

The Church is God's Temple // 1 Corinthians

3:10-17

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[0:00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

1 Corinthians 3, I'm going to begin reading in verse 10 all the way to verse 17. It says, verse 10, According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation. And someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest.

For the day will disclose it because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.

[1:21] If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only through fire.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. This is the word of the Lord. Hallelujah. Please be seated. Amen. From 2015 to 2020, ABC ran a sitcom called Fresh Off the Boat.

It was about a Taiwanese family adjusting to life in America. But long before it was a sitcom, Fresh Off the Boat was a term used to describe immigrants that had just arrived into a country just off the boat.

Now, the term is often used in a derogatory way, but it describes something that's very important or something that's very real. It describes someone in a new country not yet adapted to the new country's language, culture, and custom.

[2:50] Someone in the midst of a massive transition, culture shock, so to speak, leaving their old country, their old culture, their old language, leaving all they'd ever known.

My father-in-law, an immigrant from Vietnam after the war, gave many other Vietnamese immigrants the helping hand they needed in Nashville, Tennessee.

He taught them how to become citizens, how to drive, how to find work. We were unpacking his house several weeks ago and finding these documents that he had helped for people, helping them adjust to life in America for years.

For years, he devoted himself to helping people who are fresh off the boat to our country. Well, in many ways, the church of Corinth is fresh off the boat.

They have been saved, as Eric pointed out. They have been called into the fellowship of the Lord Jesus Christ. They have been, they've learned so many things, but in many ways, they're more Corinthian than they are Christian.

[3:57] And so, what the Apostle Paul is doing in this letter is telling them about this new language, this new customs, this new culture, this new country that they are now in.

And in many ways, he's not merely teaching them who they are as individual believers, but as members of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, of the church that he called into existence.

I've heard my friend Jeff Schwell say, nothing needs more biblical and theological definition for a pastor than the local church, because it's where he's investing and laboring.

But the same could be true of us. At this juncture, seven years into this experiment, of planting Trinity Grace Church as we install another elder, you could argue nothing needs more theological definition than the church, because it's where we're investing, it's where we're laboring, it's where we're giving our lives.

And that's what the Apostle Paul is doing in these verses. As I pointed out last week, these 17 verses hang together. He's talking about what is the church. And in verses 1 to 10, or actually 5 to 9, he's talking about this agricultural analogy, compares the church to a field in which workers are in the field, servants, pastors are in the field for the fruit and the labor of the field.

[5:32] Even as our Lord said, call out to me, I'm the Lord of the harvest, and I'll send laborers into the field. Well, in verses 10 to 17, he picks up a different analogy, an architectural analogy, comparing the church to a building in which people are involved in laying bricks to this building.

But this is more than a metaphor, if you know your scriptures well. This idea of the church as a building, as a temple, it just brims with theological and biblical significance, because what he's saying is the church is the culmination of what God has done in dwelling with his people that runs throughout Scripture, gathering a people for himself.

The tribes of Israel went into the promised land, having received their own land, where the Lord said, my people are my inheritance.

So there's so much going on here, and I'm trying to preach a shorter sermon today, so bear with me. And where we're going is, let all that you do be done for the building up of the whole church, because it is the dwelling place of God.

Let all that you do be done for the good of the whole church, because it is the dwelling place of God. We're going to unpack this just the way the Scripture gives it to us.

[6:57] The first point is the church has one foundation. The church has one foundation. The church is a building. Every building has a foundation. And the foundation of the church is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Similar to the way he talks about the harvest. In the previous verses, he talks about the work of the harvest being done in different stages. So too the church is built in different stages.

And the Apostle Paul reminds them that the stage of the church in Corinth began with his laying down the foundation. Look at verse 10. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid the foundation.

He's reminding them of the first days of faith. When he came from Athens into Corinth, it's so important, you know, our Bible is not an ahistorical document.

It is telling us the history of the faith. And it's so vital. It's real people in real time. And so the Apostle Paul goes into Corinth. He preaches the gospel there.

