

God's Fifth Temple: Church

Introduction

It is impossible to over-estimate the importance of the Temple in Jerusalem to the Jews.¹ It was the centre of their religious system, and the centre of their identity as God's people. It was the place that God had chosen to be present with his chosen people,² and was the centre of their sacrificial system.

St Paul was a Jew, so it is not surprising that he used Temple imagery in his writing. Temple imagery was useful both to Jews and gentiles. The essence of a Temple, in both Jewish and pagan thought, was that was where the presence of a deity was manifest. To enter a Temple was to enter into the presence of the deity.



Jesus the Temple gives his Spirit to us

We have seen how Jesus referred to himself as the ultimate Temple - the place where God could be found and where God and man can be reconciled. Paul also speaks of the church as the Temple of God. These two are closely related, Christ and his Church. Because Christ is the ultimate

¹ For this study we have generously used Julian Spriggs, *The Temple as a Symbol of the Church* <http://www.julianspriggs.com/Pages/ChurchAsTemple.aspx> (accessed 6 June 2015)

² Deuteronomy 12:5

Temple, the Church is also a Temple.³ And by giving the Spirit that made Jesus into the Temple of God to his followers, Jesus made them into a Temple, together with Him. The promise of the Spirit to come to His Temple, came true in Christ, and through Him, also in his church. NT Wright says,

The Pentecost-scene in Acts 2 takes the long awaited place of a second-Temple scene in which Israel's God comes back at last to live with and among his people.⁴

That was quite unexpected! Israel expected a majestic manifestation of God, returning to his Temple in Jerusalem. Instead, He came in Jesus as the crucified Lord. And he came to dwell in his church:

The Living God, who had said he would put his name in the great House in Jerusalem, has put that name upon and within [these] little surprised communities, dotted about the world of the north-eastern Mediterranean. Unless we are shocked by this, we have not seen the point.⁵



³ Compare the proximity of Christ and the Church in the comparison of the Church with the body of Christ: The Church is called “one body in Christ” in Romans 12:5, “one body” in 1 Corinthians 10:17, “the body of Christ” in 1 Corinthians 12:27 and Ephesians 4:12, and “the body” in Hebrews 13:3. The Church is clearly equated with “the body” of Christ in Ephesians 5:23 and Colossians 1:24.

⁴ NT Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, p. 356

⁵ NT Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, p. 355

Greek vocabulary: Hieron and Naos

There are two different Greek words for Temple. Although there was not much distinction between them in secular Greek writing, in both the Greek Septuagint and the New Testament they had distinctly different meanings.

The first word for Temple is *hieron*, which is used to refer to the whole Temple complex in Jerusalem, including all the extensive outer courtyards and precincts. In the New Testament *hieron* always refers to the stone Temple in Jerusalem.

The second word for Temple is *naos*, which is the Greek word for a shrine or sanctuary, including a pagan shrine, where the gods were thought to dwell. In the New Testament it is used to describe the special place of God's dwelling, the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple.⁶ In his speech in Athens Paul also used *naos* for pagan shrines.⁷ This is also the word Jesus used to describe his own physical body,⁸ and it is used many times in Revelation to describe the heavenly Temple, the place of God's glorious presence.

Hints in the Old Testament

Israel is never directly described as God's Temple in the old Testament, but there are hints about the nation itself being seen as a Temple. During the exodus, God dwelled in the tabernacle which was set up in the midst of his people, who camped around it in their different tribes, so

⁶ eg. Mt 27:5

⁷ Acts 17:24

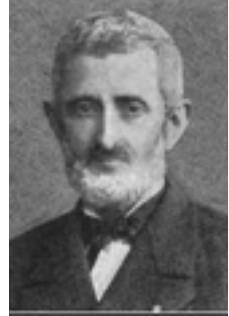
⁸ John 2:21

the presence of God was literally in the midst of his people.⁹ The Psalmist described Judah as becoming God's sanctuary:

When Israel went out from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
Judah became his sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.¹⁰

This concept of the people of Israel collectively being a Temple of God, was also mentioned in by the Jewish Rabbi Elijah (Eliyahu) Benamozeg, who said,

The universe, mankind, the nation, and [individual] man are in reality so many stages through which the Holy reveals Itself and in which It dwells. Consequently, it is reasonable to see in these stages so many parts of the Temple of God.¹¹



Even in the time of Jesus, Philo and the Essenes, for instance, spoke of the nation of Israel, or of their own community, as a 'house of God'. The Essenes considered themselves an imitation of the Temple in Jerusalem.¹² It was therefore not hard for Jews in the first century, to understand why Paul considered the Church a Temple.

Given the importance of the Temple in Jerusalem and the different movements that saw themselves as alternatives to this Temple, it is obvious that Paul purposely presented the church as an alternative to the

⁹ Numbers 2

¹⁰ Psalm 114:1-2

¹¹ From a description of the view of Elijah (Eliyahu) Benamozegh, 1822 -1900, an Italian Orthodox Rabbi, Kabbalist, on <http://www.saieditor.com/stars/zegh.html> (accessed 19 April 2015)

¹² Yulin Liu, *Temple Purity in 1-2 Corinthians* (Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2.Reihe, 2013) p. 117



Temple. NT Wright says that ‘the earliest *ekklesia* understood itself as, in a sense, a counter-Temple movement.’¹³

A few times, Paul speaks explicitly about the church as a Temple. We now look at these three occurrences.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17

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.

When addressing issues of disunity in the church, because there were different factions favoring different apostles,¹⁴ Paul challenges the Corinthian believers in their understanding of the nature of the church. He asks, ‘Do you not know that you are God’s Temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?’ Note that the ‘you’ is plural, referring to the people corporately, rather than individually. This means, the community of the church is a Temple. It is the presence of the Spirit of God in the church that gives them their identity as God’s one people.

