"Stop Dating the Church! – Part 4"

Text: 1 Corinthians 3:1-17

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 7, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** For the past few weeks we have been documenting a massive trend that is occurring within North American Christianity. Up until about the 1960's most Christians viewed their Christian life as flowing out of their life in a local church.
    - But as we have seen, this is no longer the case. There is an entire generation of Christians growing up who claim to love Jesus and yet they have little or nothing to do with the visible organized church, what we call "the local church."
- I have a book entitled, ***"What Canadians think about almost everything."*** It is a collection of Ipsos-Reid Polls revealing what Canadians think about…well, almost everything.
    - In the chapter on religion there is this summary headline to describe Christian views on the church: ***"Loving Him from a distance."***
        - ***"If the church…is God's house, we Canadians aren't dropping in on Him nearly as often as we used to. While the vast majority of Canadians believe in God, just…(20%) attend church on a weekly basis…for many Canadians, religion has become a private thing."***
- Summarizing the trend from 1946 to the present Ipsos Reid says,
    - ***Church attendance…plummeted precipitously…In 1946, (67%) reported attending church in the past seven years. Attendance then slid quickly downhill during the tumultuous years between 1965 and 1980 before leveling out between 1989 and 1999 [at] 29%"*** and it is now at 20%.
        - The biggest group that is fleeing the church is the 18-34's. 31% of over 55 years old attend while only 15% of 18-34.[1]
- I do not want to make too much of these statistics but one thing is crystal clear: Christians today place very little value on the visible organized church.
    - It is common today to hear Christians say things such as ***"What matters is being a Christian, not being a member of a church"*** or ***"I am into following Jesus, not being part of an institution"*** or ***"What matters is* Christianity*, not* churchianity*."***
        - Some Christians forsake the church all together. Others attend but aren't involved at all.
- There are many reasons for this but from the radical individualism of our culture to the hypocrisy of Christians and churches. Yet, I submit to you that there is one reason underneath all the reasons. That is, Christians have lost a vision of what the local church *is*. We have failed to understand the *true nature* of the local church.
    - We often see it as a man made organization that may or may not be of help to our individual spiritual lives. And so we have been saying that many of us have a dating relationship with the church. Dating is very different from marriage. When you date someone you don't have to be committed, you are free to live your individual life, and you can leave the relationship if it is not satisfying to you.
- As I said a few weeks ago, when I was in my late teens and early twenties I was the quintessential church dater: I lacked any form of commitment, love, or care for the local church. I sat on the outside, sometimes criticizing, most of the time indifferent. But all that changed one Sunday when I heard a sermon on the passage we are going to look at today.

[1] All quotes from Darrell Bricker and John Wright, *What Canadians think about almost everything*, 80-83.

- This text changed my view of the local church forever. Through this passage, the preacher showed me the true nature of the local church and it changed the entire course of my life. You might not become a pastor because of this text but I am praying that it will change your view of the church as well. On this thanksgiving Sunday, I am praying that we would come away from today giving thanks to God for this church.
    - So let's ask two questions this morning: first, what is the true nature of the local church? And then secondly, how should the true nature of the local church change the way we treat her?

THE LOCAL CHURCH IN CORINTH

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First then, **what is the true nature of the local church?**
    - We need to begin by noting that Paul is *not* writing to all Christians across the world. Paul is writing to a *local church*. He is writing to a visible group of Christians in a specific city called Corinth.
        - Now sometimes you hear Christians criticize modern churches and say, ***"I'm quitting the church because it is nothing like the early church of the Bible. If churches today got back to being like the early church I would be a part of it."*** This assumes there was a time when the church was pure and close to perfect but we have lost it. But this is incredibly misguided. When I hear this I say, "***Which early church are you referring to because there were many churches and, just like today, there were some that were healthy and some that were not."***
- For instance, this church in Corinth is one of the last churches I would want to join. If you have read 1 Corinthians then you know that this church had serious problems. People are arguing over which pastor or leader in the church was the best: ***"I think Kevin is the best pastor." "No, I follow Barton." "Forget that, Steve is better than either of them."*** And then the really spiritually people said, "***I don't follow any pastor. I follow Jesus."***
    - There was jealousy and strife among them. They had a man who was openly living in a sexual relationship with his stepmother. On top of all the Christians in the church were taking each other to court.
        - That should be enough to show you that this church had problems. But Paul's argument to them is, ***"Look people if you understood the true nature of the local church, you would not treat it in the manner that you presently are – you would take it seriously."***
- Paul then describes the nature of the local church with *one* picture that comes in *three* parts. So let me reveal one part of this picture at a time so that once it is fully revealed it will show us the true nature of the local church.

