

## **Sermon: Temple of the Holy Spirit (Church)**

### **1 Corinthians 3:1-22**

*Rev Dr Jos Strengholt*

Yesterday evening we heard that another Sudanese woman, Rebecca, died of the burn wounds after a gas-explosion two weeks ago. She was the fifth person to die.

Yesterday we also buried the body of Ikhlas, the wife of Rev Hassan. She had been too badly burned.

We live in the hope of resurrection and so Rev Hassan and his children are comforted that God takes care of Ikhlas.

Our bodies are important for God - they are his temple. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within in", we saw last week.

#### **1 Church as temple of Spirit**

We looked at 1 Cor 6, where Paul addresses individual believers in Jesus Christ and he tells us that we, each of us, are a temple of the Holy Spirit. He is around you, even in you, to guide, to bless, to comfort.

Do you (singular, you personally) not know that you are a temple of the holy spirit who lives in you.

Today, in 1 Cor 3, we see the same words - you are a temple of the Holy Spirit, but these words are now addressed to the church as a whole - the community of Christians. You (plural) are, together, the holy temple of God's Spirit.

We can never think of the Holy Spirit without thinking of the Church, because in the church, he is at work.

Some people treat church as if it is a bag full of marbles. Each of us is a marble, and one day a week the marbles are together, and after an hour, we all go our own way. The church is just a gathering of like-minded people, each individually a temple of the Spirit, each individually relating to God, each individually reading his or her Bible. And to get encouraged to do this, we meet once a week.

The Apostle Paul presents a very different picture of church and of you and I.

It is better to compare us with the lights in the christmas tree. Each little light can say, I give light. But that is only because each light is part of the whole string of lights. Without being part

of that, each light is nothing. Only by being part of the whole string, that is connected with the power-source, do those little light shine.

And the branches of a tree can proudly say, I am a tree. But no branch is a tree when cut off from the source. Connected the branches have the precious saps of the tree, but cut off from the trunk, the branches are nothing and die.

Yes, we are each individually a temple of God's Spirit - but this is because we are part of the one temple of God. The norm is the community. God is a community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and he creates community, the church. And he links his name with that community and that is where he can be found.

Any talk about the work of the Holy Spirit that is separated from his work in the community of the church, gravitates to individualism and to a distorted view of how God and man relate.

Even the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as we read about them later in the same letter of Paul, are first and foremost for building up this community of believers.

Our creed is divided in three parts; it is about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And then, in the end, we read a line that says, I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. It is not a coincidence that this follows immediately after we express our faith in the Holy Spirit.

Because the church is the main work of the Spirit, and if you desire to intimately relate to God through his Spirit, it cannot be done without the church.

The church, let me underline it, is not the building. It is the community of the believers in Jesus Christ.

In our community the Spirit of God can be found. That is where God wants to be found; it is His choice.

We call the church apostolic - because it is built on the labour and the faith of our apostles. The apostle Paul writes that the foundation of the church is Jesus Christ. Where He is, you find the Spirit.

And the church is called holy. Because it is made holy by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It is called catholic. This word means, it is not a sect in one place or another, but it is God's community worldwide. In other words, it is ecumenical. That word originally means, world wide.

And the church is one. The Holy Spirit has decided to be found in the one worldwide church that builds on Jesus Christ and that is sanctified by Him.

Now that sounds wonderful... but rather idealistic!

Because look around - The church is in fact divided, as it struggles to define the faith. It seems less than holy. We've messed up so royally. Is it not logical to search for God in an individualistic way?

Not at all. Because God is committed to his church. Even to a sinful, broken church. Because ultimately, it is His church. His temple.

## **2 Curse of division**

The church in Corinth that Paul is writing to, is called a holy Temple of the Spirit. And they were not spiritual at all, just babies in Christ. Immature believers. Not what you call the perfect community of believers at all.

Paul blames the Corinthian church for their factionalism, their jealousy and envy. The root of the problem was, people thought: I am more important than others; my opinions are more important than those of others.

This individualism introduces division into the fellowship of the Church. And with this individualism we damage the temple of God.

We quench the work of the Holy Spirit whose main work is to bring love, peace and joy in our midst. The very badge of the Church is love for others. Love is about others, not about myself. Love is about community, togetherness.