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul had underlined how important it is for leaders in the church to work for the wellbeing of the Temple, and for members of the church to see those leaders in that light. He was addressing their preference for Apollos, and explaining the function of the two servants, himself and Apollos. Both were described as servants who were together constructing God’s building. Paul laid the foundation by being the first to preach the Gospel in Corinth and establishing the church there (3:10). Now others were building on that foundation, these being Apol-

¹³ NT Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, p. 355

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:10-13

los, the other apostles, and the Corinthian church themselves. Paul warns that those who build on the foundation must take care how they build on that foundation, which is Jesus Christ, because the quality of the building will be disclosed by fire on the day of judgement (3:12-15).

The church is God's holy Temple, therefore the church should be treated with the same respect that the Jews had for their Temple in Jerusalem, and that pagans had for the Temple of their favorite deity. The church has been sanctified by God, as his holy dwelling place.¹⁵

2 Cor 6:16-7:1

What agreement has the Temple of God with idols? For we are the Temple of the living God; as God said,

“I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.
Therefore go out from their
midst,
and be separate from them,
says the Lord,
and touch no unclean thing;
then I will welcome you,
and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be sons and
daughters to me,
says the Lord Almighty.”

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.



¹⁵Julian Spriggs, *The Temple as a Symbol of the Church*
<http://www.julianspriggs.com/Pages/ChurchAsTemple.aspx> (accessed 6 June 2015)

Note first, that the quote of God speaking, is a combination of words from different books of the old Testament. And that Jewish listeners would hear in these words references to God's covenant with Israel and Temple-language. Without blinking an eye, St Paul applies this to the church of Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus in Corinth.

Here, Paul is arguing that as the church is God's Temple, the believers should not have spiritual fellowship with unbelievers in their Temple-meals, otherwise they will be defiled. The Temple of God should be a holy place. Although this passage is frequently used to teach that believers should not marry or have romantic relationships with unbelievers, the original context is the church as a whole, calling the church to



be distinct from the world and not to compromise with the worship of idols. Being a Temple of God must lead to living a holy life together as a community.

The church as a Temple has a sacred meal, just as the idols in their Temples have sacred meals. The sanctity of the Christian eucharist is undermined when believers participate in the meals that are offered in the Temples of the idols.

Ephesians 2:17-21

[Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy Temple in the Lord.

Keyword in this passage is the togetherness in the Temple. Paul describes how the enmity between Jew and Gentile has been broken down by Jesus, to create a new humanity in himself.¹⁶ There is now peace between the previously hostile groups. Paul says that he has 'broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us.'¹⁷

This is undoubtedly an allusion to the wall in the Temple beyond which no Gentile could pass. Gentiles were permitted to enter the Court of the Gentiles, so they could listen to the teaching of the rabbis and hear the worship of Yahweh. Surrounding the central sanctuary was a low wall. Beside the gates in this wall was the following inscription, written in Greek and Latin:

¹⁶ Ephesians 2:15

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:14

No gentile may enter within the railing around the sanctuary and within the enclosure. Whosoever should be caught will render himself liable to the death penalty which will inevitably follow.

This wall became a symbol of the deep division between Jew and Gentile in the first century which has been torn down in Christ, so both Jew and Gentile can now enter the presence of God in Christ, and become one new community. Paul describes this community as a living structure which grows into a holy Temple (sanctuary), which is the dwelling place for God.

In this passage, Paul is using the same Temple imagery that he used to describe the Corinthian church, but here he is applying it to the entire world-wide church. The church is a living community, which continues to grow and develop, but it is a community where God's Spirit dwells, making it a holy and sanctified Temple. This new community transcends all divisions between peoples, whether of status, culture or gender.

The 'growing together' is important for this Temple to become a better Temple. It needs to grow, and it needs to do this together. This is not possible without Christ being the cornerstone and without an apostolic ('New Testament') and prophetic ('Old Testament) foundation.

The people



The Roman Catholic Pope Francis, when speaking of the church as the Temple of God, said:

If we ask ourselves, "Where we can meet God? Where can we enter into communion with Him through Christ? Where can we find the light of the Holy Spirit to enlighten our lives?" the answer is, "in the People of God, among us, for we are

Church – among us, within the People of God, in the Church – there we shall meet Jesus, we shall meet the Holy Spirit, we shall meet the Father.¹⁸

This is an important emphasis we must take at heart. In all talk about the Church as the Temple of God, we do not speak of the church *building* but about the community of people.

Mankind, as the pinnacle of Creation was intended to be the Temple of God; Thanks to Jesus Christ, the leader of the new mankind, we as church are now God's Temple. We are the place where God can be found, and in this context it is good to remind us of the ancient Christian maxim, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church no salvation).

Conclusions

On the day of Pentecost, in Acts 2, Jesus gives his Spirit to the community of his followers, thus constituting them into being a Temple of God. This is direct fulfillment of the promises in the Hebrew Scriptures that God was to come for being with his people.

The Temple of God should be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. These are all-important ingredients for the church as the Temple of God. The leaders in church should build the congregation with a focus on these creedal marks.

The church is not the building; the church-building is not a Temple; the community of believers constitutes the Temple. This does not militate against institutes, as the community of believers needs regulations etc, but it does create a set of priorities. Church life is about people.

¹⁸ Pope Francis' catechesis at his Wednesday audience (6/26/13)

It is important for us to grasp the idea that the church is the holy Temple of God, his dwelling place on earth, and treat it with awesome respect. The church should be a radical community of people amongst whom the presence of the Spirit is real, which attracts people to forsake the pagan world to find the genuine presence of God.



The community of believers is the place where people find the genuine presence of God; it is the place where God is praised, and where people are reconciled with God.