

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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The Perfect Church

1 Corinthians 3:5-17

When life in a congregation gets confusing and chaotic, we sometimes think, "If we could just go back to being like the early church. If our life together could more closely resemble those first-century gatherings of Jesus' followers." I suppose that kind of attraction is understandable. We're often prone to picture those first communities of believers as pristine and ideal, uncorrupted by issues and circumstances that would arise as time went on, the church expanded, and Christian living got more complicated.

But one look at the New Testament will caution us against that approach. When I say a look, I mean a close look. Not just a surface attempt to note an idea or to touch upon a doctrine. No, I mean really zooming in and digging deep into the people, places, and problems that fill the pages of our Scriptures.

Today's text from 1 Corinthians is a good example. Paul corresponded extensively with this community of believers. In fact, we're probably better informed about the fellowship in Corinth than any other first-century church. We get a more precise sense of the events and issues, the problems and personalities, that shaped this congregation's life and Paul's pastoral guidance.

A close look reveals that this community of Christians is far from ideal. True, Paul opens his letter by giving thanks for the Corinthians. He's grateful for the many manifestations of God's grace that are evident in the congregation. When it comes to gifts of the Spirit, the Corinthians are richly blessed. These gifts are part of God's provision for their mission while they wait for the final judgment. For now, they must rely on the faithfulness of God. "He will keep you strong to the end," says Paul, "so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:8).

Blameless in the future, but certainly not blameless now. I say that because Paul moves quickly from commending the Corinthians for their spiritual giftedness to condemning them for their internal strife. After giving thanks for them, Paul immediately starts appealing for their unity. Paul writes, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1:10). The word translated as "united" has to do with restoring something to a prior condition. In other words, the putting in order of something that has fallen into disarray. Apparently, when Paul left the Corinthian congregation, things were in a relatively harmonious condition. Things certainly weren't perfect, but they were a lot better than present circumstances. Now quarrels are splitting the church. So Paul spends most of the first four chapters of this letter calling, in one way or another, for unity.

In today's text, Paul's appeal for harmony takes the form of a metaphor about the church as God's building. Paul uses this image as a way of stressing the importance of constructing the church with integrity. He's the one who laid the foundation by preaching Jesus Christ crucified. Now those who are building on that foundation need to do so in a way that's in keeping with the original message. Otherwise the building will be unstable. On the day of

judgment, God will examine their work and expose its quality. As for now, the fractures in the Corinthian fellowship raise serious questions about whether its leaders are building with integrity.

Pastor William Self tells about a time when he and his wife were in London for a conference on preaching. They were walking near Buckingham Palace when they noticed a church. Actually, it was the shell of a church building, currently being rebuilt. There was nothing standing but the four walls. No doors, no windows, no pews. There was scaffolding on the inside of the walls, and a group of workers taking a break for lunch. Around the church was a chain link fence with barbed wire on the top. Near the opening that served as a door, a large sign was posted that read: "Danger! Enter at your own risk." As Self points out, though that sign was designed to help protect the public from construction accidents, it was also a reminder of how messy and harmful life can get in the fellowship of the church.¹

But just because life in the church can get messy, as it did in Corinth, doesn't mean that God isn't present and working to accomplish his saving purposes. Though the Corinthians aren't living up to their identity as God's people, they're still God's people. Paul has to remind them of that. And one of the ways he does so is by taking the image of a building and developing it even further. He tells the Corinthians something that they've apparently been taught before, namely, that they're not just any building but in fact the temple of God. "Don't you know that you're God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (v. 16). Note that the "you" in this verse is plural, not singular. At another point, a few chapters later (6:19), Paul speaks of the individual as the dwelling place of the Spirit. But here in our text, he's talking about the Spirit dwelling in the gathered community, the church.

There were many pagan temples in the city of Corinth. But Paul probably doesn't have these in mind. Rather, he's thinking of the temple at Jerusalem, where the Spirit of the God of Israel was believed to dwell. The Jerusalem temple was the place where praise and worship were rightly offered up to God, the place where, in a sense, heaven and earth met. So what a remarkable thing Paul is declaring when he says that the church, the gathered community of those who are in Christ, is the place where God resides, the place where heaven and earth meet. In other words, the Spirit, the personal presence of God, has taken up residence in the fellowship of believers.

