

You are God's Temple

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Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

1 Corinthians 3:16 (NET)^{1 2}

Some of the wonders of the world, both modern and ancient, are structures people have built. Considerable pride of human accomplishment swells up within those who marvel at them. Indeed, they are impressive.

Creating such structures in the ancient world required decades of work to accomplish. It was a marvel in itself that a building project could continue long enough to complete these wonders since wars often broke out between nations and interrupted the construction. For example, the temple of Apollo at Didyma was to be the most massive temple in the Greek world. Though the temple's construction lasted for centuries it never reached completion³. Even when a temple was completed, it did not last.

Moses built the tabernacle of the tent of meeting. They used it for about 400 years until they began using Solomon's temple. The elaborate temple planned by King David and built by his son, King Solomon, stood for 372 years before the Babylonians came and burnt it down along with all the houses in Jerusalem.

About seven decades later they rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. It is known as Zerubbabel's temple, also known as the second temple. This temple stood for almost five centuries before Rome destroyed it.

The next year King Herod broke ground on a forty-year project to build a temple embellished with so much gold that the glare from the sun was blinding. Yet, as majestically as it stood, the temple could not last fifty years before Rome destroyed that one too. It seems temples just do not last forever.

Paul was aware of the times and the difficulty in building something as special as a temple and hoping to keep it from getting destroyed. In 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 Paul compares us all to builders. He and the other apostles built the foundation using Christ as the cornerstone. He talks about the materials we use as we build on that foundation and the test of fire our work must endure if it is to last. Our work is the bringing in and building up of believers.

In verse 16 Paul gives a mild rebuke, "Do you not know?" It is used twenty-seven times in the Bible. Almost half (12) of these are by Paul and 10 of them are in 1 Corinthians. He wants to get

¹ I used the NET Bible here because "God's temple" seems the best translation. "God's temple" is used by most translations leaving NASB's "temple of God" as the great minority among modern translations on this point. "God's temple" is also supported by the International Critical Commentary (Robertson & Plummer).

² Biblical Studies Press. (2005). The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible (1 Co 3:16). Biblical Studies Press.

³ <https://www.ancient.eu/article/640/the-temple-of-apollo-at-didyma/>

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their attention so he can tell them something they apparently need telling. He has two things to say here.

The first thing Paul says is, "that you are God's temple." (NET) But what is a temple. The words sanctuary, tabernacle, and temple are often thought of when thinking of a temple. They are often thought of as synonyms, and for the most part they almost are. However, the meaning of sanctuary in a religious context is simply a holy place whereas a tabernacle is like a temple with the same functions and purposes of a temple except it is temporary or mobile.

Foremost of all, the temple is thought of as the dwelling place or house of God. Several passages indicate the temple is God's dwelling place or house. It is where one expects to find the presence of God. We see that after the exodus from Egypt, God lead the Israelites through the desert toward the promise land. His divine presence (shekhina) appeared "in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night". This presence of God filled the tabernacle when they completed the building of the "tabernacle of the tent of meeting."⁴

"Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."

Exodus 40:34 (NASB95)

Again, when they completed Solomon's temple and moved the ark of the covenant into it. (see 1 Kings 8:1-11)

¹⁰ It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹ so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

1 Kings 8:10-11 (NASB95)

Both the tabernacle and temple were intended as dwelling places for God. God accepted both of these and made his presence known. The psalmist understands the temple as God's dwelling place. He calls God's house His "holy temple" in Psalm 65:4 and again "His temple" in Ps 27:4.

How blessed is the one whom You choose and bring near to You
To dwell in Your courts.
We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house,
Your holy temple.

Psalm 65:4 (NASB95)

⁴ One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD And to meditate in His temple.

Psalm 27:4 (NASB95)

⁴ Numbers 14:14

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The temple is also a place of worship. The above verse not only mentions the temple and the house of the Lord, but it also speaks of meditation in His temple. Revelations 11:1 also speaks of those who worship in the temple.

A temple, by its very nature of being publicly visible to those who pass by, serves as a witness of the deity for which it was built. Even a temple of a false god has a reputation among those who see or interact with it. The temple of God also serves as a witness to the people who are aware of it and has a reputation among them.