[7:59] Preaches in the synagogues, run out of the synagogue. Preaches the ruler of the synagogue's house. And so he preaches the truth of Christ and him crucified.

He lays the foundation. He likely baptized the first converts. He's there on the first days of these faiths. So he just reminded them, you remember when I laid the foundation to the church there.

But now he says, if you look down in verse 10, he's continuing. He says, and someone else is building upon it. Now that's not meant to be something like, hey, they shouldn't build upon what I lay down. That's not what he's saying.

He's saying, they're doing what is right. The building must be built in stages. And so he leaves and someone else is building upon it. And this analogy, in many ways, or this metaphor, really doesn't make as much sense to us as it would in the original context.

You know, construction projects in our world, our neck of the woods, so to speak, don't generally last beyond a year. We get a little angry if they last even a year. But if you remember, what did our Lord say?

[9:04] I will tear down that temple. And they say, what are you talking about? It took 70 years to build that. St. Peter's Cathedral took 120 years.

He's saying, you know, the church is like that. It's built in stages. That's really important. The mission of the church is not to get one stage right.

Like Hezekiah, who didn't care about what came after him. The mission of the church is to build in such a way to prepare for the next stage.

One day, this room will be completely filled with new people. You will have died and gone, as will I have. And so the church is built like that.

And in a wealthy city like Corinth, when they read these words, they just thought, oh yeah, you remember all those construction projects going on around town, being built year after year. But good buildings are not just built.

[10:13] They're built well. That's where the apostle Paul is going. Anyone can swing a hammer, but not everyone knows where to put the nail. Anyone can carry a brick, but not everyone knows where to set it down.

And so the apostle Paul is saying, let everyone take care. Look down there with me again. He says, let each one take care how he builds upon it. Now in verses 10 and 11, he uses a literary device. It kind of builds up to this thing. That is the center of what he's trying to say in this first section. Everyone must take care because the foundation is so important that you must take care how you build.

And he continues, the foundation is Jesus Christ. The foundation is Jesus Christ.

In order for a building to be built well, it must be built on the foundation. In order for the church to be built well, it must be built on Jesus Christ.

[11:13] on the good news. I find it striking that Paul doesn't say it was built on him. While Paul laid the foundation, he didn't lay a foundation about himself.

Even Ephesians 2.20 says it was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. But the point there is not that it was built on those people, but built on their testimony. Built on the gospel that they preached.

And so that's what Paul is saying here. And so to a church built around preferences, it seems, and different personalities defined by squabbles, jealousy, and rivalry, and strife, Paul says Christ alone must be central.

Now all this might seem like Captain Obvious. After all, we came to learn about Jesus Christ. But it is the preeminent challenge for any church to make sure the church is built on the gospel of Christ and him crucified.

Author D.A. Carson tells the story of talking with a Mennonite leader and this Mennonite leader was assessing his own movement. He says, the Mennonite leader said one generation of Mennonites cherished, and this is not meant to be critical of Mennonites, it's descriptive, one generation of Mennonites, it's descriptive by one of their own, one generation of Mennonites cherished the gospel and maintained certain social and political commitments.

[12:43] This man said the next generation assumed the gospel, no longer talked that much about the gospel, and emphasized certain social and political commitments.

commitments. And he says, assessing his movement, the present generation identifies with certain social and political commitments, and many don't even hold to the gospel.

what Dr. Carson and the Apostle Paul are alerting us to, that it's a whole lot easier to pass down a way of doing church than it is to pass down the gospel.

It's a whole lot easier to pass down a list of do's and don'ts in the way, this is how we do things around here, than it is to pass down an excitement, an appreciation, an appropriation of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

D.A. Carson kind of sums this up saying, I fear that the cross, and that includes the gospel of Christ and Him crucified, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy by relatively peripheral, secondary, tertiary insights that take on far too much weight.

