

A Holy Temple

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like you to turn open your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 2 on page 181.

It's been very interesting this week following the fortunes of a piece of sculpture by Dennis Oppenheim. You know the Vancouver Park Board voted unanimously to have it removed from Harbour Green Park.

It's a very controversial piece. It was rejected by the New York City Public Health, Public Art Fund, not the Health Fund, the Art Fund. It went to Stanford and there the university rejected it. It's too controversial.

You've probably seen it. It's a little church, a little New England church that's nearly finished and it's been turned completely upside down so that the steeple pokes in the ground at a slight angle and I really like it and it's sad to say it's going to Calgary where it's not going to block anyone's view of anything.

For those of you who come from Calgary, see me later. Oppenheim was going to call this thing the church but too controversial so he called it device to root out evil.

[1 : 27] And in an interview a number of years ago he said this, pointing a steeple into the ground directs it to hell as opposed to heaven. And I can't figure out whether he's trying to be prophetic or ironic.

I can't tell whether he's trying to say the church today has been turned on its head and is pointing people to hell and not to heaven or the way we look at the church is completely upside down or if we just think the church is the building, that's not the real church and we have it upside down.

Whatever he meant by it, I think the Apostle Paul would like it because I like it. And I think the Apostle Paul would like it because of what he says in the last four verses of chapter 2 of Ephesians which is one of the most radical and remarkable statements in all the Bible about the church.

It basically says the church is the opposite of every human institution. It's not a creation of human ingenuity. It's not the combination of our faith or of human dreams.

The church is an organic building project where God himself is building from heaven so that he might dwell in it. Just look at the last verse of chapter 2 in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place for God and the Spirit.

[2 : 49] So the first two chapters of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul has been explaining the gospel, exalting in the gospel, that we've been chosen in Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world and that what God is doing in the world is bringing everything under the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the middle, out of the lavishness of his love and his grace, he sent Jesus Christ who died for our sins, he's raised us from the dead, made us sit with Jesus Christ to the praise of his glorious grace and he's just been unfolding the gospel and showing some of its implications.

We now have access to God. We have peace with God. We have a new spiritual identity, a new spiritual family. And now as he runs down to the end of chapter 2, he brings it all together and he kind of makes application and conclusion.

This is where he's been heading. You see verse 19, he begins with the two words, so then, he says, this is where I've been driving all along. Here it is, he says, verse 19, so then, you are no longer strangers and sojourners.

You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. You know that when the New Testament uses saints, it doesn't mean the people in our stained glass windows.

It doesn't mean super-Christians. It means everyone who is, everyone who has placed their faith in King Jesus and is part of the kingdom. And it's saying that if we follow the Lord Jesus Christ, we also are part of that kingdom with equal rights, equal freedoms, equal security.

[4 : 31] We have a home. And he says, even better than that, we're part of the household of God, adopted into the family of God. We have a new life. We have the same Heavenly Father.

And so we have that weird and lovely family thing going on. You know what your family's like? You just, you love your family. It doesn't matter how weird you are, they are. And we, that's what God does for us.

People around us are our spiritual brothers and sisters. But I think there's something deeper here and more intense. It says that God is making us into a holy temple where he himself will, he himself does dwell.

In other words, God is not wanting to be distant from us, but God is wanting to be real and present with us. Remember the Exodus? We looked at the Exodus and we saw how God rescued his people with mighty power and an outstretched arm brought them to himself and the whole of the second half of the book of Exodus is how God finds a way so that his glory might dwell, that he might be present with his people.

And the tabernacle of the Old Testament and the presence of God and the dwelling of God's glory in the world is all fulfilled in the church. All of that was a rehearsal for the church.

[5 : 52] And I don't know about you, but I think this is amazing and wonderful. I mean, you could never tell it by looking at the church, could you? But if we don't understand what Paul is saying about the church, we're always going to see the church upside down.

It would have been wonderful beyond words if God had merely decided not to punish us, not to send us to hell, just to forgive us our sins and just to allow us a new life.

