

HOW TO PROMOTE THE CHURCH'S SPIRITUAL WELFARE

3¹⁶Do you not realize that you are God's temple, and that the Spirit of God is living in you? ¹⁷If anyone desecrates the temple of God, God will destroy him; for the temple of God is holy, and this is what you are.

¹⁸Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise by [the standards of] this age, let him become a fool, so that he may become wise; ¹⁹for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. Indeed, it is written, "He traps the wise by their craftiness;" ²⁰and again, "The LORD knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."

²¹So then, let no one boast in men, for all things are yours. ²²Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all things are yours; ²³and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God. (1 Cor. 3:16-23)

Introduction

Suppose there was an old dilapidated building in town, it had been around forever, but in the course of time it has become badly deteriorated. Someone appears before the town board and suggests that the old place be demolished and the land be cleared of debris. But then it is discovered that the old building is actually an historical landmark: the original town meeting hall.

Now a group of concerned citizens appears before the town board and urges that, rather than being demolished, the old building be renovated. Accepting the documentation concerning the historical significance of the old building, the town board erects a committee to preserve the structure and restore it. Now the police are given instructions to patrol the neighborhood nightly to prevent kids from throwing any more rocks through the windows or further vandalizing the old building. Plans are set in motion to reconstruct the site according to its original design, even using materials and building methods prevalent in that historical period. The whole community becomes involved and gets behind the project because they have a common interest in this dear old building as part of their common heritage. Consequently, rather than being unceremoniously demolished, the old structure is renovated because of its unique historical and cultural significance.

Applying all this to the church of Jesus Christ: if we lose sight of our unique identity as the church of God, we may entertain attitudes or engage in conduct that is detrimental to the church's spiritual well-being. Remembering that we as Christians are the church of God, we must do what is necessary to promote the spiritual welfare of the church. As we study 1 Corinthians 3:16-23 let us seriously consider How We May Promote the Church's Spiritual Welfare.

I. Let Us Promote the Church's Spiritual Welfare, by Respecting the Church as God's Own Sanctuary (3:16-17)

In verse 16 the Apostle Paul informs us that the church is *"God's temple,"* (literally, *"God's sanctuary,"*) and that the Spirit of God is living in us.

During the Old Testament era the LORD's presence dwelt in the Holy of holies of the tabernacle, and later in the Holy of holies of the temple. In the New Testament era the LORD, by His Holy Spirit, dwells in the midst of each congregation as well as personally in the heart of each individual believer. Revelation 1:13,20 provides us with a picture of Christ dwelling in the midst of His church: *"among the lamp stands was someone like the Son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and having a golden sash around his chest ... ²⁰The mystery ... of the seven golden lamp stands is this: ... the seven lamp stands are the seven churches."*

Paul is surprised that these Corinthian Christians appear to be ignorant of this awesome fact; or at least for all practical purposes they have lost sight of it. As Christians, we need to remind ourselves of this awesome fact and not lose sight of it: we are a sanctuary of the living God, note 2 Corinthians 6:16, *"we are the temple [literally, sanctuary] of the living God. As God has said, 'I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'"* Regretfully, there are many times we must identify ourselves with Jacob when he said, *"Surely, Jehovah is in this place; and I did not know it"* (Gen. 28:16.)

Verse 17 confronts us with a solemn warning: *"If any one desecrates the temple [or, sanctuary] of God, God will destroy him."* This solemn warning had very practical significance and application for the Corinthian congregation. They were plagued with factions, which was threatening to tear apart the body of Christ: *"each one of you is saying, I belong to Paul; or, I belong to Apollos; or, I belong to Cephas; or, I belong to Christ"* (1 Cor. 1:12.) The church was also plagued by a spirit of divisiveness: *"you are still worldly. Since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly and are you not [living] like men?"* (1 Cor. 3:3.) Furthermore, they were tolerating the practice of immorality, which was polluting the sanctuary of God:

... the body is not meant for fornication, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ... ¹⁸Flee from fornication. Every [other] sin that a man commits is without the body, but he who commits fornication is sinning against his own body. ¹⁹Do you not realize that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You do not belong to yourself; ²⁰you were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body. (1 Cor. 6:13b, 18-20)

Then, too, they were grossly abusing the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and thereby insulting and even blaspheming the presence and the person of Christ: *"when you are assembled together it is not possible to eat the Lord's Supper; ²¹for each one goes ahead and eats his own meal. Consequently, one remains hungry, while another gets drunk"* (1 Cor. 11:20-21.)

