

God's Building Project

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Today, I would like to direct our minds and hearts to the church building. Not the physical building which surrounds us here, comprising bricks, wood, metal and glass, but the building of God, the one and only true Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Church He promised to build; the Church He promised would prevail over evil; and the Church which is built only from living stones – the children of God.

The New Testament uses a number of descriptive images for the Church. It's described as a family into which we are born again with God as our Father and many brothers and sisters in the faith. The Church is also described as a kingdom wherein we are citizens, with Jesus Christ ruling as our king. Other scriptures talk about the Church as a body emphasizing both unity and diversity, each of us performing different roles with Jesus Christ as our head.

Today I want us to explore the imagery of the Church as a building, with every believer being a stone built into that building and our reading from 1 Peter 2 will be our starting point.

“As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (vv. 4-5).

Paul used this same imagery in Ephesians:

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Paul goes from the concept of citizenship in the kingdom to the concept of family to the concept of a building. And that may seem to be somewhat of an anticlimax. After all, a building is rather cold and impersonal compared with the relationship of a family. But if you look more carefully, you'll see what's in Paul's mind. He's actually moving closer, higher, to a more intimate relationship, because he is stressing the closeness of the members of the house of God - closeness to one another and closeness to the Lord – all built together as one.

You see, it's possible for the members of a family to be scattered throughout the face of the earth. Some of you have family members who are thousands of kilometres away. In a family like that, you're still related, still members of one another, but you're widely separated and don't see one another for months or years at a time. But when you think of a building, there's no separation of stones that make up the walls. Everything is closely joined and bound together. The Church of Jesus Christ draws us together in a way that nothing else can.

As you look around you at this physical building, not so very long ago, it was nothing but a bunch of scattered pieces. There was a stack of four-by-twos in a timber yard; a pile of nails, bolts and screws in a hardware store; pallets full of bricks at the brick supplier; a roll of carpet in somebody else's warehouse; panes of glass waiting to be cut; there was concrete that hadn't even been mixed yet.

Then something amazing happened one day: with great planning and a lot of hard work and expertise, all those pieces and hundreds more were gathered together and joined into one building.

The same thing is true of the Church - God's building. Many of us who are now believers were previously separated – we were different pieces which had little in common; different economic situations; different ethnic backgrounds; different interests. But Jesus Christ, the Master architect and Master builder, has gathered us together as living stones and joined us together in His building. What Paul said of the Jews and Gentiles, who had been separated for hundreds of years, is also true of us. *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made (us) one.”* (Ephesians 2:13-14a).

Jesus Christ takes every part, every stone, and knocks off the rough edges, chiselling a piece here, sanding a piece there, getting it ready, building it in, fitting it into place in His supernatural, eternal building. And when He's done, there's nothing out of place. There are no defective pieces and together we form one building, His building.

But not just *any* building – we are a *temple*. That concept would remind the Jews that for centuries they had looked to the temple in Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God. And it would cause the Gentiles in Ephesus to think about the temple of Diana and the other pagan temples in which they believed their deities lived. But, as Stephen pointed out in Acts 7, our God *“does not dwell in temples made with hands.”* (Acts 7:48). Rather His dwelling place is the hearts of His people.

So we are not just *any* building. We are a building with the highest purpose that any building could possibly have – we are a temple: the dwelling place of God. That makes this building very special indeed. It is where God dwells on earth – within the hearts, lives and actions of His people. God's building is unique also in that it is always a work in progress – it is never finished – not in time and space anyway. Of course, everything is 'finished' in God's kingdom because He knows the end from the beginning. But here in this earthly kingdom, Jesus will always be building His Church.

You may have read about Sarah Winchester, the daughter of the creator of the Winchester rifle. She inherited twenty million dollars and had an additional income of one thousand dollars a day. That's a lot of money today, but it was a ridiculous sum of money in the late 1800's. Well, Sarah moved to California and bought a simple eight-room farmhouse on 160 acres of land. She hired 16 carpenters and put them to work. For the next 38 years, crews worked seven days a week to build a mansion to beat all mansions. When Sarah died, the house covered six acres and had six kitchens, thirteen bathrooms, forty stairways, 47 fireplaces, 52 skylights, 467 doors, ten thousand windows, 160 rooms and a bell tower and the house was still not completed when she died.