But I think the wonder of the gospel is that he raises us up and gives us this unspeakable dignity that God himself dwells among us now.

Which means the New Testament's view is that salvation is fundamentally positive. Yes, we've been rescued from all sorts of things, but salvation in the New Testament is much more about what we are saved for.

We are saved for God to be the dwelling place of God. And that is the application of the gospel. It's the church. We're it. So I've got three questions that the Apostle Paul answers here, three headings, if you take notes.

[7 : 03] The first is, what is the church? The second, where is the church? And the third, why is the church? Firstly, what is the church? What is it made up of?

Thank you, Jim, for stealing my thunder. But we need to hear it again. And let me read verses 20 to 22. So the church is built, verse 20, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place for God in the Spirit.

I know this sounds simple and I know it sounds familiar, but the church is not the building. It's not the bricks and mortar.

It is people. It is men and women and boys and girls. And I know it's simple, but it is extremely radical. It's not just men and women.

The church is men and women and boys and girls who are building their lives and being built onto the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. It's men and women who have a living connection with Christ Jesus as their cornerstone.

[8 : 28] So walk with any Christian, walk with any believer in this church, scrape their lives bare, scrape it back to the deepest point and you'll find that the deepest point of their lives is the rock of Jesus Christ.

And they take their lines, the main lines of their lives come from Jesus Christ. They are being built on him. The church is a living, breathing, growing community made up of those whose lives are based on Jesus.

In the Old Testament, you know, God made his presence dwell in the tabernacle and then in the temple from time to time. And when the Son of God came and entered our world, the Apostle John tells us the Word became flesh and tabernacled amongst us, full of glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, and we have beheld his glory full of grace and truth.

But in the death of Jesus and in the resurrection in Jesus and in the giving of the Holy Spirit, there has become a most remarkable change. Now the temple of God and the dwelling of God is not in a temple, a physical building, nor in the physical body just of Jesus Christ.

Now it's made up of the people who belong to him. The people who are around you. They are the stones being built into the spiritual temple.

[9 : 52] You are the temple of God. Now some of us live in apartments and some of us live in houses and they're made with wood and they're made with bricks and they're made with stones.

In Australia, in the 70s, we invented a thing called brick veneer. Bricks were very expensive and so to make your house look better, we painted bricks on it. Whatever you build your house out of, it makes a statement about who you are and how you want people to think about you and how long you think you're going to last.

And God is building a house where he is going to live forever and what Paul is saying here, he has already moved into it and he's building it from the inside and the house is made up of the one thing in this world that's going to last forever, people.

Now, I never make application to our current diocesan Anglican woes from the pulpit but I need to say that some of us are anxious about our buildings right now.

It would seem that the diocese wants to take our buildings away from us and it is true in the last weeks that there are congregations who through court decisions have been made to move out of their buildings although we hope and pray those decisions will be reversed.

[11 : 13] But here is the question for us this morning. Is St. John's the buildings or is it you, the people? I mean, does God dwell in the building or does he dwell in us, the congregation?

If we all stand up and continue our service out on the grass, will God be building us there or will he be confined to the four walls of this building?

These buildings have been faithfully given and faithfully kept for the ministry of the gospel. It's very important. They facilitate ministry. We have to bring Ephesians to bear on our lives.

Do you know the apostle is writing from prison? Chapter 3, verse 1. Was the word of God in chains? The sovereign God who before the foundation of the world chose us in Jesus Christ and after the world is going to bring everything under the feet of Jesus Christ, does he still care for us?

The power which raised Jesus Christ from the dead, which is at work in us today, is it sufficient so that we might be committed to one another come what may? God is building a holy temple out of us where he dwells by his Holy Spirit.

[12 : 35] Is there any power on earth that is greater than that? What is the church? It is the people God builds on Christ, the cornerstone.

That's the first question. The second is this, where is the church? Where is it? Verse 20 again. Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.

