part 3, p 291]
- **Paul warns of a sure and soon-to-come day of judgment which will test how one has built, whether with perishable or imperishable materials.** One’s reward will result from the disclosure of the quality of those materials used. “It shall be said to him, ‘Well done, thou good and (not *successful*, but) *faithful* servant, enter thou, &c.” [Fausset, *JFB vol 3 part 3*, p 291] **“They are not raising up a house for themselves, to be constructed of what materials and on whatever plan may suit their taste. They are building the temple of God.”** [Hodge, *1 Cor*, p 58]
- Some of the misinterpretations which have surrounded these verses: many remove this from its context and make it to apply to one’s individual growth in Christ with a ‘carnal Christian’ still getting to heaven while losing all his rewards. Calvinists and Arminians have debated these verses in terms of eternal security. Roman Catholics use this as the single NT text for purgatory. “Paul addresses none of these issues, not even indirectly. **His concern is singular, that those currently leading the church take heed because their present work will not stand the fiery test to come, having shifted from the imperishable ‘stuff’ of Jesus Christ and him crucified.**” [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 137]

WARNING TO THOSE WHO WOULD DESTROY THE CHURCH, GOD’S TEMPLE IN CORINTH — ¹⁶ *Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?* ¹⁷ *If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.*

- “Since v. 5 Paul has been trying to correct the Corinthians’ false view of church leadership, by redirecting their focus from the teachers themselves to God, who owns all and whose alone they are. At the same time he must correct their understanding of the nature of the church itself. Thus the argument now takes another slight turn, in which he carries the imagery of vv. 9b-15 a step further by specifying the *kind* of building that he and the others have been erecting, namely God’s *temple* in Corinth. With this imagery he does two things: (1) he tries to help the Corinthians to see the nature and significance of their being God’s people in Corinth, and (2) by picking up the imagery of judgment from vv. 13-15, he sternly warns those who are in process of destroying the church by their divisions. **Thus he presents us with remarkable imagery describing the nature of the local church, as well as with the strongest warning in the NT against those who would take the church lightly and destroy it by worldly wisdom and division.**” [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 145f] “Yet there is something worse than to build badly upon the true foundation, and that is to destroy what has been already built.” [Wilson, *1 Cor*, p 58] “However poor his work, the workman of ver. 15 built upon Christ. There are cases worse than his.... Besides the good and ill builders, who will gain or lose reward, there are *destroyers* of the house, whom God will *destroy*.” [Findlay, *1 Cor*, p 792f]
- Paul uses this imagery of the church as being a temple in two other places: 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21.
- The word used (*naos*) refers to the actual sanctuary, the place of the deity’s dwelling, the structure containing the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, in contrast to *hieron* which referred to all the temple precincts, courts and structures as well as to the sanctuary. “As in the Jewish temple, in its inmost recess, the Shechinah, or glory of God, was constantly present, and conferred on the building its awe-inspiring power, and rendered any profanation of it a direct offence to God’ so does the Holy Spirit dwell in the Church, the profanation of which by false doctrine is therefore sacrilege.” [Hodge, *1 Cor*, p 59]
- Gordon Fee mentions that, “although one perhaps should not make too much of it,” Paul’s word order is probably both emphatic and an illustration of what linguists call “Colwell’s rule”; if so, then Paul would be saying, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God in Corinth?”, in contrast to the multiple pagan temples. “*Since there is only one true and living God, He can have only one temple in Corinth, and you as a church are it.*” [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 147]
- Lit, almost certainly, ‘if anyone is destroying ...’. [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 148]

● **THIS VERSE NOT ADDRESSED TO INDIVIDUALS BUT TO THE ENTIRE CONGREGATION** — in the last portion of the verse: *‘which temple ye are’ = you (plural) make up that single unit, the temple of God, the congregation, assembly, local church.* “The words of this verse are sometimes applied to the individual believer, but it is vi. 19 which speaks of the individual as God’s temple. Here the thought is that of the whole community of believers as God’s shrine. *Temple* is singular, but *ye* is plural. The reference is to the Church.” [Morris, *1 Cor*, p 69] “[T]o Paul the Church was the spiritual counterpart of the Jewish Temple, and every Church embodied this ideal.” [Findlay, *1 Cor*, p 793] “This passage has endured a long history of unfortunate interpretation in the church. Because the imagery of the temple is reapplied in 6:19-20 to the individual Corinthian who was going to the prostitutes, many have read that usage back into this passage as though it were a word of warning to individual Christians as to how they are to treat their bodies or live out their individual Christian lives. Both the context and the grammar disallow such interpretations, even by ‘extended application.’ This is all the more unfortunate because this is one of the few texts in the NT where we are exposed both to an understanding of the nature of the local church (God’s temple indwelt by his Spirit) and where the warning of v. 17 makes it clear how important the local church is to God himself.” [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 149] ‘ye are the temple of God’ = “‘God’s temple,’ not ‘a temple of God.’ The Apostle is speaking of the community, not of the individual Christian. There is an allusion in these verses to the dissensions which are a corrupting of God’s temple.” [Lightfoot, *Notes*, 194]

