

The True Tabernacle

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The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as the “Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not men.” (Heb. 8:2) Among the many insights we might glean from this short statement, perhaps one of the most important would be to recognize that there is such a thing as the Lord’s *true* tabernacle (temple, sanctuary). By implication, anything that is not really of His true tabernacle but yet still claims to be something of it must, by necessity, be either a fraud or a counterfeit, a mere imitation of the real thing. There are some, being immersed in a counterfeit and unaware of their deceived state, who ridicule the existence of a false “body” or “bride” of Christ. Such people, never having been trained or inclined to hear the voice of God and to seek the heart of God on every matter, base their judgments on appearances, always excusing themselves as “better” than those other “Christians” who meet down the road or, when they tire of one brand of “Christianity,” concoct their spirituality in reaction to the apostate abomination they’ve just stepped away from, never realizing that they themselves are as bad or worse than what they’ve left behind.

A second important aspect we should glean is that the true tabernacle of Christ is built by Christ and not men. Herein lies the clearest indicator by which we can evaluate what kind of structure we have come to.

- If we come to a building made by human hands, we can be certain it is *not* God’s house. (Acts 7:48, 17:24)

- If we come to a group where one man is magnified above the others (“super-apostle,” “patriarch,” “senior-pastor,” etc.), we can know without doubt we have come to the fiefdom of some man and not the kingdom of Christ and God. (Mt. 23:8)

- If one man must always be *the* teacher or “worship” leader who must always be center stage in the limelight, we have found a show, an entertainment, a mere form of godliness that is void of (or at least inhibits) the life-changing power of God. (3 Jn. 9, 2 Tim. 3:5)

- If we can come and go among the group and do as much or as little *for* God as we care to – or if we are pushed toward the exit and “encouraged” to go find others who think, believe and practice the “Christian” religion the way we want to – we can know that we have entered into a place that practices lawlessness, what is right in their own eyes. (Jdgs. 21:25) It is not likely that we will find much, if any, of God’s righteousness in their midst. (2 Cor. 6:14)

- If we come to a group who uses music (so-called “worship”) to first “set the emotional mood” of the people, no matter how accurate any teachings might be afterward, those insights will be lost amid the soulish noise and excitement stirred up by the music.

- If we come into a setting where all religious acts of “worship” are governed by a liturgy (written or unwritten order or agenda for the meetings) we can know that we are observing a counterfeit of Christ’s true tabernacle because *He*, not some piece of writing, is the *leitourgos* (the Greek word from which the English word “liturgy” is formed [3011]), the Minister of the sanctuary. (Heb. 8:2)

The fascinatingly transcendent thing about all this is that a sincere seeker of God can actually learn about and meet Him in any of these false expressions of the way of following Him. A sincere seeker will not be able to remain long in such a place once God begins to take away the veils and scales from his eyes, but one can certainly obtain some truths and even encounter God in any of these settings. This is why there is a recurrent returning to the cry to “Come out and be separate” (2 Cor. 6:17-18, Rev. 18:4) throughout all of church history as the Spirit has stirred various men and groups to recognize the sinful, wicked or even apostate condition of groups who stubbornly insisted on being recognized and treated as “*the church*.”

What will the true tabernacle of Christ erected among men of our time look like? It is not enough to say that they will not be like the examples used above – we must have some concrete, discernible traits to examine and weigh.

- Orphans, widows and the “least” (poor, outcasts) of Christ’s brothers will be received and treated with honor and respect and their spiritual, emotional and physical needs will be tended to. (Jas. 1:27, Mt. 25:37-40) The rich are by no means excluded but neither are they treated as the special, central figures in the meeting. (Jas. 2:2-4)

- A sincere and divinely-guided love for one another will be the agenda for all who come in contact with one another. (Jn. 13:34-35, 1 Cor. 12:24-25, Gal. 5:13, etc.)

- Unanimous consent, agreement and seeking of the will of God in all things will be the chief characteristic attitude. (2 Cor. 5:15, 1 Cor. 1:10, etc.)

- Two or three people are more likely to be the participants rather than groups of 20, 100 or 1,000. (Mt. 18:20)

What do we do to find or attain to such fellowship? The only answer is that we must follow the Lord Jesus Christ wherever He leads us. Whether He leads us into glorious unity with a number of fellow believers or leads us into a dry and lonely and seemingly endless wilderness, our duty is to follow and obey. He knows our needs – He indeed knows our need for genuine fellowship – and He knows how to satisfy and fulfill our needs. We, on the other hand, most often do not even know the difference between our needs and our desires – and too often, we don’t even know the difference between the desires of the Spirit and the more subtle lusts of the flesh! (see Gal. 5:17) If we, apart from the leading of God, seek to find even a good thing like genuine Christian fellowship, we are more likely to end up practicing idolatry rather than obedience.

What do we do if we find ourselves in some false or contaminated expression of “following” Christ? Though the Lord does indeed call on us to come out and be separate and different, how and when to make our exodus are issues that only He can resolve for each individual. Occasionally and for a certain season, some rare individuals are called to return to various “church” groups, most often as a witness against certain practices or as “pillars” for others in that “church” to lean upon and gain some genuine fellowship. Groups that serve the homeless or the poor and meetings that draw in addicts of various kinds, for example, are often snubbed by the rich and powerful members of a “church” but these groups and meetings can also be the only place in that “church” where genuine Christian interaction occurs. Again, the only answer to all this is to simply follow Christ wherever He leads us.