Paul says, "... you are God's temple." Since we are God's temple, even the very stones that make up the temple, our actions affect not only the rest of the temple of God but also the temple's reputation and by extension the honor of God in the eyes of the public. Honor and reputation were important to the people of the Ancient Near East and it should be to us also. My article, "Adopted By God" ([hyperlink](#)) points out our responsibility to bring honor to our Heavenly Father

Just as God chooses to enter His temple and make it his house, He can also choose to leave His temple. In the 10th chapter of Ezekiel God shows the prophet a vision of the glory of God leaving the Jerusalem Temple to reside with the captives in Babylon.⁵ This indicates God chooses his dwelling place and may choose to leave whenever he decides to. It is His house.

Also note it does not say temples, in the plural. There is only one temple. Temple is in the singular form. It is helpful to note that "Paul often has the singular [noun] to denote something shared by a group of people ..."⁶ such as a heart, body and as in this case a temple.

The word "you are" (ἐστε) in 1 Corinthians 3:16 confuses many people. This is because one cannot discern from translations in modern English whether "you" is plural or singular and assume it is singular. However, one must refer to the Greek because the English "you" can be either singular or plural. A person who cannot see this directly from the Greek word can easily look it up with Bible software that includes morphology⁷ and find it is in the plural form.

In the plural form it refers to the whole church of believers forming a single temple instead of the singular form which refers to each individual being a temple resulting in there being many temples of God. But there is only one temple in this verse and "you" is in the plural so we understand that many believers form a single temple.

A temple built of stone has many parts requiring many stones of different shapes, sizes, and functions to form the temple. The temple Paul is referring to here is made of the many

⁵ Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Major Prophets* (pp. 399–400). Joplin, MO: College Press.

⁶ Moulton, J. H., & Turner, N. (1976–). *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Style*. (Vol. 4, p. 91). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

⁷ The morphology indicates what part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, or etc.) the word is and includes the number (plural or singular).

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individuals Christians who together are the whole church, each one of us is a “living stone” taking our place in the structure of God's temple. As Peter tells us,

⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:5 (NASB95)

With Christ as the cornerstone to which all other stones are aligned, and the foundation laid by the apostles, we are the stones that form the rest of the temple. With each stone doing its part to support the other stones around it to stay aligned with Christ we form God's temple. We become God's dwelling place, God's holy temple.

As with physical temples of Paul's day, he sees difficulties for even this temple. He is concerned about the disunity of the Corinthian church. The following chapters⁸ of 1 Corinthians mention arrogance, immorality, lawsuits, and disagreements. Paul is concerned this lack of unity within the Corinthian church will destroy it. That is, to make it dysfunctional and ineffective in its purpose. In essence, such a dysfunctional temple dishonors God. A person is destroying the church when they upset the unity within it and weaken its witness, or dishonor God.

Jesus in His high priestly prayer of John 17:20-23 prayed for unity of all believers.

20 “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

John 17:20–23 (NASB95)

Jesus places an emphasis on the importance of the unity of believers in the verses above from His high priestly prayer. Three times Jesus mentions this unity. He says, “that they may all be one” and again, “that they may be one.” Both times the desired unity or oneness of believers is compared to the unity the Father has with Jesus. This is a perfect unity. The third mention of unity says exactly that, “that they may be perfected in unity.”

NASB95 has a translator's note saying that “unity” here is literally “into one.” There is a Greek word that is translated “unity” (ἐνότης). It is used twice in the New Testament and carries the meaning of the English word “unity” very well, but John did not use it. John used “εἰς ἓν” to say “into one.”

⁸ Chapters 4, 5, and 6

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“This is perhaps little more than a brief way of saying “that they may be completely perfected and brought into unity.”⁹ Yet it may also refer the kind of unity Christ desires for us by referring back to verse 21, “that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us ...” referring to a unity even with God as much as or more than with each other. See Kerr¹⁰ for discussion on these verses.

To be perfected in unity means to acquire that highest quality of oneness that is only obtainable through a Christlikeness by which we accept God's will and purpose as our own.

It is in Christ's third mention of unity that includes the reason for the need of unity, “so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.” The reason is a two-fold witness to the world. First, that the world will know God has sent Christ. Secondly, that the world will also know God has loved them with the same kind of love He has for Christ.