The place where God is building his temple and his dwelling is wherever the teaching of the apostles and the prophets is heard and believed and obeyed.

They are the ones who speak the words of God. They are the ones through whom the gospel came. That is why it is my job week by week and Jim's job and the job of all who are teaching Sunday school and wherever in the congregation.

It's to teach the words that God has revealed through the apostles and prophets and not to come up with the latest thing. The foundation of a building and the cornerstone of the building are completely irreplaceable.

[13 : 41] If you take away part of the foundation or if you shift the cornerstone the whole thing is going to disintegrate. That's why there is such an emphasis in the book of Ephesians on unity, this beautiful unity because we are built supernaturally on the same foundation with the same cornerstone and we are commanded to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace because there is one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

But unity is never in the Bible unity for unity's sake. It is the unity that is based on the apostolic gospel.

It's only the apostolic gospel that can create true unity. There's all sorts of false unities and superficial unities, you see. When I went to high school in the last century, it was a long time ago, we were forced into military cadets.

Once a year I wore a uniform, a military uniform to school and I learned drill, explosives, weapons, how to kill people. What better thing to teach pubescent schoolboys in my view?

And every year we had a two week camp where we would be transported into the outback and we would be put under the command of boys who were a year or two, a grade or two ahead of us who suddenly turned into monsters.

[15 : 14] Lord of the flies, I kid you not, that was a bit what it was like. In my grade 10 I was a junior officer and we were out in the outback with real weapons and real ammunition when the guy who was our commanding officer who was in grade 12 went absolutely mad with power.

It's a very interesting experience but I need to tell you we experienced in all the company the most magnificent unity. I've never experienced it before.

We hated this guy. It was a unity in suffering and it was a unity in hatred because we all had a common ally but it's a superficial, it's not a genuine unity and the only unity that the Bible recognizes is the organic spiritual unity of those who are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets Christ Jesus being our cornerstone.

Church structures are a vacuous basis for unity because only the power of the gospel can clean us and turn our selfishness to the glory of God.

And if the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets if you try and build the church somewhere else not on the teaching of the apostles and prophets it's going to collapse.

[16 : 39] And if you try and drag the church off its foundation onto a new teaching you may drag the institution with you but God will not be in it. As you know we as a congregation voted to receive the oversight of Bishop Harvey through the network in February.

And since that time there have been letters to and from the diocese. This week Dan and I received letters seeking to stop us from exercising any ministry whatsoever here at St. John's accusing us of being trespassers in the church.

I want you to know that Dan and I and Jim and Jim and the other workers in the church have no intention of going anywhere. And as long as we are able to build on the foundation and continue in the doctrine of the apostles and prophets and watch God build his church on Christ the cornerstone we will continue.

When the church moves from the gospel when it tries to build on another foundation when it rejects the teaching of the apostles and prophets when it replaces the gospel with a message which is more affirming of the opinions of our culture it destroys true unity unity.

And it has to replace unity in the gospel with legalistic threats and that church she is in danger of losing her reason for existence. And in the end brothers and sisters that is what this is all about.

[18 : 07] It's whether we will stand on the foundation laid for us in scriptures. It's whether we will trust Christ and his gospel for our lives and for our future.

That is the only way that we can be sure we are building on Christ our cornerstone. Would you take out your prayer books for just a moment? The wine coloured book and turn to page 706.

These are the 39 articles which are very important to read. They are like the flower of the reformation. In the 16th century as people return to the teaching of God's word.

One of the things they had to think of most clearly was what is the church? Look at article 19. That's XIX for those of you in high school. I'm sorry.

Of the church. The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men include women boys and girls faithful meaning we believe the gospel in the which the pure word of God is preached.

[19 : 17] Not an addition and not a subtracted and not a different version and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ ordinance in all those things that are of necessity are requisite to the same which means discipline.

And then there's this astounding statement as the church of Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch have erred so also the church of Rome have erred not only in their living and manner of ceremonies but also in matters of faith.