By individualism and factionalism we split up the Church and reduce it to a series of disconnected ruins. No building can stand firm and stable if sections of it are removed.

The major reason for the division in Corinth was that people had their pet leaders. Some liked Paul a lot, others Apollos, or other leaders in the churches. A problem we are very aware of in our days.

Many churches are popularly known by the name of their pastor, and we go to this or that church because he is so good, better than the priest or pastor elsewhere.

Paul points out that he and Apollos are merely hired hands on someone else's farm. Leaders in church can only do so much, but it is God who gives the growth. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst that creates growth and blessing.

The man who plants and the man who waters are on one level; neither can claim any precedence over the other; they are but servants working together for the one Master—God. In Corinth they had forgotten all his. They were fighting, arguing.

But still... Paul calls the community of such people - because they believe in Jesus Christ - a Holy Temple of the Spirit. Paul begins the chapter we read by addressing those quarrelsome people in the church as brothers (and today he would also add, sisters).

Maybe they were sensual and not spiritual enough but they had received the Spirit of God by believing in the message of the church - the message about Jesus Christ.

With pentecost God had given his Spirit to the church, so by being part of the church, and by having the faith of the church, we enjoy the same benefits.

And even today, the Holy Spirit is in the midst of us, even in the midst of our rather ruinous temple

### **3 Together building the temple**

What must we do in order to enjoy the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst more?

The core of our church-life, must be Jesus Christ himself. We align ourselves with Jesus Christ, the foundation of the Church. That makes us Christians. So to be a Christian without the church and outside the church is a contradiction in terms.

Here in the community, is the place where God can be found, because the foundation is Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit moves in the church.

And we have to be frank. The church worldwide is a mess, as we have allowed ourselves to be divided from many brothers and sisters by our ungodly divisions.

I think it is really important for us to recognize that all churches that preach the same faith of Jesus Christ, as expressed in the creed that we recite each week....are valid expressions of the body of Christ. They are also part of that Temple of the Spirit.

In those other churches the Holy Spirit is also at work. I know this may be hard to accept when we look at denominations that are so different from ours.

And it may be mentally easier to simply write all others off, so that we do not have to take those others seriously. And it may also make it easier to live with divisions. The others are simply not good, so why care about them?

But we should never allow the pain of our divisions to be softened by these mental tricks. We are not better than others; and the Holy Spirit has not limited his presence and his work to our church only.

If God is pleased to be present in other churches; if people come to faith in Jesus Christ elsewhere, then we can only conclude that our divisions make us collectively guilty before God. We limit the work of the Holy Spirit by our lack of unity and love.

## **Conclusion**

What to do? What can you do?

First, do not look down on other denominations and their believers but express your faith in the Holy Spirit who also made those other churches his temple - because he is wherever Jesus Christ is believed and obeyed.

And do remind your church leaders to never be content by just looking at their own flock. They must take concrete steps to show respect for and a basic unity with other churches.

This week I was so busy with the victims of the fire our Sudanese community suffered from. I was struck by the medical ministry of the Coptic Orthodox church of Ard el-Golf, nearby, on the other side of Uruba Street.

Without any questions of denominationalism, they very kindly served some of our victims with medical help and money. As did Heliopolis Community Church, and many people from many different churches here in Egypt and worldwide.

Dr Manal and her team of the church of Ard el-Golf went to the Zahraa Hospital of al-Azhar, you know, one of those places with many bearded muslims.

One of our victims, Rebecca, was there. Dr Manal prayed with and counseled Rebecca as far as that was possible. One of the doctors with a beard saw it and asked them to also pray with some other patients. He said, we must not only look at the body but people need healing inside.

And he said that the hospital is always open for these Christians to minister to the people.

Now this service of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Ard el-Gulf with unity and love shows the presence of the Holy Spirit and invites Him to work.

That is how we serve our Lord Jesus Christ. That is how we build up our church. That is how we make the presence of the Spirit tangible in his temple, the church. By acting in love as a community.

If this is how we build up our own church, surely we will experience more of the presence of the Holy Spirit, of God with us. And the world will see it.

**Amen**