This may seem like a very strange and surprising way for God to be present in the world. After all, every local assembly of Christians, like the church as a whole, is deeply broken and messy. The ideal church is still just that—an ideal. Whether you're looking in ancient Corinth or contemporary Bryans Road, you won't find a flawless fellowship. Rather, what you'll find are local gatherings of redeemed sinners, struggling to cultivate unity and embody holiness.

Carmen Renee Berry wrote a book titled *The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church*. It was inspired, she says, "by her odyssey from the deeply conservative church of her childhood into the world of seekers and cynics, and back again."² Berry says that she withdrew from the church primarily because of her disappointment with church members who failed to act as Christians. But strangely enough, that's also what drew her back to the church. She writes:

I had overlooked one essential factor—that I am as finite and flawed as everyone else When a friend committed suicide, I realized I could become too cynical, too lost, and too alone. I needed a church, a community of believers. I needed to live in my faith and visit my doubts. Something happens there that simply doesn't when you are alone in prayer or on the Internet. As much as I hate to admit it, my faith is enhanced and enlarged when in relationship to other less-than-perfect human beings.³

Less-than-perfect human beings make for a less-than-perfect church. And within the one church, all we have are less-than-perfect congregations. Whatever different communities of Christians may agree or disagree on, this much we all have in common—our imperfection.

The story is told of a man who was stranded on a deserted Pacific island. Finally one day a boat came sailing into view. The man waved to draw the boat's attention and it came to the island. When the sailor got out of the boat, he asked the stranded man, "What are those three huts you have here?" "Well, that's my house there." said the man. "What's the next hut?" asked the sailor. "I built that hut to be my church." "What about the other hut?" asked the sailor. The man said, "Oh, that's where I used to go to church."

It's hard to give up searching for the perfect church. In one sense, it does exist, in our minds and dreams. But the reality is that none of us ever finds or experiences 100 percent of what we want or hope for in a church. One pastor tells about how, after he retired from ministry, he and his wife began searching for a church home. They sometimes felt like Goldilocks at the bears' residence. One church would have good preaching but not so great music, while another church would have good music but not great preaching. Eventually this uncertain and somewhat unhappy time in their lives lead them back to a truth that he states this way: "There is no perfect congregation, just the ones we've got, full of imperfect people that God loves and calls to be the church. And we knew ourselves well enough to realize that if we ever found the perfect church, as soon as we joined it, it wouldn't be perfect anymore."⁴

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" Not, "Once you get your act together and become the perfect church, then God's Spirit will come to dwell in you." No, God chooses to take up residence, and to work in and through, imperfect people in imperfect congregations. And in the process, the Spirit works in and among us to do the perfecting. We still live toward the day when we, as Christ's church, are to be blameless at the final reckoning. That requires being changed, which requires God moving into our midst with his holiness, and making us more holy.

"God's temple is sacred" says Paul. "And you are that temple" (v. 17b). That's why holiness, transformation into the likeness of Christ, is such a serious matter. We may not be perfect, but that doesn't mean we're any less set apart for the service of God in the world, or any less accountable to God for how we construct and care for this temple called Grace Baptist Church. Whenever we do things that destroy love or damage the unity of the congregation, we're interfering with and hindering God's chosen way of being present in the world. We're diminishing the sacredness of the fellowship that we have with Christ and with one another. We're failing to be grateful for how God uses imperfect people for eternal purposes.

In his book *Life Together*, theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ.⁵

Christ, in his abundance, is with us. The Spirit lives in us. Even if we're not a perfect church, we're always called and created to be a better church, a stronger church, a church that more faithfully reflects the character, the will, and the way of God.

¹ William L. Self, "The Church IS Worth the Effort!" Day1. November 13, 2011. Accessed July 24, 2012. <http://day1.org/3302-the_church_is_worth_the_effort>.

² *USA Today* (June 2, 2003).

³ *USA Today* (June 2, 2003).

⁴ Richard Floyd, "Finding the Perfect Church." United Church of Christ website. April 9, 2016. Accessed June 6, 2019 < https://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_finding_the_perfect_church>.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954) 29.