● “The Spirit of God dwells in their midst”, that is, Paul is reflecting on the church as the corporate place of God’s dwelling who, when gathered in Jesus’ name, experienced the presence and power of the Lord Jesus in their midst. [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 147] This is not a reference of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the hearts of those who believe, although that of course is true; cp. 1 Cor 6:19.

● **JUXTAPOSITION OF TWO VERBS: DESTROY TEMPLE, GOD WILL DESTROY YOU** — Verse 17 — “Note especially the near wordplay brought about by the juxtaposition of the two verbs: φθείρει / φθερεῖ [phtheirei / phtherei]”, lit., *‘if anyone the temple of God destroys, destroy this person will God.’*” [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 148] *“It is important to notice that the verb is repeated, for it shows that the punishment of the offender is not arbitrary; it is according to the manner of the offence.”* [Morris, *1 Cor*, p 70] “The same word is studiously kept to show that the offender is requited in kind. Compare Acts xxiii. 2,3.” [Lightfoot, *Notes*, p 194] *“It is a terrible thing to tear down ruthlessly a church or temple of God like an earthquake that shatters a building in ruins. This old verb phtheirō means to corrupt, to deprave, to destroy. It is a gross sin to be a church-wrecker. There are actually a few preachers who leave behind them ruin like a tornado in their path.”* [Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol 4 p 99] *“This is not only the law of retribution — a person gets what he deserves — but also the implied notice that the church is the apple of God’s eye. Whoever touches the church touches God.”* [Kistemaker, *1 Cor*, p 117]

● **TEMPORAL JUDGMENT WITH ETERNAL REPERCUSSIONS** — *“But ... φθερεῖ [phtherei] here ... must [not] be pressed to mean annihilation. Nor, on the other hand, must it be watered down to mean mere physical punishment. The exact meaning is nowhere revealed in Scripture; but terrible ruin and eternal loss of some kind seems to be meant.”* [TDNT vol IX, 93-106; q.v. Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 148] *“‘Him shall God destroy’.* There is a solemn repetition of the same verb in the future active indicative. The condition is the first class and is assumed to be true. Then the punishment is certain and equally effective. The church-wrecker God will wreck. *What does Paul mean by ‘will destroy’? Does he mean punishment here or hereafter? May it not be both? Certainly he does not mean annihilation of the man’s soul, though it may well include eternal punishment.*” [Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol 4 p 99]

● **ONE REASON FOR THE WARNING: THE TEMPLE IS HOLY** — ‘for the temple of God is holy’ — “The word ‘sacred’ [holy] maintains the imagery of the temple, which was set apart for God and was not to be desecrated in any way.” [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 149]

CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER: ALL ARE CHRIST’S — ¹⁸ *Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.* ¹⁹ *For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness.* ²⁰ *And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain.* ²¹ *Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are your’s;* ²² *whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are your’s;* ²³ *and ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.*

● Paul first argues against the Corinthians being deceived by what appears to be wisdom but is not. It is closely tied to their problem of boasting in men.

● Paul also gives the reason why they should not boast in men, using their own slogans against them: they do not ‘belong’ to Paul or Apollos or Peter but rather Paul and Apollos and Peter — as well as everything else — belongs to them because they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.

● *‘If anyone thinks he is wise’ — of course they do! But that is the problem. Paul will use this same formula two other times in this letter (8:2; 14:37). It is a problem of attitude: they think themselves wise (3:18), as having arrived at knowledge (8:2) and as being spiritual (14:37).*