THE LOCAL CHURCH IS GOD'S BUILDING

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3) First, the local church is God's building (not a human-made building).**
    - When I say it is God's building I mean it in a metaphorical sense, not a literal sense. We are not saying this structure is God's building. We mean the people are God's building.
        - Look at verse 9. Paul has been describing the local church as a field and himself as a worker in the field but then he changes the metaphor in verse 9. **READ 9b** - ***You are God's field, God's building.*** Who is the ***"you"***? It is the local church in Corinth.
- We must *not* therefore view the visible church as merely some man-made organization that we can take or leave. The local church is *God's* building. Churches exist because God builds them. How does God build them?

- First, he shows sinners their need of Christ and saves them. Once saved 1 Pt 2:4 says, ***"You also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house."*** Each Christian is a stone that God joins to a visible church. He then gifts each believer so that they can build into that local church.
    - That is what verses 10-15 are about – using your gifts and abilities to build up the church because all must one day give an account.

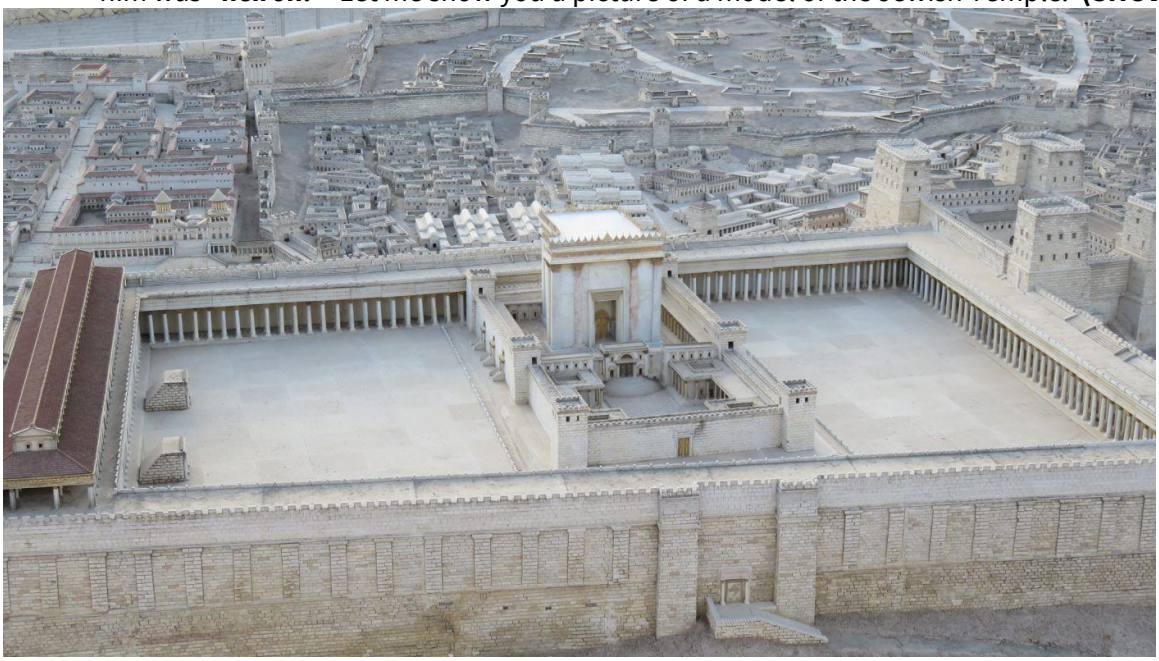
- The point is that Paul used his gifts to build up the church because he understood what the church is.
    - Do you want to build into an indestructible cause? Do you want to invest in something that will last into eternity? Invest your life in a local church.
        - So in the first place the local church is God's building. But what kind of building is it? A warehouse? A cabin? A business?

