

14.18

1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19–20—Temple of God

Imagery

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul twice refers to Christians as the “temple of God”:

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? (1 Cor. 3:16)

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God . . . therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Cor. 6:19–20)

In the first of these passages, Paul applies the metaphor “temple of God” to the church as a whole, while in the second he appears to apply it to individual Christians.

A Communal Image

The main problem that Paul is addressing in the first part of his letter is that of divisions within the church—some people seek to follow one earthly leader, while others follow another one. So when Paul tells the Corinthians that “God’s Spirit dwells in you,” he means to emphasize that the entire congregation serves as the dwelling place of God. Those who act divisively are attacking God’s temple, because what one does to the church, one does to God’s Spirit-filled dwelling place.

An Individual Image

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul takes the point a step further with regard to personal morality (specifically, sexual morality). The problem under discussion is prostitution: apparently, some members of the Corinthian church see nothing wrong with going to prostitutes. Paul tells them that abuse of one's physical body also constitutes an attack on God's temple, because every individual member of the church is a part of the dwelling place that God's Spirit has filled.

Personal Reflection

My experience of growing up as a Christian in America is that I have heard a lot of emphasis placed on the second, subsidiary point and very little emphasis placed on the main point from which it was derived. I have heard many sermons about personal morality that have sought to remind me that my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. God dwells in each and every one of us and therefore what we do to our physical bodies we do to God's temple. We should not smoke cigarettes or overeat or abuse drugs or engage in sexual immorality.

My guess is that Paul would agree with these sermons, but he would preach them only as the implications of a basic and primary point. He says to the Corinthians, your *congregation* is the temple of the Holy Spirit. God dwells in the body of assembled worshipers. What

you do to *that body*—the corporate body of believers—you do to God’s temple (see also 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21–22).

I do not believe I have ever heard a sermon that uses the “temple of God” image in the primary sense that Paul uses the phrase. I have discovered that whenever a preacher says, “Your body is the temple of God,” I am going to hear a sermon about taking care of my personal, physical body—not a sermon about caring for the body of the church as a whole. In my experience, at least, the minor point tends to be stressed and the major point tends to be ignored.

If we were to explore this further we might observe a similar tendency with regard to many other passages of Scripture. Paul tells the Corinthians, “you are a letter of Christ . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God” (2 Cor. 3:3). I have heard sermons on this passage extolling Christians to be witnesses for Jesus in word and deed: “You may be the only Bible some people ever read—your speech and behavior must bring words of Christ to them.” Yes, but Paul is actually saying that the congregation at Corinth—the entire church—is a letter from Christ, bearing public witness to the world through its conduct *as a community*.

Or, again, many individual Christians may treasure the promise of Scripture in Philippians 1:6: “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” Individual Christians will say, “I know that God is not finished with me yet, and I trust that God will keep working on me until at last I am done.” True,

but the “you” in Philippians 1:6 actually refers to the congregation at Philippi: God began a good work in this church and “will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

What the Bible teaches about churches, about communities, about congregations, no doubt applies (in a secondary sense) to individual Christians. Still, American Christians (at least) are prone to grasp at this secondary meaning and overlook the main point from which it is derived.

From Mark Allan Powell, *Loving Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 42–44.