

The Temple of God

By Cornelius R. Stam

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Let us imagine that we are out for an auto ride on a pleasant afternoon, pausing now and then to look at interesting things along the way.

As we ride on, one sight comes into view which, for its sheer magnificence, brings us to a stop. There, on a green slope stands a majestic temple, resplendent in its gold and silver and marble. Getting out of the car we stand and gaze at it. See those massive foundations! Those mighty pillars! Those priceless stained glass windows! Those great spires reaching up into the sky!

Awed, we go inside to view a sight even more amazing. With what exquisite beauty all this has been designed! How practically it has been planned! How solidly constructed! No price has been spared to make it positively breath-taking.

Overcome with the splendor and glory, we finally leave the wondrous sight and begin moving on again.

Scarcely have we started, though, before an unsightly structure meets our eyes; a conglomeration of ells, lean-tos and other additions to what appears to have been the original building, all constructed from the cheapest materials. Everything about it is in disorder. The crooked windows and doors, the broken shutters, the odd varieties of paint—and lack of paint. As we look at the ugly spectacle we exclaim: “Who built *that!*” We *know* nobody *planned* it. It is an outrage, we agree, that this eye-sore should be allowed to disgrace the magnificent edifice just next to it.

These two structures are a two-fold illustration of the Church: the Church as it is in the purpose and sight of God, and the Church as it appears, visibly, on earth.

By the visible Church we do not now refer to the *professing* Church, merely, but to the body of true believers¹ *as it appears on earth*. In *both* cases, then we refer to the *true* Church, but in the former we view it in its glorious perfection in the purpose of God, while in the latter we view it in its imperfect condition on earth. In the former we view it as the structure which *God* is erecting; in the latter as that which, under God, *man* is building.

THE TEMPLE PERFECT

It is evident that in writing about the Church, in the early chapters of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul views it as the work of God.

¹ “Church,” Gr., *Ekklesia* means simply “called out” and when used of believers, refers to the called out assembly of God’s people.

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It is composed of members no longer “far off” from God and His people; no longer “strangers and foreigners” but “fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (2:19) indeed, “one new man,” “one body” with all saints of this dispensation (2:15, 16; 3:6).

But believers of this dispensation are viewed not only as an *assembly* (1:22) a *commonwealth* (2:19) a *household* (2:19) and a *body* (2:16) but also as a *temple*, and “*habitation of God, through the Spirit*” (2:21, 22).

This temple, really the temple proper, as we shall see, is built, not upon the apostles and prophets, or any of them (as Rome teaches²) but upon “the foundation of [i.e., “laid by”] the apostles and prophets,” Jesus Christ Himself being also “the chief corner stone” (Eph. 2:20).

So this temple has a firm foundation. Let the “rains descend”; let the “floods come”; let the “winds blow and beat upon” that temple—it will *never* fail. (Ctr. Matt. 7:26, 27).

Further, this “whole building” is “*fitly framed together.*” Each piece is exactly where it belongs and fits perfectly into the building as a whole. Indeed, the words “fitly framed together” in Eph. 2:21 are, in Eph. 4:16, used of the parts of the *body*, and are rendered: “*fitly joined together.*”

How often believers ask why *they* cannot sing or preach; why *they* have not been blessed with health, wealth or education; why *they* have not been placed in more advantageous circumstances or more strategic positions in the Church of Christ. But wait, Christian friend, when the building is completed you will see that the Lord placed you in exactly the right spot to best glorify His work and Himself.

Next we learn that this building “grows” (2:21). This is the correct rendering of the original Greek word, for the same word is used of the growth of the *body* in 4:16.³

Undoubtedly there is an allusion here to the temple which Solomon built for the Lord, which seemed to those who viewed its construction, to grow like a thing alive, for

“...the house, when it was in building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither: so that there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house, while it was in building” (I Kings 6:7).

Thus the true Church *grows*. The “living stones” of which it is comprised are added, not by noisy organizational machinery or dramatic demonstration, but by the quiet working of the Holy Spirit.

² At Matt. 16:18 the *Doway-Rheims* Version says in a footnote about Peter, that he was to be “a rock indeed...for the support of the building of the church...next to Christ Himself...Peter is here declared to be the rock upon which the church was to be built.”

But in this *same* version of the Roman Catholic Bible we find this false doctrine refuted, not by a human opinion, in a footnote, but by the Word of God itself, in I Cor. 3:11 “*For other foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid; which is Christ Jesus.*” This is conclusive. There can be *no* other foundation “next to Christ Himself.”

³ Though, oddly, our translators rendered it “maketh increase” there.