THE LOCAL CHURCH IS THE TEMPLE OF GOD

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Second, **the local church is the temple of God.**
    - **READ 16, 17b** - ***Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? . . . For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.***
- This verse is often confused with the very similar verse in chapter 6 where Paul describes our physical bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit and calls us to honour God with our bodies.
    - But note carefully, that is not what he is speaking of here. How do I know that? First, because the context has absolutely nothing to do with it how we use our bodies. But secondly, ask yourself, ***"who is Paul calling the temple of God."*** Is he saying that each individual Christian is the temple of God as in chapter 6?
        - No, that is not what he is saying at all. Notice the key phrase, ***"you yourselves."*** That is plural, not singular like when Americans down south say, ***"all y'all"*** And when he says ***"God's Spirit dwells in you"***, the ***"you"*** is also plural like when Americans say ***"y'all"*** So we should read it like this: ***"Don't you know that all y'all are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in y'all."***
- So I ask you, ***"Who then is this group of people whom Paul calls the sacred temple of God?"*** Well, who is Paul writing to? Clearly the sacred temple of God is the local church in Corinth. This imagery would have been pregnant with meaning for any Jew or Gentile in the Corinthian church.
    - Corinth was the proud home for the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Like our Parliament Buildings, the temple was the most prominent structure in the whole city except it also stood on a hill up above all the other buildings. The temple was a sacred place.
        - Paul is saying, ***"listen people, there is only one God and he only has one sacred temple in Corinth – y'all are that temple."***
    - Jews would have thought of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. That temple also was utterly sacred and to be treated with respect.
- What a radical shift this makes in how we view the local church. The building that God is raising up, God's living stones, the local church, is nothing less than God's temple. Wherever you see a group of Christians gathered together as a church there you are encountering something sacred.
    - How many of you think of Central this way? How many of you thought that when you shook a fellow believer's hand this morning?
        - Friends, we should take the local church seriously because it is the sacred temple of God.
- But now we come heart of the message. You see the power of this metaphor is not simply that God is building the local church and this building is the temple of God. The metaphor finds its culmination and full expression when we reveal the final piece of the picture.

THE UNIQUE DWELLING PLACE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Third, as the temple of God the local church is the unique dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.**
    - **READ 16** - ***Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?***
- When Paul chose to use the word temple, he could have used two words. The first word available to him was ***"heiron."*** Let me show you a picture of a model of the Jewish Temple. **(SHOW SLIDE 6)**



    - The *heiron* includes the entire temple area and structure. It is the outer courts, the inners courts, and the storage places.
- But that is not the word Paul uses here. He uses the word ***"Naos."*** What do you think that refers to?
    - The Naos includes the two rooms inside the temple itself. Let's watch animated video to get a feel for what we are talking about here. **(SHOW VIDEO)**
        - Now here is the big question – what is so significant about the *naos*, the holy of holies?
- Answer: it was the dwelling place God himself. God is everywhere but, in the Old Testament, he manifested his presence in one local place on the earth and that place was the holy of holies.
    - Realize whom it is that dwells in the holy of holies. There dwells the awesome presence of He who sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, the one give orders to the morning and shows the dawn its place. There dwells the terrifyingly beautiful presence of the one whom Isaiah saw in vision and cried out, ***"Woe is me, I am undone."*** There in the most holy place, shrouded in a pillar of cloud and fire is the presence of the I AM WHO I AM, the Sovereign one, YAHWEH, the Creator of the universe.
- What distinguished Israel from everyone else on earth was not the law, not the Sabbath, not circumcision but the fact that God uniquely dwelt among His people in the *naos*.
    - That is why the temple was sacred. That is why it was to be treated reverently, seriously, and with great respect.
- Now are you ready for it? Paul takes all of this OT imagery and directly transplants it to the local church. Paul says, ***"You, the local church in Corinth, you are the* naos *of God and God's Spirit, dwells among you."***
    - Astounding! Notice the focus is not on the Spirit dwelling in each believer as true and amazing as that is. The focus here is on the Spirit's unique dwelling in the corporate church.

        - Do you see it? Just as the Spirit uniquely dwelt with Israel in the temple, the Spirit of God now uniquely dwells among his local churches. So to avoid the local church is to avoid the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. To put it positively, to be part of a local church is to put yourself where the presence of God himself dwells.
- What a thing to say of Central! With all our faults, sins, problems, and failings, this local church is the temple of God where the Spirit of God dwells.
    - Do you think of it that way? What a revolutionary view of the church!

HOW SHOULD WE TREAT THE LOCAL CHURCH?

- So that is the nature of the local church but now let's ask the second part of our question. **(SHOW SLIDE 7) How should we treat the local church?**
    - Now that we have seen what the local church is, how should it change how we treat her. Let's look again at our passage to discover first how not to treat her and then, positively, how we should treat her.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) Be extremely careful not to tear down a local church.**
    - Look at verse 17. **READ 17** - ***If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.***
        - Do not water this down. Those who cause harm to any of God's local churches will find that God himself is against them. For to harm a local church is to harm God. What strong words these are: ***"God will destroy him."***
            - Again, we see here the inseparable connection between the invisible and the visible.