We, too, as members of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, must be conscious of our spiritual identity and take to heart these words of warning: *"If anyone desecrates the temple of God, God will destroy him."* If someone came into our house and began to exhibit obscene behavior or created conflict and turmoil or began to destroy the place, what would we do? We certainly would not tolerate such conduct. Scripture warns that the LORD will not tolerate the desecration of His holy sanctuary; note the warning the Lord Jesus gives to the church of Thyatira:

... I hold this against you: You are tolerating that woman Jezebel, the one who calls herself a prophetess. She teaches and seduces my servants to commit sexual immorality and to eat [food] sacrificed to idols. ²¹I have given her time so that she might repent; but she is unwilling to repent of her immorality. ²²Listen; I will throw her into a bed of great tribulation, and also those who are committing adultery with her—unless they repent of her practices. ²³I will strike her children dead; then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches the hearts and minds, and I will give to each one of you what your deeds deserve. (Rev. 2:20-23)

Let us promote the church's spiritual welfare by respecting the church—and also ourselves individually—as God's own sanctuary: *"the temple of God is holy, and this is what you are."* Also consider Titus 2:13-14, *"our Savior Jesus Christ ¹⁴... gave himself for us, so that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people for his own possession, [a people] zealous for good works."*

II. Let Us Promote the Church's Spiritual Welfare, by Renewing Our Thinking with the Wisdom of God (3:18-20)

In verse 18 Paul cautions the church to be on guard against self-deception: *"let no one deceive himself."* The Corinthian congregation was greatly enamored by the wisdom of this world. Such wisdom makes man, rather than God, the beginning and the end of all meaning and significance. Contrast this view with the biblical view presented in Romans 11:36, referring to the Lord God, the Apostle Paul declares, *"from him, and through him, and for him, are all things; to him be the glory forever. Amen."* Such wisdom makes man's reason and man's ability the standard by which all things are judged. Contrast this view with the biblical view presented in Proverbs 3:5-7,

Trust in Jehovah with all your heart and do not depend upon your own understanding; ⁶in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths. ⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear Jehovah and turn away from evil. (Prov. 3:5-7)

Such wisdom makes man's ambitions and man's dreams the supreme goal before which all else must be subordinated or sacrificed. Contrast this view with the biblical view presented in the Lord's Prayer: *"Our Father in heaven, may your*

name be hallowed. ¹⁰Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:9-10.)

What adverse affect does such worldly thinking have upon the doctrine and the life of the church and upon the life of the individual Christian? For one thing, it subordinates Scripture, which records the works of God and speaks the Word of God, to the standard of human reason. Because they made their own human reason and ability the standard by which they judged what was possible, the Corinthians were led to erroneously deny the future resurrection of the body,

Now if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ... ³⁵But someone will say, How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body will they come? ³⁶O foolish one, that which you yourself sow does not come to life unless it [first] dies. (1 Cor. 15:12,35-36)

To such reasoning the Apostle Paul was compelled to retort, “*O foolish one;*” or, “*How foolish!*”

Secondly, such worldly thinking dismisses the teaching of Scripture in favor of current social trends. Having dismissed the authority of Scripture in favor of the current social trend, the Corinthians were refuting the husband’s role of headship in marriage and the man’s role of leadership within the church, something Paul will need to correct:

Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God ... ¹⁶If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God. (1 Cor. 11:3,16)

Thirdly, such worldly thinking takes the liberty of re-interpreting Scripture in such a way as to allow for the indulgence of the sinful passions. The Corinthians wrongfully interpreted Christian liberty as including the “right” to engage in immoral conduct, as though the Christian were free from the demands of the holy law of God. In response to this misconception the Apostle Paul declares,

Everything is permissible for me—but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me—but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³... The body is not meant for fornication, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. (1 Cor. 6:12-13)

The apostle’s counsel is that we exchange the wisdom of the world for the wisdom of God: “*If anyone among you thinks that he is wise by [the standards of] this age, let him become a fool, so that he may become wise” (vs. 18b.)* We are to set aside the wisdom of this world with its pattern of man-centered thinking and start all over again, this time with the God-centered thinking that is the

characteristic of true spiritual wisdom, note Proverbs 9:10, *“The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom; and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”*

The reason Paul gives this counsel is because *“the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God”* (vs. 19.) The wisdom that seeks to make man the center and supreme purpose of life, thereby assigning to finite man the position and honor that rightfully belongs to the infinite God, is culpable foolishness—that is to say, a foolishness that shall finally be judged by God for what it is, the sinful effort of man to usurp for himself that which rightfully belongs to God.