[14:14] In many ways, many churches fail. Many churches fail to build on the foundation, not because they've disowned the gospel, but because they've dismissed it.

How does it happen? How do churches that cherish the gospel turn into churches that assume the gospel, or worse, deny the gospel? It happens when the main thing is no longer the main thing. Now here's the problem. It's so common for Christians and churches to begin to be identified with something other than the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. To be identified with a single issue. Single issue politics can be helpful in some respects. But when something besides the gospel becomes a single issue, things start to go awry.

It could be homeschooling. It could be a style of worship. You know, we soak in our worship or whatever. It could be a point of theology. It could be KJV only.

[15:20] It could be tongues and prophecy and the extraordinary gifts. It could be dispensationalism or Christian nationalism or any of these things. These things can be important

things in and of themselves.

They can be things to think about and to be careful about and yet they must be distinguished from the gospel. And so the call of God on every church, the call of God on this church is not merely to proclaim the gospel.

The call of God for every church and this church is to proclaim the gospel and continually ensure that nothing else takes its central place.

The call of God in this church and every church is to keep the main thing the main thing. These verses examine not merely what we say with our lips but what we're excited about.

And there should be, I would argue, a whole category of joy and delight and emotion that is reserved for the gospel alone because it's the main thing.

[16 : 26] And so these verses are firstly addressed to the leaders of a local church and so I say, guys, you know where Taylor is?

Can't see anyway. We must keep the main thing the main thing. Gil Balch, keep the main thing the main thing.

But these verses are addressed to all of us. Because the shift is so subtle for when something secondary begins to displace the primary.

Something peripheral begins to move into the place of something that is central. It's reserved for the gospel alone. And I must say I'm very proud.

I don't, pride always, proud always, uncomfortable word for me because I'm trying to run from pride. But I'm so thankful for the way this church seven years in, I've watched you keep the main thing the main thing.

[17 : 39] Watched you divide over preferences, different preferences. divide in the sense that you make different decisions and yet keep the main thing the main thing.

But I would say to you, so thank you, I think the harder work is ahead. I think the harder work is ahead to keep the gospel primary.

That all that we do be done for the good of the building up of the whole church. Point two, all must take care how they build upon it. all must take care having exhorted all who build to build well by building on the foundation.

Paul tells them why they must take care how they build. Why? Because the building inspector is coming. All buildings must prepare for an inspection. All homes must be inspected and tested and you may be able to dodge the guy downtown but there is an inspector coming when it comes to the house of God and it is the Lord himself.

No, these verses are meant to warn us and inspire us. They warn us that a fire is coming to test the work. Now these verses have been used to defend the doctrine of, or teaching of purgatory.

[18 : 58] This idea that Christians are not fully perfected as we will not be before we get to heaven and so these Christians that are not fully perfected go to this place called purgatory where the fire burns off their sins and you can pray for them to be burned off a little quicker or something like that but that is, that's just missing the text wide of the mark because this text is talking about the fire not purifying believers but testing their works.

Look down there in verse 13 the fire will test last clause the fire will test what sort of work one has done. It's not their sins that are burned up but their work the work is burned up.

Verse 15 if anyone's work is burned up and so it's not talking about purgatory it's talking about a fire that's coming to test the building up of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ the true quality of everyone's work will be revealed in that day.

Paul layers on word after word talking about the quality of the work it will become manifest this day will disclose it the fire will reveal it the fire will test it nothing will be hidden nothing will be in doubt the true assessment will be the assessment that God gives of the work on the church and the quality of everyone's work will be evident whether it was skillful or shoddy built on Christ or human personality built on the pursuit of God's glory or human approval it will be revealed by fire fire will test this is not a reference to the fires of hell but a reference or metaphor for God's inspection the house of the Lord is God's house and he's coming to see what we've made of it the different building materials you see that in verse 12 the different building materials point to that as well it appears this list is of descending value right gold silver precious stones wood hay straw descending from gold down to hay and straw but that's not what's going on it's rather divided between these the items the foundational items that survive a fire and the foundation items that do not survive a fire a

church built on gold so to speak built on something it survives it's purified by the fire so every all the impurities are burned off and yet the gold remains but wood and hay and straw just burned up now some have said is this teaching that we will be judged on the basis of our work we will be judged for everything we do in the body but it's not saying our relationship with God is on the basis of our work because if you notice the man is he is saved even though his work is burned up so it's definitely not saying that rather what it's saying that everything that's not built on