You see what Craner does? He says there are matters of ceremonies over here which are secondary but there are also matters of faith over here and whole denominations he is saying can go astray.

This is doubly important for us as we are caught in this awful conflict right now. Do you not weep over the scandal this is to the name of Jesus Christ?

We need to repent of our own failures here. I tell you we are pursuing peace. We have offered conversation with the diocese that has been rejected every time.

[20 : 20] We also need to encourage one another and say this that we cannot be part of something that pretends to be the church which builds on a false gospel and builds on another Jesus because the church is the people of God built on Christ and it can only be found where the teaching of the apostles is held to.

It may look like a church but if it doesn't if it's not built on those foundations it's not a church. So what is the church? Where is it? And thirdly and finally why the church?

We go back to Ephesians. Just listen to these words again. God fits us together.

God joins us together so that the whole structure would now be a growing and holy temple in the Lord because in Christ Jesus you are now being built together to be a dwelling place for God in the Spirit.

and I'm not sure it gets much better than that. Can we top that? I don't think you can. We are being built together through the teaching of God's Word in the same direction in the same Holy Spirit so that God the Father will dwell with us now.

[21 : 49] This is not something for a distant and remote future in heaven. This is the present reality. It's in the present tense. So the more we are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets the more we align ourselves with Christ Jesus the cornerstone the more we are fitted together the more God will dwell amongst us.

What has replaced the tabernacle and the temple in the Old Testament as the place of God's glory in the world? It is the church which I know is very hard to see sometimes and that's why this word grows is so important for us.

It means we're not perfect but we're growing. We're meant to be. We have got a very vast long way to go and there ought to be a huge sign over the door something like under constant spiritual construction.

It ought to be on the inside and on the outside as well. God hasn't finished with us yet. It's God who is doing the building project and one of his biggest challenges is the raw material that he's working with and fitting us together.

He is talking about how we relate with one another. He is joining us together fitting us together which has to do with our involvement in each other's lives.

[23 : 07] See believe it or not we don't all come as perfect shaped bricks. We don't come as smooth stones ready to be fitted and ready to be aligned with Jesus Christ our cornerstone.

It's not easy for God to put us in the building in a sense. And part of the spiritual growth and increase of the church is having our edges knocked off so that we might fit with one another and fit with Jesus Christ which is next to impossible to do if your attendance is sporadic.

So look over at chapter 4 verses 15 and 16. I want to read more of this but let's just discipline ourselves to 15.

Rather Paul says speaking the truth in love it's a lovely phrase we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ from whom the whole body joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied that's you and me when each part is working properly makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

What the Holy Spirit is doing is he is working in such a way which means we are to be committed to speaking the truth in love and working together to fit together in a kind of self forgetfulness and being shaped by the desire to serve one another in love and when we do he says in chapter 2 we grow into a holy temple it's the only word it's the only characteristic the apostle says of the church it's a holy thing it's not the size it's not the shape it's not the liturgy it's not the popularity it's the holiness of the church that is what makes us different from the world and that's what makes us both attractive and repulsive to those around us and I don't know how you sculpt this if you're a sculptor I don't know how you do this at the end of chapter 2 I don't know how you make sense of it because in one way it doesn't really make sense does it?

[25 : 21] I mean the gospel of Jesus Christ comes to us and it doesn't come to us to give us inner peace and tranquility in this life it doesn't even come to us so much although that's part of it and this is part of it to rescue us and to make us alive it does that that it comes to us so that in the end we might be the dwelling place of God in the spirit and the fact that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob dwells in us together flawed sinful weak human beings the fact that he grows us and remains here with us and even uses us I think is a miracle an absolute miracle of grace and I think it explains why we're not don't look at it but in chapter 3 verse 10 Paul says that God makes his amazing wisdom known to the spiritual powers through the church