SUMMATION — *“This text has singular relevance to the contemporary church. It is neither a challenge to the individual believer to build his or her life well on the foundation of Christ, nor is it grist for theological debate. Rather, it is one of the most significant passages in the NT that warn — and encourage — those responsible for ‘building’ the church of Christ.* In the final

analysis, of course, this includes all believers, but it has particular relevance, following so closely as it does vv. 5-9, to those with teaching / leadership responsibilities. Paul's point is unquestionably warning. ***It is unfortunately possible for people to attempt to build the church out of every imaginable human system predicated on merely worldly wisdom, be it philosophy, 'pop' psychology, managerial techniques, relational 'good feelings,' or what have you. But at the final judgment, all such building (and perhaps countless other forms, where systems have become more important than the gospel itself) will be shown for what it is: something merely human, with no character of Christ or his gospel in it.*** Often, of course, the test may come this side of the final one, and in such an hour of stress that which has been built of modern forms of sophia usually comes tumbling down. But the good news of the passage is that one does not need to build badly. That which has the character of the foundation, Jesus Christ crucified and risen, will not only survive any present hour of testing, but will enter the final judgment as a glorious church; and those responsible for such building will receive their due reward, which in itself is an expression of grace..... "The imagery of the church as God's temple, which occurs twice more in Paul (2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21), is a pregnant one both for the Jewish Paul and the Gentile Corinthians. The word used (*naos*) refers to the actual sanctuary, the place of the deity's dwelling, in contrast to the word *hieron*, which referred to the temple precincts as well as to the sanctuary.... The imagery of the church as temple would have been easily understood by the Corinthians as well, although perhaps not with its rich OT overtones. As practicing pagans (see 6:9; 8:7) most of them would have frequented the many pagan temples and shrines in their city. Indeed, some of them were arguing for the right to do so still (see chaps. 8-10). But now Paul is calling their attention to the fact that since there is only one God, he can have only one temple in Corinth, and they are it. ***They became that new temple by the fact that 'God's Spirit lives in you.' Most likely Paul meant by this not that the Spirit dwelt in each of them, true as that would be for him (cf. 6:19), but that the Spirit of God 'lives in your midst.' That is, Paul is here reflecting on the church as the corporate place of God's dwelling, who, when gathered in Jesus' name, experienced the presence and power of the Lord Jesus in their midst (5:4-5).*** Again, as in 2:10-13 (cf. 2:4-5), the Spirit is the key, the crucial reality, for life in the new age. The presence of the Spirit, and that alone, marks them off as God's new people, his temple, in Corinth. As God's temple in Corinth, the church was to be his alternative to Corinth, both its religions and vices. But the Corinthians, by their worldly wisdom, boasting, and divisions, were in effect banishing the Spirit and thus about to destroy the only alternative God had in their city. Hence, following the rhetoric that calls attention to who they are, Paul solemnly warns those who were thus wreaking havoc in the church: 'if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.' As E. Käsemann has pointed out, this has all the earmarks of a 'sentence of holy law,' in which the *lex talionis* and chiasm combine to express the fearful judgment of God on the last Day. One can scarcely circumvent the awful nature of the warning. Those who are responsible for dismantling the church may expect judgment in kind; it is difficult to escape the sense of eternal judgment in this case, given its close proximity to vv. 13-15. Although in the format character of casuistic law, this is a strongly prophetic word in the apostle, and needs to be heard accordingly..... The theological question as to whether a true 'believer' could be destroyed by God lies beyond Paul's present concern. In any case, one must be careful not to let the 'logic' of one's system prejudice the plain meaning of Paul's words. That these people were members of the Corinthian community seems beyond reasonable doubt; that Paul is also serving up a genuine threat of eternal punishment seems also the plain sense of the text. The theological resolution of such tension will lie either with the concept of the visible church being composed of more than the real church, destined by God for glory, or with the supposition that some, who by all appearances do belong to the community of faith, have, for reasons beyond our understanding, opted out and are once again pursuing a path leading to destruction. The net result is the same in either case. Paul does not consider any of the Corinthians 'bent ones' to be there — yet; and the warning is intended to keep it from happening." [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 145ff]

Practical

THIS IS A PROPER WARNING FOR ALL WITHIN A CHURCH BODY — It would be an extreme error for such a lesson to be presented in an attitude of self-righteous judgment upon others. This is a proper warning given to all within the church, for all are at one time or another tempted in such a manner where our actions can hurt the body of believers of which we are a part. ***We must each constantly and consciously make an effort to make the priorities of our church higher than our own personal priorities in terms of decisions and attitudes.***

RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH — ***"One of the desperate needs of the church is to recapture this vision of what it is by grace, and therefore also what God intends it to be. In most Protestant circles one tends to take the local parish altogether too lightly. Seldom does one sense that it is, or can be, experienced as a community that is so powerfully indwelt by the Spirit that it functions as a genuine alternative to the pagan world in which it is found. It is perhaps not too strong to suggest that the recapturing of this vision of its being, both in terms of its being powerfully indwelt by the Spirit and of its thereby serving as a genuine alternative to the world, is its single greatest need."*** [Fee, *First Corinthians*, p 149f]