It is difficult to believe a divided group of bickering people have a message of love from God. Our message should be, as was Paul's, “Christ and Him crucified”¹¹ rather than our pet peeve or distinctive doctrine. A temple that is not aligned with Christ, the cornerstone, or built on the foundation laid by the apostles and cannot agree on its purpose is not fulfilling its purpose as God intends and it is dysfunctional.

As an example imagine a dysfunctional house, one missing a wall, letting the cold wind chill you to the bone and letting wet rain soak the couch or a house where brick walls covers the exterior doors and windows. It cannot fulfill its purpose. A dysfunctional temple cannot serve its purpose either. The Temple of God has a purpose to fulfill and this purpose requires each of us doing our part in unity with the rest of the temple.

Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Colossians 3:14 (NASB95)

The context of the above verse (Colossians 3:12-17) is worth reading also to fully appreciate verse 14. See study on these verses. [\[hyperlink to study\]](#) We find the topic of love appears frequently in Bible passages. Love impacts our Christian walk in many ways. Here love serves as “the perfect bond of unity.” Without love, unity falls apart. Therefore, love is every bit as vital to the church as is the unity of believers. We must be unified if we are to be a temple of God. If we are to have unity, we must have love among us. Paul uses the word love 96 times and dedicates the entire 13th chapter of this letter to love.

For the purpose of illustrating love as the bond that hold us together in unity, think of a newly constructed house. It is sturdy and ready to last more than a hundred years. Let's say that

⁹ Abbott, E. A. (1906). *Johannine Grammar* (p. 238). London: Adam and Charles Black.

¹⁰ Kerr, A. (2002). *The Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (Vol. 220, pp. 359–361). New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 2:2

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everything that acts like a glue, mortar, or cement suddenly dissolves and so does all the fasteners such as nails and screws. The house quickly collapses and into a heap of rubble. This is like unity without love. It is chaos and discord. It is completely non-functional.

The second thing Paul wanted the Corinthians to know was that "... the Spirit of God dwells in you." Here "you" is also in the plural form. This helps to explain that we are God's temple, as a temple we are the house of God, His dwelling place. God has chosen to dwell in this temple made of the corporate church, which is to say all the believers.

One misses the intended meaning of "you are God's temple" when slipping back into reading "you are" as singular instead of plural. Many people do not want to let go of the erroneous idea of each individual believer being a temple of God. There is only one temple of God.

1 Corinthians 3:17 is surrounded by the revelation that we as the body of Christ form the temple of God and God's wisdom is greater than human wisdom. Later in this letter, Paul informs us that "your (*plural*) body (*singular*) is a temple (*singular*) of the Holy Spirit ..." ¹² 1 Corinthians 6:19 uses the plural as does 3:16 making the situation very similar; however, the context of 6:19 is not as clear as 3:16 which leads some scholars to understand it as saying each individual being a temple. But, verses that are less clearly understood should be informed by verses that are more clearly understood and ones theology should not support contradictions that are easily avoided. Therefore 6:19 is understood as the many people who are one body form a single temple.

No doubt some would point to John 2:19, where Christ's body is implied as a temple, as support of each person being a temple of God. It could apply to us also if it were not referring to Jesus, God incarnate, Immanuel - God with us.

1 Corinthians 3:16 is not about being in unity with ourselves, but rather about being unified with the rest of the believers. The word for "You are" is in the plural. So, this is not necessarily speaking of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who entered us upon our salvation. Although, it is those in which the Holy Spirit dwells who are the building blocks forming the temple of God. God's dwelling place is no longer a physical temple. In the New Testament era, God dwells in a temple made of many unified individual believers who form a spiritual temple in which God chooses to dwell.

⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:5 (NASB95)

¹² 1 Corinthians 6:19

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Eph 2:19-22 also speaks of us as being part of the temple. "You" is also plural in this passage as well as the previously discussed verses. We are becoming a dwelling of God.

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:19–22 (NASB95)

In Romans¹³ Paul prays that God will help them have unity together by being "of the same mind with one another."

