

The Church - the holy Temple of God (2)

1 Corinthians 3: 16 and 17: *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.*

When Paul calls the church God's temple, he reminds us of the exciting truth that his Church is where God lives amongst his people, that the church is indwelt by the Spirit of God and that God's church is the body of Christ. This means that the congregation is holy, set apart, reserved for God and his use - sacred in God's service. It isn't a building or a place that is holy. It is a people, a congregation of believers, that is holy. *"You yourselves are God's temple and ... God's temple is sacred."*

A warning follows this truth.

Paul says, *"If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him."* Destroying or wounding the body of Christ is a serious offence in both the Old and New Testaments. God does not tolerate the destruction or wounding of his holy temple. In the Old Testament the penalty for defiling the sanctuary was either death (Lev 15:31) or excommunication (Numbers 19:20). God is no less jealous of his spiritual temple, than he was of the sanctuary built with wood and stone in the Old Testament.

Paul says, *"If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him."* This is a twofold promise: a promise to punish those who damage the church and a glorious promise to safeguard his church.

The temple of God can be wounded and destroyed from without and within.

From without we think of persecution, of attacks against the people of God. Think of Pharaoh. It was his intention to wound or even destroy the people of God. He turned them into slaves. He killed their baby boys.

Think of the Pharisees and how bitterly they attacked the Christ and his church. After the Ascension the apostles and followers of Jesus were persecuted and killed and during the first 350 years of the existence of the church more members were martyred than those who were not.

*We bear the torch that flaming
Fell from the hands of those,
Who gave their lives proclaiming
That Jesus died and rose.
Ours is the same commission,
The same glad message ours,
Fired by the same ambition,
To God we yield our power.*

*O Father who sustained them,
O Spirit who inspired,
Saviour, whose love constrained them,
To toil with zeal untired.
From cowardice defend us,
From apathy awake!
Forth on Your errands send us
To labour for Your sake.*

But, the church is not only attacked from without, but also from within. This is where Paul wants us to focus our attention. There are so many ways that those within the church can wound and destroy the Body. All that we have to do is look at the church in Corinth. She was being destroyed and wounded from within by divisions, by fights, quarrels, spiritual pride, unfaithfulness, impurity, neglect of duty, being followers of men, rather than followers of Jesus, teaching what people want to hear, rather than the inspired Word, and many other evil ways.

Imagine that we had a wedding, with a bleeding, wounded bride. What a mess. The families were seated. The groom and his friends were in their places. I was waiting at the front, Bible in hand. The bridesmaids and flower girl had come down the aisle. René began to play the wedding march on the organ, and everyone stood. We could not believe our eyes. The bride came limping down the aisle. Her dress was ripped and covered with mud. One eye was purple and swollen. Her hair was a mess. She had been fighting with her sisters and brothers again. We all thought to ourselves, "Doesn't the groom deserve better than this?"

This didn't really happen, of course. It is only a parable of what happens when Christ's bride, the church, has quarrels and divisions. A church divided brings shame upon the Lord. A church divided, wounds and destroys the Body.

God always protects and preserves his church from those who attack her, whether from within or without. God does not tolerate her destruction.

Instead, by God's grace and power, we are to build her up. We can live at peace, instead of having fights and quarrels with fellow Christians. We can walk by the Spirit instead of falling from sin into heresy. We can study the Word. By God's grace and power, we may add to the glory of God's church through missions, evangelism, and witnessing. By sticking together, believing and serving.

*The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation by water and the Word;
From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride,
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life - He died.*