FACTIONS DESTROY A CHURCH — Keeping it in its strictest context, Paul was addressing 'causing divisions within the church' (1 Cor 1-4) for the purpose of his warning. "[F]actions destroy the church, which is the temple of God, which temple they were: 'Him that destroyeth the temple of God will God destroy.' ***I never knew it to fail where a man through his fault destroyed a church of Christ that that man was destroyed world without end. Even if he was a Christian he was destroyed. Not as to eternal life, but certainly as to his usefulness in this world.***" [Carroll, *Commentary*, vol 5 p 153]

BAD ATTITUDES DESTROY A CHURCH — Attitudes very often may be more harmful than actions (although the two greatly overlap since one's attitude effects one's actions). Paul wrote to the Philippians, ***"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every***

man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus ... ” (Phil 2:3-5) **But we are all sinful, selfish, proud fallen creatures and each of us at times do not have the ‘attitude of Christ’ but rather may have an attitude fixed upon ourselves, our hurts, our personal grievances. That is an attitude of ‘self’ rather than an attitude of ‘love.’ Even if we were truly wronged (and how often is it the case where someone is 100% in the wrong and the grieved party is 100% in the right?) then an attitude of love (‘the mind of Christ’) still would seek for the well-being of the one who afflicted the harm.** Is this not the attitude of our God towards us? And in our case we were 100% in the wrong and our God was without blame! yet He reached out to us in spite of who we were and loved us. If that were not the case, there would be no one here this evening who would be saved.

LEAVE WRONGS IN THE HANDS OF OUR GOD — It would be foolish to believe the Lord never leads someone from a church. In relation to our topic tonight, there may be times when reconciliation is not possible and leaving a church is the only alternative. If without doubt that is the course to be taken (after much prayer and counsel and after all other alternatives have been exhausted) then one must be careful to not leave in pride and ‘lash out’ against the church as one leaves. After all, we all are under the rule of our Lord; if the church is truly in error then leave it in the hands of the Lord to correct the church. **It is possible for one to be right when they choose to change churches but wrong in the manner in which they leave.**

DO NOT PROSELYTIZE WITHIN A CHURCH — Going along with the previous point, if one is dissatisfied with a church and believe the Lord is leading elsewhere, it would be a great error to ‘try and take as many people with you as possible.’ The Lord works differently in all of our hearts, who are we to say when someone else should leave a church? It is the Lord who brings those to a church in His purposes (1 Cor 12:12-30). **To attempt to lead others away from a church in which the Lord has placed them is a dangerous action indeed.**

TEACH SOUND DOCTRINE — “He subjoins a dreadful threatening — that, as the temple of God ought to be inviolably sacred, that man, whoever he may be, that corrupts it, will not pass with impunity. The kind of profanation of which he now speaks, is, when men intrude themselves, so as to bear rule in the Church in the place of God. For as that faith, which is devoted to the pure doctrine of Christ, is called elsewhere spiritual chastity, (2 Cor xi. 2) so it also sanctifies our souls for the right and pure worship of God. For as soon as we are tinctured with the contrivances of men, the temple of God is polluted, as it were, with filth, because the sacrifice of faith, which he claims for himself alone, is in that case offered to creatures.” [Calvin, *Corinthians*, vol 20 p 143]

A REFUSAL TO USE ONE’S GIFTS FOR THE CHURCH IS TO THAT DEGREE HINDERING THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH — The Lord puts people in the church to use their gifts (1 Cor 12:18) therefore to not use one’s gifts for the purpose of building up the church is to hinder the body in some degree.

WE BUILD INTO THE CHURCH WHAT WE BUILD INTO OUR OWN LIVES — Warren Wiersbe brought this application from the context: “It is a serious thing to be a part of the building of God’s temple. First Corinthians 3:16-17 warns us that, if we destroy (‘defile’) God’s temple by using cheap materials, God will destroy us! This does not mean eternal condemnation, of course, because 1 Corinthians 3:15 assures us that each worker will be saved, even if he loses a reward. I think Paul is saying that each of us builds into the church *what we build into our own lives*. Veteran missionary to India, Amy Carmichael, used to say, ‘The work will never go deeper than we have gone ourselves.’ So we end up tearing down our own lives if we fail to build into the church the values that will last.” [Wiersbe, *Commentary*, 580f]

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First Corinthians chapter three
¹ And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. ² I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. ³ For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? ⁴ For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?

Paul / ministers / pastors & teachers

Corinthian church / member of the Corinthian church

Corinthian church leader (church member?)

⁵ Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? ⁶ I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. ⁸ Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are laborers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. ¹¹ For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; ¹³ every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. ¹⁶ Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? ¹⁷ If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.

¹⁸ Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. ²⁰ And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. ²¹ Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are your's; ²² whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are your's; ²³ and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.