5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 15:5–6 (NASB95)

First remembering God gives perseverance that they would act according to the mind of Christ despite the actions of others in the church and that God gives encouragement to be of one mind. It is interesting that Paul mentions perseverance. How can we have unity with one another if we cannot persevere with one another despite each other? Notice the purpose of this unity is that we may glorify God together with a single voice.

Now with a proper understanding of verse 1 Corinthians 3:16 one is ready to venture on to the next verse. "If any man destroys the temple of God." The word "destroy" (φθείρω) seem like a strong word. It can mean "to harm" but this phrase "seems to be derived from the idea of the destruction of a house"¹⁴ and is also "often used in marriage contracts."¹⁵ If one considers, "When is an ancient house destroyed?" A house is destroyed when it no longer functions as a house, when the stone cease to work together to form a house. A marriage is destroyed when it no longer functions as a marriage, when the couple has lost their unity and cannot coexist together. The temple is destroyed when its unity is gone. Believers cannot function as God's temple without unity and there is no unity without love among the people.

¹³ Romans 15:5-6

¹⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 1054). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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The second phrase of verse 17 gives a warning to those who destroy the church, to those that split churches, to those who live immoral lives, to those who have angry disagreements with others such as which Paul will address later¹⁶, Paul says God will destroy them.

The same Greek word is used both times the word destroy is used in verse 17; however, different meanings are applied to it. The first "destroy" is in the present tense while the second "destroy" is in the future tense. I have already described the first destroy, "destroy the temple" as an inability to function as intended above.

The second "destroy", "God will destroy them", carries the sense of eternal destruction or punishment.¹⁷ This gives a person reason to take pause when trying to deal with problems within the church. Taking time to pray and examine one's self before taking action. We may see that God's overall plan is better than our own.

Paul warns of the dire consequences to the individual who harms the Temple of God. We may wonder if such harsh words should be taken at face value. Perhaps Ananias and Sapphira¹⁸ could help us take it seriously. God is just and jealous. It is wise to be careful when eternal destruction looms over one who would "destroy" the temple of God. One may ask, "how such a punishment could come upon a Christian who harms the temple of God?", but an equally valid question is, "how could a Christian do such a thing?"

I have seen a church where it seemed certain the pastor needed to be ousted. Yet God did not allow enough people to see the problem at a time for anyone to take action. The man is still ministering, but I believe he has turned himself around and is a good minister now. In a different church I once attended, the board members all ganged up against the pastor and brought it to a vote. Each board member had separate reasons for wanting to oust him. Most of the reasons were petty, prideful, or just old grudges. A single vote kept the pastor in office and half the people left the congregation. No doubt leaving that church with a scared reputation requiring years to heal. Sadly, too many congregations have failed to maintain their unity and consequentially the temple of God was weakened. The whole body of Christ, the Christians, suffer in their ability to present to gospel to those in need of Christ's salvation. This was evidenced in another church I attended where the previous pastor had left because of his sin. This church was still healing from this a decade later.

The reason Paul provides for this strong warning against those who destroy the church is that "The temple of God is holy." We are the temple. God said, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY." (1 Peter 1:16b). "In the NT, holiness is an attribute of God that the people of God are

¹⁶ See 1 Corinthians 4, 5, and 6

¹⁷ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 1054). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁸ Acts 5:1-10

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urged to reflect in their lives.”¹⁹ God offers to sanctify us. This is basically a theological term for becoming Christ-like. It is a process that is never completed this side of heaven, but we do become more like Christ when we allow the Holy Spirit to teach and guide us. Out of Christlikeness comes holiness and from holiness come unity in Christ and the bond of love required to be the temple of God. The temple of God will not be holy if we the very stones of the temple itself are not holy. Love and kindness go a long way toward building and maintaining the unity of the church.

Exercising love by respecting others and their concerns make the difference. The unity of the church is important to God and should be important to us. When God heaps his lovingkindness on each of us, may some of it spill over onto those around us as we interact with them that we may be a temple of God.

Scripture quotations are from NASB95²⁰ unless specified otherwise.

¹⁹ Hodgson, R., Jr. (1992). Holiness: New Testament. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 3, p. 249). New York: Doubleday.

²⁰ New American Standard Bible: 1995 update. (1995). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.