ATTACKS FROM THE OUTSIDE

- What does it look like to destroy visible local churches? Well, we could speak of attacks from the outside and attacks from the inside.
    - Throughout history those on the outside of the church have tried to destroy her. Nero tried it in the first century by throwing Christians to the lions and burning them alive. Nikita Krushchev who succeeded Stalin in Communist Russia boasted that by 1965 he would parade the last remaining Christian in the USSR on television.
        - Today the church is being persecuted in many parts of the world…yet the church still stands. Nero is dead. Krushchev is dead. But the church lives on. Why? Because God is building it. Jesus said, ***"I will build by church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."***

ATTACKS FROM THE INSIDE

- But I want you to notice that the primary application here is not to the Neros and Krushchevs of the world.
    - This warning is addressed to those within the Corinthian church who were causing damage to their church. Since the church is the holy temple of God where he dwells, they were desecrating the temple by their actions. Their disunity, arguments, jealousy, strife with each other, lawsuits and sexual immorality were destroying the church.
        - And how does Paul address it all? He reminds them of the true nature of the local church and warns them against acting in ways that destroy the church.

THE SERMON THAT CHANGE MY LIFE

- It was this verse that changed my view of the church. I was in 2nd year Bible School and was the definition of the quote ***"a little knowledge is a dangerous thing."*** I could pinpoint all the errors of the church and freely did so when opportunity arose. I gave all kinds of answers on what should be

changed but really only dated churches and wasn't involved at any significant level. That is, until Pastor John Neufeld preached on this text and unleashed one sentence.

- I sat in stunned silence after he said it. Although there were a few hundred people around me, I felt like he was speaking directly to me.

- I don't remember how he developed the sermon. I'm sure it was much like I did today. He then got to this stern warning that, ***"If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him."***
  - And John Neufeld raised his voice and said, ***"what God is saying here is that if you try to tear down God's church in any way, then God says, 'you can go to hell!'"***
- I realized that I was destroying the church. I did it through my criticism. I did it by always pointing out what was wrong but never acting to help make things right. I did it through just sitting on the sidelines and not using my gifts to help build her up. I treated the church with indifference, criticism, and avoidance.
  - I had set myself against God himself. That sermon changed my life forever. I decided that I want to love what God loves and he loves local churches. I want to work at building up what God builds up and that is his local churches.
    - I decided I would try to be part of the solution instead of just sitting on the sidelines and making great pronouncements about what is wrong. How about you? Is there anything you are doing that you need to stop doing because it is tearing down the church?
- That is the negative answer: since the local church is the temple and dwelling place of God, we must be extremely careful not to tear her down in any way.

HOW WE SHOULD TREAT THE LOCAL CHURCH

- That leads us to the positive side of our answer. **(SHOW SLIDE 9) Treat the local church as sacred by building her up.** How do you do that? If you are a Christian here today, meaning you have repented of your sins and asked Jesus to save you, let me give you some practical suggestions on how to build into the church.
  - First, join the church through membership. Taking out membership is your way of saying, ***"I am here and I am devoted to these people."*** We have another membership class on Oct 21 following the service. Sign up with the office.
  - Second, make the church a priority in your life. If this is not done too many other things crowd in and take over.
  - Third, find ways to serve. I Peter 4:10 – ***"each one should use whatever gift he has receive to serve others."***
    - Serve on the music team, with the food, as a greeter, with set up and clean up…etc.
  - Fourth, give financially. What you spend your money on is a sure sign of what you value. You can build into the local church by giving.
  - Fifth, intentionally connect with others. We grow towards Christ with the help of others. So join a Community Group,
- Even as we hear Paul's hard words we also want to give thanks for the many wonderful ways people in this church are building her up. As a staff we spent some time the other day just celebrating the many positive examples we have of this.
  - We are so thankful for the many people who have been utterly committed to building up Central over the decades. We have people who have been members for 40, 50, and 60 years. You are an inspiring example to the younger generation.
  - We are so thankful to have so many people who are genuinely excited to be a part of Central and who are always offering words of encouragement to build others up.

- We are so thankful for how incredibly people serve, especially on special projects. Think of all the money given to sponsor refugee families, for work trips to Esperanza and Mexico, for sponsoring children with Compassion, and making things like Urban Adventures and Fall Festival happen.
- We are so thankful for those who volunteer their time to serve on committees. So many of you are building up the church: tech, food, music, food preparation, kid's ministry, youth ministry, board members, outreach and missions, membership, international fellowship, care ministries like divorce care and grief share, and our counseling centre.
    - You should know that your staff all love working here. We view it as a great joy and honour to serve you.

CONCLUSION

- The local church is the temple of God and the unique dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Let us all treat the local church for what she truly is. Let us be extremely careful not to tear her down. Let us use our gifts and abilities to build her up.