Jesus Christ in that day will be consumed these verses are talking about the stricter judgment to leaders first and foremost this is what James was talking about not many should use their words because we all stumble and God is bringing a judgment Acts 20 talks about giving an account for the people and so pastors give an account for how they've led the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and all of their ministry that's not built on Jesus Christ will be burned away it's incredibly sobering it's meant to change the orientation of any pastor from the applause of men to the inspection of almighty God because it is not any man's people it is the people for whom our Lord died and purchased with his blood and I want these to rest on us guys there's a warning here though for all of us how you conduct yourself in the house of

[23:29] God is no small matter to our Lord and I've just said I'm proud of you I'm thankful for you but when we bite and devour one another when we rally around personal preferences when we undermine leaders it's no small matter and anything built in the church that's not built on our Lord Jesus Christ will be consumed it's meant to leave you have you ever seen something burned ever seen a house burned imagine the devastation of watching it all burn the reality is it's meant to leave you with that feeling you may pass through the fire and yet what you built all be lost all be lost it's not because God's mean nothing impure is going to come into his kingdom these verses are also written to inspire us there's so much going on in these verses trying to preach a shorter sermon and there's so much though look in that first half of verse 14 he says if the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives he will receive a reward all that is not all that's done for

Christ yes all that's not done for Christ will not survive but all that is done for Christ will survive and will come with a reward it's incredible I mean some people say this makes Christians hired guns only obeying for the payoff but that is crazy because they're getting killed for following Christ so that does not resonate it means rather that God will not forget a single sacrifice for the building up of his church we may forget it we may not even remember what we were given at Christmas or birthdays or whatever these things we don't remember those things but God will not forget anything even a cup of cold water he will never forget and so too these are riveting verses why they give us a mission it means we have a mission as a church we're not afraid that all is lost we have a mission to build something that remains it's incredible incredible absolutely incredible I've been moved the past couple months by Senator Ben Sasse so you may know a little bit about him in December he was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer former senator of Nebraska he was president of Florida but I'm not going to hold that against him he's a follower of Christ he said on December 23rd two days before Christmas last year he said last week I was diagnosed with metastasized stage four pancreatic cancer and I'm going to die advanced pancreatic cancer is nasty stuff it's a death sentence but I already had a death sentence before last week we all do it's as if this text is saying that to us I already have a death sentence we all do with this passage in view it is not death that makes death lost it's life lived between now and our inevitable death it makes death either loss or gain do you understand and so it rivets us we have a death sentence after death we will give an account for all that we've done in the body all that's not done for Christ will be consumed and therefore we have a mission to please the master to please the lord of the harvest to get into the harvest for his purposes it's amazing let death be not proud let it rather rivet us with a mission for Christ to invest to labor to pour out our lives to build a church here that survives way after we're gone

I'm not trying to hit the finish line at 65 or 85 or whatever I want this church to survive and thrive long after we're gone so don't build a church for yourself build one for your kids and your grandkids and your great grandkids pour out your life there point three because the church is God's temple so Paul told them to take care how they build Paul tells them and us why we must take care how we build inspection is coming now he tells and makes clear why God will be doing the inspection because the church is God's temple God will be doing the inspection because the church is God's temple Paul asked look down there these amazing words in verse 16 do you not know that you are God's temple and God's spirit dwells in you he uses this phrase do you not know nine times in this

in the

Corinthians correspondence and this is the first do you not know telling him oh man do you not realize who you are striking to me that he says you are the temple sometimes we think about the church wrongly we think about the church as just part of the body of Christ or just part of the temple of God God has a plan to gather people for himself unlike any other people in the nation and so each church is not a part of the temple but is the temple it's striking to me what he says of who is in the temple as we mentioned this morning this idea already this temple language is brimming with Old Testament in biblical significance theological significance is a massive category books and books and books have been read on it why because

