

Stop Dating the Church 3:<sup>1</sup>  
**Respecting God's Property**  
1 Corinthians 3:9b -17  
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[Pray]

Sorry honey but there is nothing you can do to make him want a commitment. But there is one thing I can tell you, this on and off thing is ridiculous. You need a wishy-washy relationship like you need another hole in your head. I suggest leaving this loser alone for a while, and letting him decide if a relationship is something he wants.<sup>2</sup>

Yahoo! Answers can provide some interesting reading and perhaps even some insightful advice if you have a question about just about anything – this post came from First Lady in response to the question “My boyfriend is afraid of commitment, what should I do”.

We've all probably heard of relationships like this one as they are pretty common these days, but what happens if the relationship in jeopardy is between you and the church?

In an age where membership rewards cards are used by coffee shops and grocery stores to gain your shopping allegiance, loyalty is increasingly for sale. Truly we live in a generation dedicated to consumer happiness. And this attitude easily translates to our relationship with the church as well. If my church isn't giving me exactly what I want then I'll go where I can get it. My commitment is only tangible as long as my demands are being met.

Over the last two weeks we have been looking at the trend in North American Christianity to date the church instead of truly giving ourselves to her. And while there are lots of reasons why this phenomena exists I think they all go back to one fundamental point – **Many Christians don't treat the church the way they should because they don't understand the true nature of what the local church is.** And so my question today is “What is the true nature of the church and how should we treat God's property?”

Please open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians. Today I want to look at a text we looked at last fall, but from a slightly different angle as we examine the question: “What is the true nature of the local church?”

## Context

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<sup>1</sup> Format and content adapted from Pastor Barton Priebe sermon  
<http://www.dhbc.ca/media/sermons/2006-09-24%20Stop%20Dating%20The%20Church%20Part%203.mp3>

<sup>2</sup> Modified post from “First Lady” (Referenced Oct 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012)  
<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=2007031611112AA6LTAa>

Before we look at our text which comes in chapter 3 I want to take a brief moment to refresh the context of this book. This is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth.

Corinth was founded by Julius Caesar and, because of its location, became the most important city in its province and a major center for trade.<sup>3</sup> By Paul's day it had grown to house a population of 250,000 free persons and as many as 400,000 slaves.<sup>4</sup> And Paul arrived in 52 or 53 AD and established a church before moving on to Ephesus where he lived for 3 years. And it was while living in Ephesus that he wrote 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. Look with me at chapter 1 and verse 1

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,  
To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus... (1 Cor 1:1-2)

This was a letter written to a specific church Paul had planted. But the church in Corinth was in trouble, sin from the culture around it had begun to creep in. Look down at verse 10

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another... some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. (1 Cor 1:10-11)

But not only were they quarreling, these quarrels were serious. In chapter 6 Paul says:

I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother takes another to court—and this in front of unbelievers!

The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? (1 Cor 6:5-7)

The Corinthian Christians were suing each other. And beyond quarrels immorality was also taking root.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? (1 Cor 5:1-2)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bible-history.com/maps/romanempire/Corinth.html>

<sup>4</sup> Zondervan NASB Study Bible, 1999 "1 Corinthians: Introduction"

So the church in Corinth was a real place with problems like any normal church. And Paul goes on to argue “If you really understood the nature of the church you wouldn’t be treating each other this way.

And that is where we get to our text today. In Chapter 3 Paul gives us three increasingly powerful pictures about what the church actually is and why it should be taken seriously. He describes the church as God’s building, God’s temple and God’s home.

### **God’s Building**

Look with me first at verse 9.

[Read 1 Corinthians 3:9]

In this verse the “we” refers to Paul and Apollos, the two people responsible for building the church in Corinth. Paul planted the church in 52 or 53 AD, and after he left Apollos arrived and continued where Paul had left off.

The problem is, as verse 4 tells us, some of the quarrels in Corinth were about allegiance to these two men. Some were saying “I follow Paul”, and others, “I follow Apollos.”