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The account of the building of Solomon's temple points also to the infinite cost at which the true temple is being built. It has amused us to see how some commentators have added up the cost of the Old Testament temple and have concluded that there must be some mistake, since it could not possibly have cost so much. But the fabulous cost of the Old Testament temple, with its almost unbelievable riches, both hidden and visible, is still but a small token of the infinite cost of the *true* temple: the agony and shame, the tears and blood of the Creator Himself—God the Son (2:13, 16, 21).

And now the apostle goes on to say of this temple:

**“In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit”
(Ver. 22).**

We do not believe that the “ye” here refers merely to a local group⁴ but rather to all the members of the Body of Christ.

THE TEMPLE PROPER

We have never been able to view the Church of Old Testament times as one house, built, as it were, in one place, and the Church of today (“which is His Body”) as another house, built separately in another place altogether.

We believe there is unity and continuity in God's plans; that He has always had His Church (*ekklesia*, “called out” assembly); that He has been building one great structure down through the ages—into which *we* have now also been built.

The Old Testament temple itself might well symbolize this. There were many parts to this great temple, the most sacred of which was the Holiest Place, the inner sanctuary, the temple proper, where the covenant of the law was buried in a coffin⁵ and God occupied the blood-sprinkled “mercy seat” (Ex. 25:10, 16, 21, 22).

We believe this sacred precinct is the part of the temple which symbolizes the Church of this present dispensation, for it, when writing of us as individual believers, the Apostle Paul, by inspiration, brings us into the very presence of God (Eph. 1:3; 2:6) is it not logical to conclude that when he describes us collectively, as having been built into the temple of God, we should be that part of the temple in which God resides?

Certainly it was not until this present dispensation that the Holiest was opened, for, writing to the Hebrew believers about the former dispensation, the apostle states emphatically that the fact that the Holiest on earth was not open to all, was symbolic:

⁴ There is considerable evidence that this letter was an *encyclical* letter. The oldest MSS, for example do not contain the words: “which are at Ephesus” in 1:1, and this epistle is, of all Paul's epistles, most general in character.

⁵ The term “ark of the covenant” means little to the average reader, but when we consider that the word “ark,” in this term, is translated “*coffin*” in Gen. 50:26, the phrase takes on the deepest significance and affords the only explanation of God's mercy to Israel.

“The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the [true] Holiest of all was NOT yet made manifest...” (Heb. 9:8).

But now we have

“boldness to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus,”

“By a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh” (Heb. 10:19, 20).

Similarly, viewing God’s people historically as His *temple*, the Church of this dispensation of grace is that part where God Himself may be found, occupying a throne of grace.

While it is true that this temple is not yet complete, it should be observed that the apostle, by inspiration, makes it clear that the position and privileges represented are already ours.

Already we may rejoice that the law is in a coffin (now actually, rather than typically) and that God deals with us in grace through the blood that was shed at Calvary (Eph. 1:7; 2:8). Already, “now,” we are “*made nigh by the blood of Christ*” (2:13). Already we have been made to “*sit together in heavenly places⁶ in Christ Jesus*” (2:16). Already we are “*blessed...with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*” (1:3). Already we are built into His temple as “*an habitation of God through the Spirit*” (2:22).

But now let us consider the *visible* Church, this temple of God as men, under God, are building it.

“GOD’S BUILDING”

In his letters to the Corinthians the apostle also refers to the Church as a temple,⁷ but here, instead of representing it as “growing” supernaturally, he depicts it as the product, under God, of the efforts and testimonies of believers. *Men* are called the builders.

“*We* are laborers together with God,” he says; “*Ye* are God’s building” (I Cor. 3:9). And then he proceeds to caution those of the “*ye*” who would—and all *should*—join the “*we*” as builders (Ver. 10).

⁶ Gr., *epouranios*, the upper heavenlies.

⁷ In I Cor. 6:19, 20, he refers to the body of the individual believer as a “temple,” to be wholly consecrated to God, but in this article we confine ourselves to the Church, collectively, as the temple of God.

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And what shall we say of the condition of God's temple as thus viewed? Is it "fitly framed together"? Is it comparable to the magnificent temple of our original illustrations? Is it not rather like the dilapidated conglomeration next door? Look at it! The "one body" of true believers separated into discordant divisions and rival sects! Hear them insist that they are Calvinists, Arminians, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, Roman Catholics.⁸

WHY SO IMPERFECTLY CONSTRUCTED

But what is back of this division and confusion? Why have God's builders failed to erect a more harmonious structure? Without hesitation we reply that it is basically because they have rebelled against the apostleship of Paul, for it is precisely in connection with the construction of the temple of God in this dispensation, that Paul, by the inspiration of the Spirit, stresses his apostolic authority.