[29:44] God had a purpose from the beginning to be a God who had a people and he dwelt with that people we see that in the garden God is with in that temple garden God is with his people you know they're walking with God in the cool of the day what does that mean that's amazing you know and yet sin interrupted the garden and then God said I got a plan I'm going to send Abraham my servant to grab a people Abraham did then he led that people into Egypt and there they were enslaved God said I'm calling him out of Egypt to be my sanctuary my chosen possession a kingdom of priests and saints unto our God and he dwelt with them you remember that a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day God was with them and then he said I don't want to just be in a cloud I want to be in a tent a tabernacle in the midst of you I want to be with your people I want to be with you then he leads them in the promised land says build me a glorious temple that's what we see in Solomon a glorious temple in the cloud the

Shekinah glory cloud fills the temple then they're thrown out of that land they build a new temple and then Jesus Christ comes on to the scene and says I am that temple and no longer will my temple have a zip code my temple will be a people from every tribe tongue and nation that's where I'll be and he's saying to these people who are more Corinthian than they are Christian you are the temple the temple is still standing Herod's temple is still standing when Paul wrote this letter is scandalous Paul is saying you are the inheritance you are not Jews but you are the culmination of what God is doing throughout salvation history and the same thing can be said of you Trinity Grace Church you are the temple of

God why is Sunday different than any other day because all these people filled with the spirit get into one place all these little temples get into one big temple and God dwells in our midst for his glory and honor and praise and so you are the temple this could change your life from the bottom up we live in a culture that says you have to find your story and live it you have to find your song and sing it you have to find your truth and speak it but the truth is we weren't meant to live that way and the pressure is so great it's nearly breaking the back of our society breaking it in two it's not hopeful what's going on in

America with that teaching they say in rehab the power is not how the story of addicts is unique but how they are the same how they are the same story over the same experience over the same fears insecurities and anxiety over same is true in the church Paul is saying you know all that I follow Paul I follow Paul you're missing it man you're in the temple you have the same story we have the same story the same story about a

God who's rich in mercy came to seek and save that which was lost that he might bring them to himself what makes it all special is not us it's him what do you say this is identity language right we got our little monikers I identify as whatever tennis player picketball player golfer whatever photographer you know all these types of things doctor all you fill in that's not who you are now you are the temple of God where God dwells in many ways we are all fresh off the boat we're no longer of the world but we're still in it we need these things we need to know the new language the new culture the new custom the new family we need to be reminded of what we're doing the old story that's been told many times one of these temples that's built over generations and generations how would you like to be a part of a family yeah my dad died and the temple wasn't built and it looks like [35:26] I'm going to die before the temple is built and brought my son too you know how would that's what we're doing here they say in a scene like that one brick layer sitting next to another one says what are you doing I'm laying brick the other says what are you doing I'm building a temple that's what we're doing we're building a temple all the sacrifices all the giving all the early set up team all the chairs being put out all the hosting and opening your homes all the sacrifice all the meals prepared for those who are sick and can't gather with us what are we doing we're not preparing meals we're not setting up chairs we're not inviting people we're building a temple we're

building a place where God dwells for his glory that one day will fly into the next temple into the heavenly temple and all of us will fall at his feet and say all the glory to him let's pray

Father in heaven oh we give you thanks for the honor and privilege of sitting under your word and being brought up into your purposes oh God thank you for this temple you're building thank you for Trinity Grace Church we are not impressed with ourselves but we are completely stunned at the grace of God and the privilege of being among your number thank you praise you Jesus name amen you you you've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens Tennessee for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at