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But why some people would prefer one to the other is crazy talk to Paul, which is why he says “we are fellow workers” working for God. And what is the work they are doing? They work in God’s field, or on God’s building.

Both of those pictures are of the same thing. The field or the building are the Christians in Corinth who gather together as a church.

But the main point here is that this isn’t Paul’s building or Apollos’ building, this is God’s building. He is the one who is the Master Craftsman, Paul and Apollos work for Him.

It is so tempting for us to look at successful churches and say “the reason that church is successful is because it is Rick Warren’s church” or “John Piper’s church”. But the reality is that God is the one who builds His church. He uses us to work in it, but He is the builder.

And because people who gather together as the church are God’s building we aren’t free to think whatever we want about it. The church demands our allegiance because this is something God has ordained and built.

And there are consequences, especially for preachers and teachers, about what we do with God’s building. And that is what the next verses are about.

Look at verse 10

[Read 1 Corinthians 3:10]

Paul laid the foundation in Corinth, that is clear. But who else was building on it? Apollos. Apollos was building on Paul's foundation. And in as close to a chastising comment as Paul gets in regards to Apollos he says "But each one should be careful how he builds."

When it comes to Christ's building – the church – anyone who works on it must be incredibly careful. Why? Paul goes on. Look at verse 11

[Read 1 Corinthians 3:11]

That is square one, but what happens after Jesus' foundation is laid is where things can go awry. Verse 12

[Read 1 Corinthians 3:12-15]

Paul doesn't question Apollos' salvation, but if the work of building the church that he has done hasn't been gold, silver or costly stone work – if instead it has been wood, hay or straw work, then that work in Corinth isn't going to stand – its going to be burnt up in the fire.

Here it is important to note that this passage is not talking about Christians who live gold, silver, or precious stone lives, vs. those who live wood, hay and stubble lives receiving different rewards in heaven. Bible Commentator Jamison notes at this point that "The "gold, silver, precious stones," which all can withstand fire, are *teachings* that will stand the fiery test of judgment; "wood, hay, stubble," are those which cannot stand it"<sup>5</sup>.

What Paul says might get burnt up is the work he or Apollos or any other worker puts into growing the church that isn't up to the quality of the foundation. In the end it will be destroyed and the worker will have nothing to show for it.

And Paul isn't sure about Apollos, but verse 10 assures us Paul was constructing God's building with precious stones. Because he knows whose building he's working on.

And that is the first picture we see in this text, but as we peel the next layer away a whole new picture takes focus as we realize what kind of building the church is – the church is God's temple.

## God's Temple

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<sup>5</sup> Jamison, Fausset Brown Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible (taken from <http://www.biblestudytools.com/1-corinthians/3-4-compare.html>, Nov 1, 2012)

Look with me at verse 16.

[Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17]

As far as the metaphor of the church as God's temple goes there are actually two times that in 1 Corinthians that Christians are described this way. The most famous is in chapter six where Paul says:

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? (1 Cor 6:19)

And the context there is talking about avoiding sexual immorality. But in today's text Paul is talking about a different temple, not an individual temple, but a communal temple that each church makes up together.

Remember how we already said that this passage isn't talking about individuals getting into heaven by the skin of their teeth while their deeds get burnt up. Well that thought continues.

Notice in verse 16 that Paul says "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple". The "yous" in this verse are plural, but the temple is singular – many people, one temple. Now who are the "yous" that we are talking about in this passage? Well they are the people in the church in Corinth. In other words, the church, the local church, is God's temple.

And Paul goes on in verse 17 "for God's temple is sacred, and you (pl) are that temple."

Now temples today don't have near the meaning they had in the first century. But this kind of talk would have raised serious attention in Corinth because it was a major center for worship. And one of the biggest attractions was the temple of Athena which stood on the hill overlooking the city. Every time you looked up you couldn't help but see her magnificent temple. It was a sacred place that everyone respected.

And in Jewish culture the temple also played a major role and was incredibly sacred for people. The thought that a person might do something inappropriate in or to the temple was one of the worst things any Jew could imagine.

