

EPH 2.20-22: THE CHURCH IS THE TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Chelmsford 25 May 2008

Ephesus was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

It was in Ephesus that the great temple of Diana was to be found. The Greeks had a saying: ‘*The sun sees nothing finer in his course than Diana’s (Artemis’) temple*’. 435’ long by 220’ wide by 60’ high, it was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. Colossal in size, it could accommodate up to 56,000 worshippers at one time. Only the central shrine was roofed - the outer parts were made up of lovely colonnades & porticoes. Within the colonnades were 117 pillars, each of them the gift of a king. The columns themselves were made of glittering Parian marble. It must have been a wonderful sight.

So too was *the temple in Jerusalem a wonderful sight*. Although not one of the official wonders of the world, it was a vast and stupendous complex.

It covered 35 acres – i.e. it could have accommodated twelve football fields.

The blocks of stone used in its constructions were enormous – Josephus reports that some of the stones were 60 feet in length.

The Royal Portico was 45 feet wide and consisted of 3 aisles supported by 4 rows of columns. These columns, which rose to a height of 45 feet, were so thick that it took 3 men with outstretched arms touching one another to envelope just one column.

The outer walls of the temple were covered with plates of gold. To quote Josephus: “*At the first rising of the sun, they reflected back a very fiery splendour and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun’s own rays*”

This is the context in which Paul writes to the Ephesians: “**You too, are being built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself. He is the one who holds the building together and makes it grow into a sacred temple, dedicated to the Lord. In union with him you too are being built together with all the others into a place where God lives through his Spirit**” (Eph 2.20-22). The church, says Paul, is a temple.

And what’s more, it’s a temple which makes the temple in Ephesus or the temple in Jerusalem, or indeed temples anywhere else, pale into insignificance.

For the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit – it is the place where God dwells – and what could be more glorious than that?

There is nothing more wonderful in this world than the church of God. Yes, I know that there are times when the church fails to live up to its calling. But instead of knocking the church and exposing its faults, let’s become the church and be the kind of people God intends us to be.

That’s the essence of my message – but let’s look in greater detail at what Paul has to say about the church.

1. THE CHURCH IS PEOPLE

“You... are being built into ... a sacred temple” (vv21.22)

God is in the construction business – but the materials he deals with are people, not marble, brick, or wood. God is in the business of building a people for himself. And in this business people matter more than things, buildings are always secondary.

Don't get me wrong. I don't believe that church buildings are unimportant. I believe it was right for us to spend almost £2 million on redeveloping our premises. We have become far more effective in our mission as a church precisely because of our building.

But buildings are always secondary. You can have the grandest of buildings, but without a living church, those buildings are just a white elephant.

The church is people. For that reason in the past Baptists never used to speak of their buildings as churches. They first spoke of their buildings as *'meeting houses'*. Later they spoke of them as *'chapels'* – yes, even the largest of Nonconformist buildings were called chapels. Take Westminster Chapel in Central London – that building seats over 2000 people.

Alas, today we have become sloppy in our use of language, with the result that all too often we speak of the church as a building.

But in New Testament terms, the church is people

So Paul writes here: **“You are being built into a sacred temple”**

- Similarly in 1 Cor 3.16 he writes: **“Surely you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you”**
- He takes up the same imagery in 2 Cor 6.16: **“We are the temple of the living God! As God himself has said, ‘I will make my home with my people and live among them; I will be their God, and they shall be my people’”**
- Temple imagery is also applied to the church in 1 Pet 2.5: **“Come as living stones, and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple, where you will serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ”**

The church is people. In the words of one American (John Havlik): *“The church is never a place but always a people; never a fold but always a flock; never a sacred building but always a believing assembly. The church is you who pray, not where you pray. A structure of brick or marble can no more be a church than your clothes of serge or satin can be you”*

Furthermore, the glory of the church, in human terms, is its people.

True, its people are far from perfect. There are times when I am tempted to put up a notice outside our church building: *“This church is for sinners only”*. The church is made up of people who recognise that they have failed God and failed one another. And yet, the glory of the church is its people, in that God's people, through their very diversity, bear witness to the transforming power of Christ.

Look at the opening words of our text: **“You TOO are being built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and the prophets”**.

Paul is here referring to the miracle of God having brought Jews and Gentiles together. So he writes in v18: **“It is through Christ that all of us, Jews and Gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father”**.

The glory of the church is its diversity.

Or to be particular, the glory of our church is our diversity.

