

"Y'all Are God's Temple"

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¹⁰According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

¹⁶Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

¹⁸Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

²¹So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, ²³and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.
(1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23)

In our highly individualized culture, we are likely to hear the claim "you are God's temple" as a call to personal self-improvement. You are God's temple, so you really should quit smoking. You are God's temple, so cut out the trans fats and eat more whole grains. You are God's temple, so get off the couch and onto the treadmill.

This is not bad advice, but it is not what Paul is trying to say here. We know that Paul is not addressing these words to individuals, because all of his pronouns are plural. The *you's* are actually *y'all's*. According to Paul, God's Spirit chooses to dwell not just in the individual soul, but in the community of the church. According to Paul, being God's temple is not something we can do by ourselves. According to Paul, only a "we" can be God's temple.

For this reason, the metaphor of a construction project is well chosen. When Paul compares the church to "God's building," Paul knows that building a church, just like building a house, is a team activity. Proper construction requires skilled contributions from all kinds of people -- environmental engineers, architects, grading contractors, paving companies, brick masons, carpenters, roofers, plumbers and electricians. Even when all the necessary players are involved, plans can still go awry. If everyone isn't careful, if each contributor does not do his or her job well, the building could end up with corners that are not quite square, walls that are not quite plumb, wires that do not quite connect, or pipes that do not quite drain.

If quality and attention to detail is important for a normal building, Paul suggests, then it is even more critical for the construction of God's house. It all begins with the foundation, and as Paul consistently does, he lays that foundation on the only base strong enough to stand the test of time. "No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid," Paul proclaims, "[and] that foundation is Jesus Christ" (3:11). That is the foundation upon which Paul has labored with all the grace and skill that God had given him, and he calls upon each laborer who would come after him, every person whom God has called or will call into Christ's church, to do the same. "Each builder must choose with care how to build on [this foundation]," Paul warns, for the integrity of the structure relies on each person doing the best that he or she can do for God and the group.

Near the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea, nestled among the rocky and sunbaked hills of central Israel, sit the ruins of the ancient city of Qumran. It is here that the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered by a young Bedouin shepherd boy in the 1940s, and it is also

believed to have been the home of an ascetic community of Essenes around the time of Christ. The settlement was the closest thing that Judaism had to a monastery, which meant that the people of Qumran took their faith very, very seriously.

Today, all that remains of this once-vibrant community are the foundations. The buildings themselves are gone, but the footings -- most of which are only a few feet high -- still tell a story of the faithful people who lived there. Walking through the ruins of the library, one can easily imagine the extensive shelves housing scrolls of nearly every book of the Hebrew Bible. Inkwells and remnants of writing benches found within those foundations recall the community's steady emphasis on diligent study and reflection on God's Word. A few steps farther, the footings of the dining hall mark the room where the whole community ate together as one family. Over 1,000 vessels -- 708 cups, 210 plates, 108 bowls -- have been found there. Closer to the sea, one can still descend the steps into a large basin, the place where ritual cleansings were performed. Holiness was expected of everyone, and rules of purity were strictly enforced. These were people who shared everything: meals, study, work, worship, devotion, property, joys and sorrows. Because the entire community was God's building, each person knew that he or she must labor together to build themselves into the purest, best, most giving congregation they could be.

This common purpose is obvious in one of the most important documents discovered at Qumran, which has been aptly named the "Community Rule." It was a comprehensive code of conduct for the community, a solemn covenant that the people made with God and each other that they would be God's temple together. After a catalog of the shared responsibilities of membership in the group, the rule summarized the purpose of these expectations:

The Congregation should pursue these "ways in the world for the enlightenment of the heart of man": "a spirit of humility, patience, abundant charity, unending goodness, understanding and intelligence, [a spirit of] mighty wisdom which trusts in all the deeds of God and leans on His great loving-kindness; a spirit of discernment in every purpose, of zeal for just laws, of holy intent with steadfastness of heart, of great charity ... of admirable purity ... of humble conduct ... These are the counsels of the spirit to the sons of truth in this world...

*And when these are in Israel, the ... Community shall be established in truth. It shall be an Everlasting Plantation, a House of Holiness... an Assembly of Supreme Holiness... a Most Holy Dwelling... a House of Perfection and Truth."*¹

There is great resonance between the call to purity in Qumran and the call to faithfulness in Paul's letters. For Paul, faith is never to be a selfish thing, a self-focused thing. The mind of faith is always set on God and other people. The traits valued in the Community Rule are the same as the ones valued in Paul's communities: humility, patience, goodness, understanding, intelligence, trust, steadfastness of heart, great charity, admirable purity and humble conduct. If our goal is to cooperate with God in the Everlasting Plantation God is building, the House of Holiness God wants us to be, then Paul says we must be very careful about what we are building, not just for ourselves, but for the church that will come after us.