In fact, knowing that this was the ultimate insult, in 167 BC the Roman Emperor Antiochus Epiphanies invaded Jerusalem, entered the temple and sacrificed a pig on the altar – and the Jews responded with the Maccabean revolt – they could not allow their temple to be desecrated.

And here Paul is saying, there is only one temple in Corinth and it isn't Athena's temple, its not even the Jewish temple, it is God's temple and you, the church are

that temple. And the people would have realized right away how important it was for them to treat the temple correctly because temples were sacred.

What a major shift this brings to how we view the church. Imagine what respect and reverence we would have if on our minds as we shook hands with each other in the morning, or stood beside each other as we sang we thought “together with these people we are God’s temple”.

Friends God takes His temple incredibly seriously and so should we. But this still isn’t the full picture. And here is where we get to the third part of this text and the most powerful image yet.

Look again at verse 16

[Read 1 Corinthians 3:16]

### **God’s Home**

The most incredible thing about the temple in Jerusalem was the fact that God promised that He would live in it. In 1 Kings we get these words:

The word of the LORD came to Solomon: “As for this temple you are building, if you follow my decrees, observe my laws and keep all my commands and obey them... I will live among the Israelites” (1 Kings 6:11-13)

And then a couple chapters later this became a reality:

When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple. (1 Kings 8:10-11)

The temple in Jerusalem was not just a place built to worship God, it was the place on earth where God lived, the place people could actually be in His presence.

Now there are two words that Paul could have used to refer to the temple here. He could have used the word *heiron* which referred to the whole temple complex – the outer and inner courts as well as storage rooms and everything else. Or he could use the word *naos* which only refers to a unique spot in the temple.

And *naos* is the word Paul uses here. Now any guesses what part of the temple was known as the *naos*? The inner sanctuary or the holy of holies.

If you went to the temple in Jerusalem you would enter first through the courts of the gentiles. This was the place that anyone was allowed to go. Then inside this was the court of the Jews where only Jews could go then inside this was the court of male Jews. Then only if you were a priest could you enter beyond that. This was where all the sacrifices were carried out. Beyond that only select priests could enter into the sanctuary of the temple itself. And at the end of the

sanctuary hung a thick purple curtain that only the high priest could enter through once a year. And it was behind this curtain in the holy of holies that God lived.

This was the place in the temple that in 1 Kings the cloud of the Lord's presence filled.

Isaiah the Prophet had a vision of God in the holy of holies and he writes:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple (that's the inner temple or the holy of holies). Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;  
the whole earth is full of his glory."

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple (there it is again) was filled with smoke.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." (Is 6:1-5)

Can you imagine what Isaiah saw – what it was like to be in the presence of God? Now are you ready for this...

Paul says "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, God's *naos*, and that God's Spirit lives in you plural?" The local church, when gathered together is the place where YHWH makes His home. You can not get a holier place than this.

Notice again that the emphasis is on the plural. God dwells in or among us, rather than in or among me as an individual though that is true as well. The point here though is that when the church gathers together – even a church like Corinth with all its problems – that God makes His home among us.

Friends look around. This is it. As you sit with these people you find yourself in the very presence of God. This is the Holy Spirit's home.

Try something for me. Imagine that throne room as Isaiah saw it. Imagine yourself looking in and seeing YHWH high and exalted and the train of His robe filling this room, and the doorposts shaking. And now open your eyes and look around, see the people around you. It is when we gather together that God comes to us in this way.

How does that make you feel about Fort George? What an extraordinary picture! Not only has God built a building, indeed a temple out of His people, but in His omniscient omnipresence He has chosen to make His home specifically among us.

### **What does this look like?**

And this leads us back to our question. How should we treat God's property? How should we treat God's home?

Well let's look first at how we shouldn't treat it. Look at verse 17

[Read 1 Corinthians 3:17]

Paul says if we destroy the temple then we will find God to be our enemy and He will destroy us.

This is as brutal a statement as exists in the Bible. In the Old Testament the punishment for desecrating the temple was death, and Paul says it hasn't changed in the New Testament.