I am delighted that our church is made up of people from different backgrounds, different ages, different races and cultures. That is the way church should be. No church should be made up of one kind of people – but rather every church should be made up of all kinds of people. I long to see our church become even more diverse. I long to see our church become even more international in character.

For the greater our diversity, the more glorious is our unity. The glory of the church is that **“there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; we (lit: you) are all one in union with Christ Jesus”** (Gal 3.28).

2. THE CHURCH IS BUILT UPON JESUS

Listen to Paul: **“You too are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself”** (v20). I.e. Jesus and the teaching about Jesus should be at the heart of the life of any group of people who called themselves a church.

The church is more than people – it is made up of people who are building their lives upon Jesus and his Word.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke of there being two kinds of builders – those who build their lives on him and his teaching, and those who don't. **“Anyone who hears these words of mine and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain poured down, the rivers overflowed, and the wind blew hard against that house. But it did not fall, because it was built on rock. BUT any one who hears these words of mine and does not obey them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain poured down, the rivers overflowed, the wind blew hard against that house, and it fell. And what a terrible fall that was”** (Matt 7.24-27).

Children love this story – but it is far more than a story.

It is a dreadful warning of the peril of not building our lives upon Jesus.

Not to build our lives on Jesus is to head for certain disaster.

And what is true of individuals, is true of churches too

But let's look more closely at what Paul had to say.

In the first place, he speaks of the church being **“built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets”** – literally, as the footnote in the GNB makes clear: **“built upon the foundation, that is, the apostles and prophets”**.

Who are these apostles and prophets?

“The apostles” are in the first place the 12 apostles, the 12 men who had been with Jesus **“from the time when John had preached his message of baptism until the day Jesus was taken up into heaven”** (Acts 1.21-22).

Above all these 12 were “**witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus**”. True, one of the original 12 was not – but Judas was replaced by Matthias, who had also been with Jesus and who had also been a witness to the resurrection.

The church is built upon the testimony of these apostles – the Gospels, which enshrine that testimony, are fundamental to the understanding and shaping of the church in general, and of our church in particular.

But the church is not just built upon the apostles – it is also built upon “**the prophets**”. Who were these prophets? Some have suggested that we have here a reference to the Old Testament prophets, men like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel.

If they be the prophets Paul has in mind, then we can say that the church is built upon the Old Testament and the teachings of the prophets as found in the Old Testament, as also upon the New Testament and the teachings of the apostles as found in the New Testament.

However, the word-order suggests that the prophets came after the apostles: Paul does not say that the church is built upon the prophets and the apostles, but upon the apostles and the prophets.

Prophets were not just found in OT times – they were also found in the early church. So Paul writes in Eph 4.11 that when Christ gave gifts, “**he appointed some to be apostles, others to be prophets**”. Prophets were teachers specially inspired by God to expound the significance of Jesus. Their teaching was foundational to the life of the church.

Whether or not Paul was an apostle or a prophet is a moot point – as a result of his encounter with the Risen Christ he undoubtedly saw himself as an apostle, but his letters indicate that he was a “prophet” too.

Yes, the church is built upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets – teaching which was later collected to form what we now call the New Testament.

In the building of any church, as indeed the building of any Christian, the teaching of Scripture has a vital role to play. Churches and indeed individuals stand or fall by their loyalty to the teaching of Scripture.

But the church is not just founded upon the apostles and prophets.

The “**corner stone**” is “**Christ Jesus himself**”.

Interestingly, the word translated “**corner stone**” was also used for the “*cap stone*” of a building which as the so-called ‘crowning stone’ held the building together. There has been a good deal of scholarly discussion as to what Paul actually had in mind.

Whether it be “**foundation stone**” or “*cap stone*”, the implication is clear: Jesus is absolutely key to the building of his church.

The church is built upon Christ, supported by Christ, and the shape of the Christian community is determined by Christ.

Remove Jesus from his church and the whole building collapses.

Jesus is absolutely central to Christian believing and Christian living.

It all sounds so obvious. Alas, there have been churches which have lost their Christian foundation. They have looked for truth within themselves or within other people.

Jesus is but one teacher amongst many. Jesus is but one way to God amongst many.

The fact, however, is that Jesus is central to Christian believing.

Unfortunately the GNB fails to bring out a significance nuance in the text: for literally Paul says *Jesus, and Jesus alone* (*autos*), is **the cornerstone**.

