

The Living Temple

Eph. 2: 17-22, Heb. 10: 24-25

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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We're beginning a mini-series on what Scripture says about Christ's people, the church. I'd like to start by showing you something you have accomplished. We've had a mission campaign called *Building Up*. The goal was to raise significant funds for building needs of four key mission partners. You responded with abundant generosity. Now look what you've done! We've just authorized funds to be sent to Brian Miller's church in Medellin, Columbia in order to pay for the house they bought.



This house is in a prime location, very near the central business district where good, legitimate jobs can be had. The young pregnant women rescued off the streets will soon have a place to live with their children and a house parent as they find work and rebuild their lives, no longer on the discard pile of humanity.

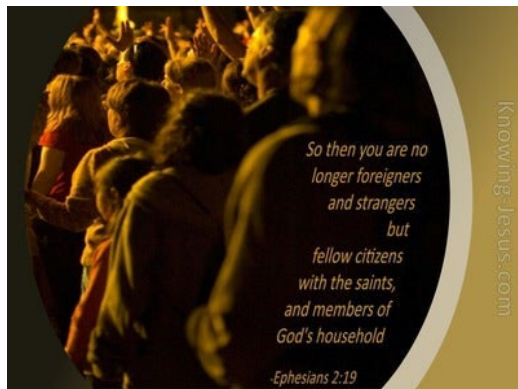
There's a lot of work to be done on the house, but our gift has made its purchase possible

and will in time also pay for much of the renovations. The body of Christ is connected throughout the world. Our church to their church, we're partnering in ministry to people in desperate circumstances. I'm so proud of what you've already made possible and all that is to come!



That seems to me a good place to start as we explore what Scripture teaches about the importance of the particular, local church which gathers in person week by week. In our passage from Ephesians, we note that Paul was writing to a small community of Christians from very different religious backgrounds and ethnicities. Jesus proclaimed peace with God to those who were near and those who were far. So, this new little church included the "near" people, those who had for generations been part of the LORD's covenant people, the Jews. It also included

lots of “far” people, those formerly pagans, languishing under the anxiety and high demands of capricious, selfish gods. They thrilled to meet the Lord Jesus who cared for them enough to have shed his blood on their behalf. The great news of the gospel is that it didn’t matter if your people had known about the LORD I Am for centuries, or just learned about him in the last month. Once in Christ, every baptized believer shared a magnificent identity. Let’s look at 3 images Paul shows.



1) *“So, then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.”* Paul makes a strong identity statement. You were this. Strangers and aliens to God and his people. Now you are citizens. Full participating members in Jesus Christ and his family, the church. You’ve moved households. You’ve got new genetics. A new bloodline. A

new set of customs. New responsibilities. New house rules for how to get along. Once you were a foreigner to a relationship with the true God. Now you are an insider. Once the things of God were strange to you. Now they are your hearts home.

We scarcely realize what a dramatic shift it was for the early believers to transfer into Christ. Becoming part of the household of God made them strangers to the majority culture and customs in which they had grown up. They didn’t move geographically to another country. They moved spiritually from the kingdom of the world to the kingdom of God. And that made them fish out of water in the city around them. But home and welcome in Christ’s embrace.



Baptism has always been the sign of entry into the household of God, the citizens of the heavenly city. In baptism, the new believer declares before the assembled church, “I am with Jesus.” And the assembly of the church declares back, “This person is with Jesus.” In the case of infant baptism, the same identity marker is being given. Speaking on behalf of my

child, I’m declaring, “This little girl is with Jesus.” And the church replies, “Your little girl is with Jesus. And we are together in him.” So, I’m going to tell that identity to her every day and night until the time comes that she takes at her own.

In Christ, my primary identity switches from trying to be at home in the world. Now I realize I am a citizen of God's realm. I'm now an ambassador from God's country to the world that is without Christ and his salvation. There's nothing more wonderful than finding the deepest meaning of your life in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness of sin. Companionship. Peace. No fear of death. Gifts beyond price. But we also need full disclosure here. If you are in Christ, you are no longer at home in this world. You're an alien. An exile passing through. A pilgrim seeking a higher country. But with an edge. My task now is to spend my days showing what the household of God looks like. So that. So that the lost and broken will want to come home to Christ also. I'm an ambassador. And also, a missionary. God doesn't want people to stay where they are. My king sends me to gather others from citizenship in the dark world to the light of his grace. Isn't it great how beautifully our connection to the church in Columbia exhibits this!

It's not hard, then, to see why being a member of Christ and his church is different than any other membership. I may be a member of the City Club, but it's not my essential identity. I may be a member of a sports team, but it's not the country of my deepest citizenship. I may be a partner in a practice but that's not my true homeland. Baptized *into* Christ, he makes a radical identity claim upon me. He says, in effect, "You are in me. You are a citizen of my country. Your allegiance is to me, first of all and into eternity."