As people who are trying to build on the faithful foundation of Christ, to preserve for this generation and pass on to the next one a church that continues to rest on firm footings, we have to be careful about our building in two ways. First, we have to be careful not to put too much faith in ourselves. If we think our contributions are more important than those of others, if we

¹ "The Community Rule (1QS)," *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, ed. G. Vermes, Baltimore: Penguin Books, (1995), pp.80-1.

dismiss the value that other people with other types of gifts bring to worship, mission or ministry, then we are not acting with the humility, charity and trust that Paul is seeking. To paraphrase the apostle, the moment we think that we are wise, that we have all the answers, we should get a little nervous about how much spotlight we are grabbing for ourselves. "You should become fools," Paul says, "so that you may become wise."

But we must also guard against the opposite error, and that is not putting enough faith in ourselves. Pretty much every week, I hear people describe how unqualified they think they are for ministry. "I am just not comfortable praying in front of others," they say. "I think Sunday school is important, but I just don't know enough about the Bible to teach." "I know that stewardship is important, but I am very uncomfortable talking with people about their money." I have said it before and I will say it again. God made you the way you are for a reason. God gave you certain gifts and passions and abilities, and God expects you to use them for good.

When we lived in Wilmington, I made a small stone patio outside of our back door, something just big enough to hold a small table and a few chairs. I dug out the area, filled it with sand, and then started to lay the various paving stones in place. They were of many different colors -- some darker and some lighter -- and they were in all kinds of shapes -- some big and thick, others smaller and thinner. Because they were irregular, getting them to fit together was like working a big puzzle. I tried all kinds of configurations. Finally, after much trial and error, I found a way to fit them all together. In the end, those pieces that seemed the oddest -- the ones that I wondered how in the world I would ever be able to use -- were the ones that fit perfectly into the gaps. They were the stones that made the whole project come together. If you have ever worried that you just don't fit in, if you are struggling to see how God can use your particular set of gifts in the construction of God's temple, then let me just encourage you to keep looking, to keep trying to find your place, because God really does have a plan just for you in this divine project called the church.

The congregation I served in Rocky Mount loves to tell the story of Lib Dove, a Sunday school teacher who had a great gift for music and a wonderful way with children. She taught in the 1960's, a time when downtown Rocky Mount was changing along with the rest of America. The church had outgrown its walls, and something had to be done about the building. One group in the congregation had wanted to move the church to the outskirts of town, closer to the neighborhoods where most of the members lived. To the congregation's credit, that effort was defeated. The vote was close, but the congregation recommitted itself to being a downtown church, to living out its faith in a neighborhood where the living stones were not all the same color and not all the same shape. The majority understood that faith can never be a selfish thing, that the mind of faith is always set on God and other people.

Because the church had decided to stay, plans were quickly drawn for a new addition to the church. It would house new offices, classrooms, gathering spaces and even a gym. Lib Dove, being the great Sunday school teacher that she was, wanted to get the children involved. Putting her best musical skills to work, she wrote a song for the children to sing. The title was "O We're Going to Build a Church." During Bible School that summer, she asked the children to bring in their pennies and nickels to contribute toward the building campaign. By the end of the week, they had amassed maybe three or four dollars. And then, on the Friday that ended Bible school, the children lined up outside of church with the change they had collected. With their teachers leading the way, they marched in procession down Church Street to the brick yard at the other end of town, singing their new song all the way... "O We're Going to Build a Church!" At the brick yard, each child traded their little bits of change for a single, red brick. And then they marched right back down to the church, each carrying a building block, once

again singing all the way... "O We're Going to Build a Church, brick by brick." Back at the church, a mason was now waiting for the procession to return. He stood at a corner of the new foundation of the addition. Still moving in turn, each child handed his or her brick to the mason, who carefully spread it with mortar and set it securely in place in the new foundation. And now the entire church, who had gathered for their return, was now singing in one voice "O We're Going to Build a Church, brick by brick, hand by hand."

"Do you not know," Paul says, "that y'all are God's temple?" This thing we are doing -- this community that God is building with us and through us -- is work that cannot be done unless it is shared. With humility, patience, charity and trust, each of us must choose with care how we will build upon the foundation laid by Christ. With the innocence and faith of a little child, may we all bring the gifts that we can bring, and lay our own contribution upon the Christ the firm foundation, saying together "O We're Going to Build a Church, brick by brick, hand by hand."

Amen.