By the grace of God, he declares, he was chosen to be a "wise masterbuilder," a well-instructed foreman⁹ (I Cor. 3:10). As the plans and specifications for the erection of the tabernacle of old were committed to Moses (Heb. 8:5) so the plans and specifications for the erection of God's spiritual habitation today were committed to *Paul* (I Cor. 3:9-17; Eph. 3:1-11; etc.).

Looking at it historically, he goes on to say:

"I HAVE LAID THE FOUNDATION" (3:10).

Do not these words themselves indicate that a new dispensation began with Paul? Otherwise in what sense did he lay a foundation? Surely he does not mean, merely, that he had laid the foundation for the Corinthian church. The Corinthian church was not the only local assembly built upon the foundation which he laid. The grace of God had *in fact* made him the "masterbuilder" of the Church of this dispensation and it was his to lay the foundation upon which *it* was to be built.

Thus Paul's words in I Cor. 3 are not merely his words to the Corinthian believers, but God's Word to us, regarding the apostolic authority of Paul.

But does not the apostle himself proceed to declare that "*other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ*"? (Ver. 11). And had not this foundation already been laid? Had not our Lord responded to Peter's recognition of His Messiahship with the words: "*Upon this rock I will build My Church*"? (Matt. 16:13-18).

Ah, here is where the beauty of the Spirit's design appears in an additional proof that a new dispensation had now begun with Paul!

⁸ This is not to say that all who belong to these groups are true believers, but that true believers are to be found among them all, comparatively few people possessing a very thorough understanding of what their denominations really stand for.

⁹ The Greek *architekton* is not exactly synonymous with our word *architect*.

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It is true that Paul in his ministry built, like Peter, upon Jesus Christ. No house built on any other foundation could possibly stand. This is one reason why Paul urges the utmost care in building. “Take heed,” he says, “For you are building upon Jesus Christ Himself” (See Vers. 10, 11).

But Paul was not building the same structure upon Jesus Christ as Peter had done. Peter and his comrades had been building the *Messianic Church*, with the earthly kingdom in view (Acts 3:19-21, etc.). Paul later began to build “the Church which is His body,” with its position and blessings in the heavenlies (Eph. 1:3, 22, 23, etc.).

Nor, in their building, did they recognize Christ *in the same way*. Peter had built upon Him as “the Christ [the Messiah] the Son of the living God.” This is how He was to be recognized at that time, as shown, not only in the synoptic “gospels” but even in that according to John.

Nathaniel confessed: “*Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel*” (John 1:49). Peter said, on another occasion: “*We believe and are sure Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (John 6:69). Martha added her testimony: “*I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world*” (John 11:27). And to these testimonies we should add those found in 4:42; 7:26, 31, 41; 9:22; 10:24; 12:13, 15; 18:33, 37; 19:19; all in John’s “Gospel.” Indeed, John himself testifies that Jesus had wrought “many other signs,” not recorded in his “Gospel,” but that “*these are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name*” (20:31).¹⁰

Surely all this is conclusive as to the manner in which our Lord is presented, not only in the Synoptics, but in John’s Gospel, and it is *not* the manner in which Paul presents Him. Paul says concerning “*the word of faith, which we preach*”:

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus AS LORD, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom. 10:9, R. V.).

Peter presented Christ as the divine Messiah, Israel’s King, and the Messianic Church was to be—and will be—built “upon this Rock.” Paul proclaimed Christ as the glorified *Lord* in heaven, and the dispenser of grace to a lost world, and the Church of today is to be built “upon this foundation.”

Thus, as we have said, another part is being built into the great Temple which God has been erecting down through the ages—also founded upon Christ, but upon Christ as the One who, through the shedding of His blood, has brought us into the very presence of God.

It is with this in view that the apostle exhorts:

“I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. BUT LET EVERY MAN TAKE HEED HOW HE BUILDETH THEREUPON” (I Cor. 3:10).

¹⁰ See the author’s booklet: *The Writings of John*, for a fuller discussion of this subject.

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It is because the builders have rebelled against Paul's God-given authority; because they have ignored the plans and specifications given through him; because they have failed to "take heed *how*" to build, that "temple of God" stands before the world marred and disfigured.

They have failed to note that it is not Peter nor John nor the twelve, but Paul alone who says: "*I speak to you Gentiles*"; "*I am the apostle of the Gentiles*"; *I am the masterbuilder*"; "*I have laid the foundation.*"

They have taken Petrine material and have built it upon a Pauline foundation. They talk about "building the kingdom," and strive vainly to carry out the so-called "great commission." They have taken baptism, tongues, healings and signs of the times from another dispensation and have brought them into the dispensation of the grace of God, until believers are "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine."¹¹

They have turned a deaf ear to the apostle's teachings about the believer's supernatural baptism into the death of Christ on the cross, and how this spells death, not only to the law (Rom. 7:4, 6; Col. 2:12, 14) but also to the flesh (Rom. 6:1-3) and to the world (Gal. 6:14) and as a result of their failure the Church has become proud and carnal and worldly.¹²

They boast about the "growth" of the Church (in numbers) while false cults and all sorts of sinister movement keep gaining headway, and the crime rate keeps rising steadily; the Church too weak and sick and divided to do much about it.