2) So Paul goes on to tell the Ephesian church that they are "*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.*" Paul started with the picture of a household--the children, parents, servants, workers, grandparents-- in one

family living together. Now he switches to the *structure* in which this multi-generational family lives. The spiritual house is built on a foundation in which Jesus is the starting block, the stone which bears the weight of the whole structure. His prophets and apostles received the Scriptures and wrote them down. The Word of God written builds on Jesus the Word of God enfleshed. That's why we revere the Scriptures so highly. God's Word brings us into contact with the living God. What it teaches gives structure and direction to our life and mission together. Individual believers are built into that house as the Spirit joins us together upon

that base. In England, carpenters are called *joiners* and I think that's so appropriate for us. We get joined to Jesus by his Spirit through faith. That means we are framed into the house that is the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. We're nailed into connection to every other believer.



3) Then Paul switches pictures again. This household that has a foundation in Christ and his Word has a particular purpose. This spiritual house that is the church “*grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In [Christ], you are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*” The Ephesians understood about temples. They were everywhere in that city. A temple was where a god lived. If you wanted to meet the god, you had to go to the

temple and offer whatever sacrifices or rituals were required. The church is a temple. Christ Jesus dwells not just in individual believers but in the midst of his interconnected, framed together, people who gather to offer the sacrifice of praise.



Those who knew the Hebrew Scriptures would have realized Paul was showing them a golden thread of God's everlasting promise. Once, in Eden, God dwelt with the humanity he had created. Our sin got us exiled from Eden and we've been longing for God to dwell with us again. That's the promise we keep encountering in the Word. The LORD says, “I will make my dwelling among them, and I will be their God and they shall be my

people” (e.g., Lev. 26:12, Jer. 31: 33, Rev. 21: 3). From Genesis to Revelation God makes this promise. He intends to dwell again in our midst. And it begins with the church. When we gather, the Spirit constructs a living temple. Christ Jesus by his Spirit is in our midst. The church gathered in worship becomes the premier place where people meet the Triune God.

In other words, every time we gather, the Spirit forms us into a temple in which God makes himself known and present. Note this. It's not just individual spirituality. It's communal. Together we form the house for the household of God. We are fitted into the temple where God shows up. He offers us the sacrifice of his blood to atone for our sins and give us everlasting life. In grateful reply, we make

our sacrifice of praise. Not just as isolated individuals working out personal spirituality. That's a pagan idea. This is the interconnected people of God gathered in worship. Perhaps we can illustrate this.

The computer game, *Minecraft*, was invented by Swedish programmer Markus Persson, aka "Notch," in 2009. Players are able to "mine" blocks on the screen from which they can construct an entire world. Take a look at this video of how one player created a self-building house coming together. [Play: https://youtu.be/k_j_2b4XF2M, minute: 1:47 to 2:18]. Did you notice how a foundation was laid beneath ground level and then the blocks cascaded over it as the structure rose? As all the blocks gathered they tumbled into place as a unique, attracting, harmonious building. Watch it one more time imagining that this is the church coming together on Sunday for worship. [Play video again]. Even the speed with which the structure comes together is significant. The Holy Spirit quickly assembles the building blocks of the living temple, each one of us, as we gather, rise, sing, open our hearts and let out our voices. So wonderful.



Now, let's see how our passage from Hebrews factors into that. "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another..." Notice how the emphasis is not on what I come to *get* from worship. The emphasis is on what I *bring* to gathered worship. That changes everything.

As a mere consumer, worship might be one option on a Sunday among many individual choices I could make to suit my desires. I could come worship Jesus in community. Or I could go get coffee. Or sit by myself with my computer. Or head for the beach or the woods. Or get a head start on the work that awaits me next week. Those might all satisfy me in the moment. They are all good things to do. But what happens when I stay away? *I do not bring anything to others.* The living temple that is built lacks some blocks that would have enhanced it when I stay apart. It doesn't look like what it could look like. There are gaps in the cascade of those blocks building the house when I stay away.

By contrast, Hebrews calls me to do two things: to encourage others by showing up and stir up others to love and good works. I can't encourage anyone if I'm not with anyone. We are very tempted to think, "Well, they don't really need me. They'll be fine if I don't show up." But that would be false. I'm a living stone

in a living temple. The structure rises higher when we all get built into gathered worship. At the very least, there is someone here for me to smile at. There's a hand for me to shake. There's a candy I can give a child so she can make it through the sermon. There's someone who will see me, week by week, and come to count on me. There's the witness I bear, just by showing up, that I am a citizen of heaven. And there's a lot more our presence creates. We know what it takes to get a party started. So we come early enough to make it feel to visitors that it matters to be here. We come early enough to greet people we know and to introduce ourselves to people we don't know. We stay long enough to speak to people. And if we do that week by week consistently, I guarantee significant conversations will open up. Opportunities for life exchange will present themselves.

We took vows when we joined the church. The same as baptism vows. In essence we said, "I'm with Jesus." And the congregation replied, "This one is with Jesus." And we agreed to worship and serve Jesus in community. We are citizens of heaven, members of the household of God. It's our deepest identity. We are a living temple. We are called to one another because we belong to one another. The ordinary people sitting in this room with you are extraordinary. They have been redeemed by the Lamb of God. They are fellow saints. And they need our love, encouragement and presence. We gather live to be formed as a living temple in which the weary find encouragement, the weak find strength, the anxious peace and the lost come home. It matters that you are here! Every week!