John was surprised when he saw the great prostitute. (Rev. 17:6) We are not told why but one aspect of his amazement must surely be that the great prostitute grew alongside the holy bride of Christ (see also the parable of the wheat and the tares – especially Mt. 13:30) and bore the trappings of claiming the name of Christ even as “she” drank deeply of the blood of the saints and the martyrs (witnesses) of Jesus. The true “tabernacle” and the false “tabernacle” will say many of the same things and even be involved in many of the same kinds of activities. The differences are spiritual and they are spiritually discerned. Jesus still commands His true followers, “Do not judge according to appearances, but judge with righteous judgment.” (Jn. 7:24) Jesus still warns His true disciples, especially those alive at “the end of the age,” to “Take heed that no one deceives you.” (Mt. 24:4)

Christ’s redeemed remnant must be those who are pure, obedient, honest and blameless. (Rev. 14:4-5, 1 Jn. 3:3, Heb. 5:9, Eph. 4:29, Phlp. 2:15, etc.) If our lives do not match up to this kind of description (apart from our progressive and occasional battles with some sin we still carry in spite of our desires otherwise – see 1 Jn. 1:8), then perhaps it is *we* who are not yet ready to be Christ’s true tabernacle and only when a sufficient amount of purifying work has been performed in us will we be “safe” to bring into contact with others of His true tabernacle – and the longer we avoid the purifying wildernesses He would lead us through, the longer it will be before we will see the unity and beauty of the real body of Christ.

Building the Temple

Moses was commanded to take care “to make all things according to the pattern shown [him] on the mountain.” (Heb. 8:5) Moses’ tabernacle and the rituals of worship associated with it were to be a living and ongoing picture of God’s redemptive work among men and the Jews “were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed.” (Gal. 3:23) We enter and remain in Christ’s true tabernacle by obedient faith. Christ is not merely some pattern we are to follow and imitate (see Jn. 13:15 and 1 Pet. 2:21 for the *only* two places where Christ is said to be our example) – rather He is to be the Head of *all things* to those who are part of His true tabernacle. (Col. 1:18, Eph. 1:22-23)

We are also instructed to take care how we build upon the foundation that is Christ. (1 Cor. 3:10) If we use “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw” – each of these things being something that can trace at least its origins back to the Creator – our work will be tested by fire and if our work survives we will be rewarded. But if our work does not survive we ourselves will remain though we will suffer loss. (1 Cor. 3:12-15)

Many teachers, especially those who teach absolute “eternal security,” like to stop right there and have us believe that reward or loss are the only two possible outcomes for those who

would build on the foundation of Christ. Paul, however, goes on in his analogy of building to present to us the third alternative by saying, “Do you not know that you are the temple [tabernacle] of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? *If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him.* For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” (1 Cor. 3:16-17 – emphasis added)

If anyone’s work as a builder upon the foundation of Christ actually introduces defilement – something which cannot be traced back to God but can be traced either to the demonic (1 Tim. 4:1) or to the vain and evil hearts of men (Mk. 7:21-23) – God promises here to *destroy* him, an alternative very different from that of the one who suffers loss but is saved as if through fire. (1 Cor. 3:15)

This is why Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Mt. 7:21-23)

Those who dismiss this warning as not referring to followers of Christ have missed the point entirely. These are people who profess the Lordship of Christ – they call Him “Lord, Lord.” These are people who *in the name of Christ* publicly speak the words of God saying in one form or another, “This is what God says.” These are people who *in the name of Christ* cast out demons and they have been successful enough at it to think it belongs on their spiritual “resume”! These are people who *in the name of Christ* perform miracles of one sort or another and have seen enough power flow through them to think they are operating in some gift of the Spirit. This is not only “Christians” – this is “Christian” leadership material! These are those who routinely, if not professionally, build upon the foundation of Christ

What is the defilement that causes these builders to be dismissed from the Lord’s presence? Jesus says they have practiced lawlessness, a trait He later said would be a primary characteristic of the end of the age. (Mt. 24:12) Lawlessness (Greek, *anomia*, literally “no law” [458], is best summed up as what is right in one’s own eyes just as righteousness is best summed up as what is right in God’s eyes. (see 2 Cor. 6:14)

With this dire consequence in view, we need to hear again Paul’s instruction that “the temple of God is holy” (1 Cor. 3:17) as well as the writer to the Hebrews’ warning “without [holiness] no one will see the Lord.” (Heb. 12:14) To be holy is to be “set apart” for God’s use. In practical terms, holiness is simply obedience to God. It is because the builders who will be ultimately dismissed choose to build whatever is right in their own eyes (lawlessness) rather than build according to God’s “pattern” (holy obedience to the Christ and the leading of His Spirit) that these builders have only succeeded in building a false “tabernacle.” These have constructed a tabernacle that is erected by men and not by the Lord.

At the beginning of his analogy about builders, Paul gives the “secret” to gaining God’s approval on our construction efforts. “For we are *God’s fellow workers...*” (1 Cor. 3:9) Only those works that can truly be said to be accomplished in co-labor with Christ and God are those works which will erect the true tabernacle that God erects and not men. Co-laboring with Christ is the only possible means whereby we might gain reward as well as keep ourselves from bringing some form of defilement among the people of Christ, God’s true and only tabernacle. That so many are heaping up defilement and so few seem to know how to remain pure says much about how far we have fallen.

Let he who has ears hear.

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