I think this is why as you look at the church what do you see a group of weak sinful people fumbling around trying to remain faithful to the gospel trying to hold Jesus Christ out to others because we know there's no hope in us there's only hope in him and God in heaven points to the church and he says to all the spiritual powers that is my wisdom that I dwell with those people it's so ordinary and it's so extraordinary Satan if he can would stop us believing the gospel and he would stop us trusting Christ and he would stop us offering Christ to other people but it is the stunning wisdom of God the only way that we are held in the gospel and hold to the gospel is if he is in our midst praise God and all heaven watches in awe this is the temple where God dwells by his spirit he does not build this for our sake alone he doesn't even build it for the sake of the world but he builds it for his own glory and his own dwelling so that this will be the beginnings of the place where he is known and where his glory is shown so Mel is going to come and lead us in prayers and in a moment let us bow before the majesty of our good God let's acknowledge our sin and our failure let's pray that God would continue to fit us together let's pray that God would continue to build us on nothing but the apostles apostles and prophets that he would conform us to Christ the cornerstone that we might know his presence and that we might show his presence to the world let's pray father we are here this morning we are thankful to be alive all of us are important to you and all of us are important to each other as each of us has different qualities and attributes and strengths and weaknesses we are dependent on each other for support and encouragement but ultimately we are all dependent on you you are the cornerstone of our lives not just as the church but as individual

Christians forming part of that church and you are the one around whom we are all joined together thank you for the ability to work together in the furtherance of your kingdom as we spread the gospel message in Vancouver and around the world Lord in your mercy hear our prayer as we think of our place in the world we pray for our leaders civic leaders we think of the queen our prime minister the premier local authorities for the leaders in our church as well we pray for Bishop Don Bishop Malcolm for Archbishop Venables for those in our staff here and in the network who are committed to the furtherance of the gospel for the church in Malawi we pray as they are having trouble finding the right person to lead that church we think of

Samuel as he went out to find David and it seemed as if he went through the whole list of people in the family there had to be somebody else God brought David and we pray that in the same way the diocese of Upper Sheer will find and Malawi will find their right person for our local diocese Lord as David has expressed we pray for your strength and guidance we pray that your church will remain strong and will stand Lord in your mercy hear our prayer for those in our church who are ministering locally we ask your blessing for Paul for Dan and Fran for Marion for Richie for those who minister overseas we think of Sharon

Tom and Ann Alan and Ile and Heather give them the comfort of your spirit as they face obstacles to the spread of the gospel each different obstacles in their own situation help them and us to continue to pray to you for strength and for guidance and for those who minister in St.

[32 : 29] John's for the youth as they're starting in their new groups may they each continue to grow closer to you and we pray for their leaders and ask you to continue to give them the wisdom to know how best to teach and encourage the youth as they are the future of our church for our pastoral staff we pray for strength to continue in their ministries and may feel may they feel their strength increase as they continue to rely on you for guidance and help us all to support them in prayer and be with the trustees and church committee as they're faced with decisions that may not be easy and give guidance to them and wisdom to them and to our staff Lord in your mercy hear our prayer we think of those areas of our world that are in crisis at the moment we pray for political stability in the

Middle East and in Africa economic stability and encouragement for those in China in Burma and the devastations they're going through and we ask for a smooth distribution of aid as it goes into those countries for the Ratnak project we ask that you would continue to open doors in Cambodia and to help Brian to know where you would have him minister for those in our church who are sick we pray some are sick some are hurting some are bereaved continue to strengthen them continue to help each one to focus on you as the source of life and strength we think specifically of Anne of Edith Rowena Lorna Fiona

Janet Margaret Harold and Erwin and from Iran we ask that you would continue to work in his case with the immigration board that he may have a favorable ruling for those we know in our own hearts we take a moment to pray for those who are recovering from illness we pray for continued improvement for those who are bereaved we ask for strength and we ask you to make us continually aware of those who have needs in the church and at the same time we thank you for those who meet regularly to pray for our church and its ministries and thank you and encourage those who have a ministry of caring for those who are sick and hurting

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer so then just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord continue to live in him rooted and built up in him strengthened strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness amen to bed for those as you a help and you and people