My prayer is that Jesus and Jesus alone will always be “**cornerstone**” of our church. Yes, we are a Baptist church – but first and foremost we are a Christian church. We are not in the business of making Baptists, but of making disciples of Jesus. We want to build on Jesus, and on him alone.

3. THE CHURCH IS WHERE THE SPIRIT IS ACTIVE

“In union with him (Jesus) you too are being built together with all the others into a place where God lives through his Spirit” (v22).

Even in OT times the Jews realised that you couldn’t limit God to a building. When Solomon built the temple he prayed to God: **“But can you, O God, really live on earth? Not even all heaven is large enough to hold you, so how can this Temple that I have built be large enough”** (1 Kings 8.27).

Not even the largest and grandest of buildings can ever contain God.

The fact is that God is everywhere. There is no such place as a ‘godless’ place.

As the Psalmist put it: **“Where could I go to escape from you? Where could I get away from your presence?”** (Ps 139.9). The answer is nowhere: **“even the darkness is not dark for you, and the night is as bright as the day”** (Ps 139.12).

However, it is when God’s people gather together in the name of Jesus that God is present in a special way through his Spirit. Jesus said: **“Where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them”** (Matt 18.20).

Jesus through his Spirit is present with us this morning.

He wants us this morning to experience his presence, his power, his direction.

But the question is: will we?

My mind goes to a verse in Hebs 11.6 where the author states: **“Whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those who seek to him”**.

Similarly God says through the prophet Jeremiah: **“When you search for me, you will find me; IF you seek me with all your heart”** (Jer 29.13 NRSV).

To experience the Spirit’s presence amongst us, we need to be expectant.

God through his Spirit is here – but sometimes we need to open our eyes and ears to his presence. Let me ask you:

- When you heard the Scriptures read this morning, did you expect to hear God to speak – or did you just hear ... read the passage from the Bible? There are times when frankly I don’t need a sermon – God has already spoken to me through the reading of his Word. Incidentally I find it much easier to hear God speak, when I am following the reading in my own Bible – I also find it much easier to remember what he has said, because I have marked the word or phrase which jumped out for me.
- When you hear me preach, do you come expecting to hear God speak, or do you come expecting to hear just a sermon? There is a difference: I find that if I come expecting to hear God through a sermon, then time and again I discover fresh insight or direction for living. The sermon may have been poorly constructed, may have

had all kinds of defects, but for the person who comes believing that God wants to use the preacher, God does use the preacher.

- What is true of the Scriptures and of the sermon can be true also of the worship. If we come wanting to be uplifted by the organ or by the worship band, we will be disappointed. But if we come wanting to give of ourselves in worship to the living God, time and again we will encounter him.

The early church father Origen once said: “*We are most of all God’s temple, when we prepare ourselves to receive the Holy Spirit*”. Question: do we prepare ourselves to receive the Holy Spirit.

God by his Spirit is present within our worship.

But God by his Spirit is also present within our fellowship. God by his Spirit is present making us one – enabling us to overcome the differences which are between us.

Let’s not knock the church – but rather let’s respect the church.

Let’s build one another up – and in this way build up the church

Let’s recognise and celebrate the work which the Spirit is doing amongst us.

My mind goes to some words of Paul found later in this letter: “**Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you. And do not make God’s Holy Spirit sad**” (Eph 4.29,30).

In the way in which we relate to one another after this morning’s service, let’s bring joy to the Spirit – instead of just talking to people like us, let’s ensure that we speak to people who are not like us. The fact is that churches need to grow and develop.

Let’s go back to our text: Jesus, says Paul, “**is the one who holds the building together and makes it grow into a sacred temple**”. There is a mixing of metaphors here – buildings don’t normally grow. However, the point Paul is making is that the church is still a building under construction – we as a church are still in the process of becoming a temple of the Holy Spirit. And we can play our part in this building process, by ensuring that our church is a church where people of all kinds are not just welcome, but actually belong.

Let’s ensure that our church is indeed “**a place where God lives through his Spirit**”.

[Yes, God by his Spirit is also present when we come together in church meeting – for in our church meetings we gather together in the name of Jesus, do we not. Question: is the church meeting a place where we expect to hear God speak – or is it simply a place where we do our church business?

When we make our decisions at church meeting, are we conscious that we are discerning God’s will or we simply wanting to express our personal preferences? Interestingly, Paul on one occasion, when talking about the church meeting wrote: “As you meet together... the power of the Lord Jesus is present” (1 Cor 5.4). For Paul the church meeting was a deeply spiritual experience – it was a place where God through his Spirit made himself known].