Are we too hard on our popular leaders? Who, then, is to blame for the deplorable state of the Church? *They* have, under God, been the builders. Shall we say the devil is too strong? Shall we say the Word and the Spirit have no power? No, the Spirit will use the Word—and only the Word—to strike down every foe when it is rightly divided and sincerely taught, for the Word is still "the *sword* of the Spirit." But the majority of our popular leaders, reluctant to give up their financial gain, their positions and *themselves*, have set their *wills* against truths which have by now been confirmed by overwhelming Scriptural evidence.

How long will they resist the Spirit and the truth? We plead with any who have not yet gone too far, to heed the apostle's solemn warning to give careful attention to their *workmanship* in building the temple of God; to build upon the Pauline foundation the truths of the Pauline revelation; to proclaim God's message and program for *today*, as Paul received it by revelation from the glorified Lord (Rom. 16:25; Gal. 1:11, 12; Eph. 3:1-3; etc.).

"Take heed *how* you build," says the apostle, for "every man's *work* shall be made manifest...and the fire shall try every man's *work*, of what sort it is. If any man's *work* abide...he shall receive a reward. If any man's *work* shall be burned, he shall suffer loss" (I Cor. 3:10-15).

¹¹ See the author's booklet: *Paul the Masterbuilder*, for a more comprehensive discussion of this subject.

¹² It is an interesting fact that the Apostle Paul has more to say about godly living than any writer in the Bible.

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The recurrence of the word “*work*,” in this passage, associated as it is with such words as “*build*,” “*how*” and “*sort*,” emphasize the fact that we are to give an account before the judgment seat of Christ, not only for our conduct but for our *service* as believers, indeed for the *character* of our service, for our *workmanship* as builders of the temple of God.

How many of God’s builders there are whose work does not “abide” even now. How, then, will it abide the fire of that day when the divine Building Inspector exposes it as “wood, hay and stubble,” rather than “gold, silver and precious stones”?

Thank God, through His grace not one who stands before that *bema* shall be lost, but many a builder will see his *service*, his *work*, go up in flames, unworthy of divine recognition, while “he himself shall be saved” only “as by fire.”

The “temple of God” in this dispensation may either be beautified and glorified by building strictly according to the plans and specifications found in the epistles of Paul, the “masterbuilder,” or marred by failure to follow these instructions. This is God’s Word about it, and to those who minimize what God here emphasizes, the apostle exclaims:

“Mar the temple of God and God will mar you!” (Ver. 17)¹³

WILLINGNESS TO LEARN

One essential quality of any successful builder is a willingness to *learn*. He cannot stubbornly hold to preconceived notions and insist upon doing things in the way *he* has always done them. There may be methods which, though new to him, are better than his own.

This is even more so with God’s builders. In the erection of His holy Temple, it is the greatest folly to place the will of man above the Word of God, or to substitute human imagination for divine revelation.

The Corinthians had boastfully taken sides with Paul, with Apollos and with Cephas, as though these were rivals for their allegiance (I Cor. 1:12; 3:21-22). But “No,” says Paul, “It is not a question of personalities, but of a *message*, a revelation of grace, given to me for you by the glorified Lord Himself.” Thus he closes his exhortation to his puffed-up brethren with these words:

“Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, LET HIM BECOME A FOOL THAT HE MAY BE WISE” (Cor. 3:18).

We must begin by acknowledging our ignorance, ready and willing to learn from Him.

“FOR THE WISDOM OF THIS WORLD IS FOOLISHNESS WITH GOD. FOR IT IS WRITTEN, HE TAKETH THE WISE IN THEIR OWN CRAFTINESS” (Ver. 19).

¹³ The words “defile” and “destroy” are the same in the original, better rendered “mar.”

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There is the divine alternative: Possess the single desire to know *the truth* and make it known, and be rewarded, or tamper with the Word of God and burn your fingers. Earnestly desire to learn more fully, so as to build more intelligently, and be approved, or be self-willed and self-wise and see your work for the Lord go up in flames, disapproved *by Him*.

How appropriate, then, are the words of Paul's exhortation to Timothy:

**“STUDY TO SHOW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT
NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH”
(II Tim. 2:15).**