Let us promote the church’s spiritual welfare by renewing our thinking with the wisdom of God. The wisdom of God is a wisdom that starts with God, rather than with man: *“The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom; and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding”* (Prov. 9:10.) It is a wisdom that evaluates all things by the criterion of God’s Word. Consider the example of the noble Bereans, they evaluated any teaching, including that of the Apostle Paul, with the Scriptures they already possessed, namely, the Scriptures of the Old Testament:

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11)

The wisdom of God is a wisdom that subordinates all thought, (i.e.; cultural trends, human dreams and desires, etc.), to the Word of God, as Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 10:5, *“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”*

III. Let Us Promote the Church’s Spiritual Welfare, by Recognizing Our Status in Christ (3:21-23)

In verse 21 the apostle exhorts us, *“Let no one boast in men.”* We are not to place our confidence in men; we are not to find our identity in our allegiance to any man or human organization; we are not to find our source of significance in man-centered enterprises. The great temptation of these Corinthian Christians was to identify themselves with a particular individual, placing their confidence in him and giving their devotion to him; rather than focusing upon Christ, giving Him the pre-eminence and making Him the supreme object of their devotion.

The reason we as Christians are not to boast (or, glory) in men is because *“all things are yours.”* That is to say, all Christian leaders, including all of their teaching and ministry, is in service to the church of Christ--their ministry is to present Christ to us and bring us into an ever deeper relationship with Christ; the focus of their ministry is to be Christ and His church, rather than causing the focus to be upon themselves because of their ability to minister.

Instead of becoming a disciple of any particular Christian leader, we must realize that all Christian leaders are ministers (servants) of Christ, appointed to minister His grace and truth to His people. Consider the Apostle Paul's testimony concerning his own ministry and that of his fellow apostles and evangelists: *"we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake"* (2 Cor. 4:5.) Note, too, the Apostle Paul's testimony of his willingness to sacrifice himself in service to the Corinthian church: *"So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well"* (2 Cor. 12:15a.)

Having declared, *"all things are yours"* Paul now expands that statement to the broadest possible dimension: the world, life and death, things present and things to come. In what sense are *"all things yours"*? First, we must realize that all things have been put in subjection to Christ; referring to Christ, Paul declares, *"God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything"* (Eph. 1:22a.) Secondly, we must realize that the church of Christ collectively, including each believer in Christ individually, has been joined to Christ to share in His inheritance, as Paul informs the Romans, *"Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ"* (Rom. 8:17a.) By way of illustration, when a woman marries a man she shares in all of his possessions and holdings.

In practical terms, what is the significance of this great truth, *"all things are yours"*? In the present, all things contribute to the furtherance of our salvation and nothing can defeat the saving work of God that operates on our behalf: *"we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who have been called according to his purpose"* (Rom. 8:28.) In the future we shall share with Christ in the full enjoyment of the great inheritance granted to Him by God His Father; note, again, Romans 8:17a, *"Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ."*

Although all things belong to us as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we do not belong to ourselves; on the contrary, *"you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God."* We belong to our faithful Savior who loved us and gave Himself up for us; and together with Him, we belong to God as His most beloved and treasured possession.

Let us promote the church's spiritual welfare by recognizing our status in Christ. Rather than identifying ourselves with men—affiliating ourselves with them in an effort to gain a sense of identity, approval and acceptance—let us appreciate our identity in Christ and all that that entails for the present and for eternity.

Conclusion

As Christians, we need to be diligent to always bear in mind these three things: 1) the need to respect the church as God's own holy sanctuary; 2) the need to renew our thinking with the wisdom of God; and 3) the need to recognize our status in Christ. As we consciously live accordingly, it will greatly promote the spiritual welfare of Christ's church, as well as our own spiritual welfare as individuals who belong to Christ our Savior.