Now there are two ways that people destroy the church. The first is externally. And this is most visible in people who radically oppose the church. In the first century Nero tried this by sending hundreds or even thousands of Christians to their deaths by burning them in the streets or feeding them to lions.

More recently Nikita Khrushchev who succeeded Stalin in Communist Russia boasted that by 1965 he would parade the last remaining Christian in the USSR on television.<sup>6</sup>

And today the church is still being persecuted in many places and yet it still stands. Nero is dead. Khrushchev is no more but the church lives on. Why? The simple answer is because Jesus said He was building the church and not even the gates of hell would prevail against it.

But there is another side to the attack on the church and this is where Paul's warning strikes home. These verses were written to the church in Corinth, to Christians, not to atheists. And the reality is that most of the time the attack on Christ's church comes from inside its own walls as we mistreat each other, God's home.

The Corinthians were quarreling, taking each other to court and practicing promiscuity, but is the North American church any better? We've all had the wrong idea about what church is.

The problems start when Christians view the church as a human institution with human leaders who aren't worthy of their allegiance. In reality God is the one behind the church, this is His home, and He is very worthy. Now sure people are

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<sup>6</sup> Barton Priebe <http://www.dhbc.ca/media/Sermons06.html> (Sep 23rd Sermon)

involved, sure the church is full of problems, and sure I'm part of those problems. But this is God's plan.

God has ordained the church to be the place where sinful people get indwelt by His Spirit and are transformed into His image. The existence of sin is only evidence that God's work is not yet finished here.

But if we see the sin and reject God's church we find ourselves disrespecting God's prized property and He takes that very seriously.

- Pastor Barton Priebe tells the story of when this struck home for him. He was in Bible school and living the life of a quintessential church dater. He knew all the problems that the church had and was fond of pointing them out. But one day he was in church and his pastor was preaching and read verse 16 ***“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”***.
  - And Barton's pastor raised his voice and said, ***“what God is saying here is that if you try to tear down God's church in any way, if you are a destroyer of God's temple then God says you can “go to hell”***.

And it was in that moment that Barton says “I realized that by my indifference and my critical spirit I was destroying the local church, not building it. That day I changed my attitude forever. You see, I want to be on God's side, passionate about what God is passionate [about], working for what he works for, and God is only building one thing – the local church.”<sup>7</sup>

Alright, so leaving how we aren't supposed to treat the church behind lets conclude today with how we are supposed to treat it.

## Conclusion

I hope you can see that like the Jews treated their temple we must treat the temple – the local church – as sacred. We must struggle to build and support it because this entity that we are part of is not our club, we are God's home.

So, if you are a Christian. If you are someone who acknowledges that you are a sinner in need of a Saviour and if you know that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour who is able to make you right with God then I want to give you five practical ideas for how to build God's home and respect His property.

**First**, overcome the issues that are holding you back and join the church through membership. Taking out membership is the way to say, ***“I am here and I am devoted to these people.”***

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<sup>7</sup> Barton Priebe <http://www.dhbc.ca/media/Sermons06.html> (Sep 23rd Sermon)

**Second**, make the church a priority in your life. There are a million things out there that are competing for the place of priority. Choose to serve Christ by committing yourself to His church.

**Third**, find ways to serve. I Peter 4:10 says – ***“each one should use whatever gift he has receive to serve others”***.

Serve on the music team, or the media team. Sign up to be a greeter, or come talk to me. Find a way to be involved.

**Fourth**, give financially. We spend our money on the things that we value. You can build into the local church by giving.

**Fifth**, connect with others. Resist the temptation to run out the doors after the service, turn around and meet some people. Fellowship assumes relationship. We grow towards Christ with the help of others. So join a small group, attend events, invite people out for coffee or to your house.

God is in the business of building local churches. He is passionate about them because this is where He lives and it is through this place that He wants to grow you into His image.

So friends, the call today is to be a respecter of God’s property – stop dating the church and invest yourself in building God’s home.