

Sermon – 01/06/2008 am

A Holy Temple

Study Text: Ephesians 2:19-22

Moses told the Israelites that when they entered Canaan the Lord God would choose a site for his earthly dwelling place (Deuteronomy 12:5). There was only one house of the Lord to which all the people were to come with their tithes and offerings. They would go up in family and community groups to worship the Lord with joy and thanksgiving. When the land was divided, Jeroboam sinned by building another place of worship (I Kings 12:28). God had declared his presence would be in the temple. He was present in the Holy of Holies.

Gentiles, as we have seen, were not allowed into that temple. They were strangers to the covenants of promise which God made with the Jews. But now in Christ Jesus, now by the precious blood of Christ they have been brought near to God. The Jew also has been brought into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. They were both brought in by the blood of Jesus, the great High Priest who offered up himself as the sacrifice for sin. *Through him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father (2:18).*

Paul rejoiced in this aspect of the gospel. He lived in a society marked by deep divisions and hostility. He was a Jew living under Roman occupation. As a Jew he despised Gentiles and called them 'unclean'. Paul was a free man but saw many slaves who had no human rights. He was a man but saw women being oppressed and excluded from the temple.

Has the world changed much since Paul's day? Look around in our society and in our world – what do you see? The lines of division may differ but are they any less real. Has education, politics, sport or religion been able to break down the barriers within the human race and bring unity?

Paul rejoiced because in Jesus Christ he saw the walls of separation come crashing down. By his blood Jesus brought us peace with God and peace with one another. Jesus brought peace to the household of God. Paul was rejected by his society and as far as we know he never married. But he was never alone. He belonged to the Lord Jesus, and all who confessed the name of Jesus were his brothers and sisters in the faith.

In this passage Paul brings out the consequences of the great gospel he has declared in this chapter – he will do so for the rest of the letter. He writes *now therefore* or 'consequently' you are no longer strangers and foreigners (2:19). As Gentiles they were strangers to the promises God gave the Jews (2:12), but now in Christ Jesus they are no longer strangers. They are no longer Gentiles and they are not Jews, but they are saints or holy ones of God. They are *fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household (2:19).*

The *household of God* describes the family of God, the family of those adopted as his children by Jesus Christ (1:4). But at this time the image that appears to flash through the mind of Paul is that of a physical house, an image related in many ways to that of the physical temple which was already in his mind. Paul describes the church using this image, as he does on other occasions (I Corinthians 3). He uses this image to teach important truths about the church.

Foundation

Do you ever wonder how the skyscrapers in our cities stay standing? They are built with reinforced concrete and other strong materials but they are so tall compared to their small base. The reason they can be built so high is because the foundations are deep and strong. If the foundations are not strong then the building will be in danger of falling over.

Paul is describing the church as a building. He says it is *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets* (2:20). Writing to the Corinthians he said that the only foundation of the church is Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 3:11). Some see a conflict between these two passages, but what Paul writes here does not conflict with the truth that Jesus Christ is the one and only foundation.

We can go back to what Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16:18 – *on this rock I will build my church*. Peter had just confessed *you are the Christ the Son of the living God*. It was an amazing and wonderful confession. Because Peter's name meant 'rock' Jesus used this word to describe the building of his church on that great confession of Jesus Christ. Paul is expressing the same truth here in Ephesians.

Some interpret these words of Jesus and of Paul to support their idea of apostolic succession in the church – but they are wrong. Nowhere is apostolic succession taught in the Bible. The Twelve were a unique group of men. They were called and taught by Jesus himself. They saw Jesus in his resurrected body. They were sent out (*apostolos*) by Jesus after the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost.

It was Peter who preached at Pentecost but all the apostles, including Paul, were set apart and sent out by Jesus to preach the gospel. They laid the foundation of the church which is Jesus Christ. The church still exists and will continue to stand because of this foundation. The names of the Twelve are written on the foundation stones of the heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 21:14).

The apostles and prophets (2:20). Who are the prophets? Are they Old Testament prophets? Probably not since they are mentioned after the apostles. Are they the same men as the apostles? In the Greek there is just one definite article 'the' – but in 3:5 there are two articles, making it difficult to say there is just one group. Prophets are those who speak words given by God. The apostles spoke and wrote by divine inspiration so the words of the Bible are the words of God. These words declare the truth about Jesus, and indeed reveal Jesus himself as the living word of God and one foundation of the church.

We are disturbed at the many divisions in the church today. Some of these divisions are wrong, but some are necessary because the foundation of the church has been undermined. Martin Luther did not set out to break with the Church of Rome – he desperately wanted the church to return to its true foundation. But in the end he had to return to that foundation without the institutional church.

People have to make the same decisions today. Recently J I Packer had to reconsider the foundation of the church when he saw the bishop blessing homosexual partnerships. Others are having to reconsider the foundation of the church as they see women bishops being ordained contrary to the teaching of the inspired and infallible word of God.

Paul rejoiced in the wonderful unity of Jew and Gentile, the unity of slave and free, and of male and female (Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11), but it was unity in the blood of Christ, unity in the truth of the gospel, unity founded on the teaching of the apostles and prophets.

Cornerstone

Years ago I built a brick rabbit hutch. I made a line of bricks on the ground and started laying one brick on another. The wall came up but it was so crooked. A bricklayer would have been horrified. To build a wall you have to get the corners right first. You have to get the corners plumb and square or it will turn out like my rabbit hutch.

Jesus himself is the chief cornerstone of this building that represents the church (2:20). The word *cornerstone* has two parts – ‘chief’ or ‘highest’ and ‘corner’. It is sometimes spoken of as the capstone as in Isaiah 28 and Psalm 118 – *the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone* (I Peter 2:7-8). In ancient times masons skilfully cut stones to fit together into the wall. A capstone would lock them together.

So it is that Jesus Christ holds the church together. He is the foundation, he is the chief cornerstone. ‘The whole church is viewed here as being built on, held together by, taking its fundamental shape from, Jesus the cornerstone. He is the stone on which all else depends’. Jesus is the living stone which keeps holding the building together and oversees its growth. This building is growing up as living stones like you and me are added to it (I Peter 2:5).

Holy Temple

The old temple was de-consecrated by Jesus at his death. It has no further part to play in the plans of God for he no longer dwells in it. He now dwells in this spiritual temple, the temple built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets; the temple with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone, the temple in which all God’s elect are incorporated as living stones. Yes, each and every believer has a unique and important place in this holy temple. There is a brick as it were with your name on it, if you believe.

Jesus said *I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it* (Matthew 16:18). With Jesus as the foundation and chief cornerstone this building will remain forever and ever. God is bringing in Jew and Gentile. He is bringing in people from all nations. He will bring them in until the full number has been reached and the building is complete to the glory of God.

For now the building is growing as Jesus fits together those who are being saved. The building is growing into a holy temple in the Lord. Are you fitted together into this holy temple? Is Jesus the cornerstone of your life? Remember, if you are in Christ you are also in the church of Jesus Christ. You are in fellowship with other members of this household of faith. It is in the church that you receive his blessings.

Note the words *fitted together* and *built together*. You cannot be alone as a Christian. A brick on its own is neither useful nor glorious, but in a building it is both useful and glorious. We assemble together as the temple in which God dwells by his spirit (I Corinthians 3:16). We do not gather to listen to a man sprouting his ideas, we do not gather to chat about our life, we do not gather out of duty towards God. We gather as the household or family of God, as the holy temple in which God is present. We gather to hear his words and to worship him *who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*.

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