Well that's impressive, but nothing compared to Jesus' building project. He has been working on His building for more than 2,000 years and every time someone is added to the body of Christ, another living stone is set in place. This building is never completed. It's always growing because people are continually being added – living stones are being added every day.

But what is the foundation of this building? The Apostle Peter tells us:

“For in Scripture it says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and, ‘A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’”

(1 Peter 2:6-8)

Peter quotes Isaiah 28:16 and Psalm 118:22 and points out that Jesus Christ, while chosen by God, was rejected by men. He wasn't the kind of Messiah they were expecting, so they stumbled over him. The rock they considered to be a nuisance - in the way - was then used by God as the cornerstone of His building.

The foundation is the most important part of any building and the chief cornerstone is the most important stone. The cornerstone was the major structural part of ancient buildings. It had to be strong enough to support what was built upon it, and it had to be precisely laid, because every other part of the structure was oriented towards the cornerstone. It was the support, the 'orienter', and the unifier of the entire building. That is what Jesus Christ is to God's building, the Church. The whole building ties together because of the Cornerstone – Jesus Christ.

All through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he doesn't let us forget that we have a relationship together only because of Jesus Christ. As I shared at length last week, Paul talks about how everything is "in Christ", "in him", "by him", "through him", "through his blood", "by his death." Everything comes to us in and through Christ. Jesus confirmed that when he said, "*No one comes to the Father except through me.*" (John 14:6).

So everything is built on Jesus Christ. He is the great Cornerstone of our faith and not in some vague historical sense either – like the founder of a company or the pioneer of a city – both of whom are dead and gone and we just have their photo on the wall. Not even close! The chief Cornerstone of the Church is Jesus Christ (not was). He is the living, present, foundation of this building we call the Church and we are the living stones joined together in Him; we rest upon Him; and every part of our life as a Church is only effective through Him!

So the question begs: Why has this building of living stones been constructed? What is the purpose of this living, dynamic Church, built upon the Rock of Ages? Peter answers that in our text today:

*" ... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, **that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.** Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:9-10).*

It's important that we don't forget the purpose for which we are being built. We are not only called by Christ into this amazing new living building, the Church; we are not only resting firmly upon Him and His finished work as our Saviour and Lord; but everything we do and everything we are and ever hope to be is for His glory; so that we may praise and worship the Lord of all creation and lift Him up for all the world to see; so that they too might be drawn to Him. Jesus Christ is the creator of the Church, the foundation of the Church, the focus of the Church, the source of power in the Church and the purpose of the Church is to point others to Christ and Christ alone!

And yet sadly, there are millions of people across the world today who are sitting in buildings made by man, gathering in the name of this Lord of all creation, but they have lost their focus and forgotten that the only building which matters in the Kingdom of heaven, the eternal kingdom of God, is the living, moving relational community of pilgrims which Jesus is building.

That living, breathing, worshipping, dynamic, relational building has Jesus Christ in the centre of **everything** - absolutely everything. We cannot even see or comprehend this 'spiritual house' in which God dwells, unless we see it in and through the crucified, risen and present Christ. We are the building of God. We are the Church of Jesus Christ.

When we read the book of Acts and Paul's epistles we can see what this dynamic building made of living stones really looked like way back when this amazing construction project began. There were no physical buildings then; no steeples and towers; no raised pulpits and stained glass windows.

For hundreds of years now, successive generations of the people of God have been exposed to a concept of 'church' which is diametrically opposed to everything the New Testament tells us about the true Church which Jesus is building. I'm not suggesting we bulldoze all our buildings and hit the road as God's pilgrim people - even I don't have that courage - and we now live in a time where some secular authorities seem to love our buildings more than we do and they pass laws forcing us to preserve these monuments of what the Church was never meant to be! So we can't just press the rewind button - but we *can* and *must* change our attitude, focus and priorities as the people of God. We can make sure we never forget the One by whom, in whom and for whom the Church exists.

The Taj Mahal is regarded as one of the most beautiful buildings in all the world. What you may not know is the story behind that building. Construction begun after the death of the wife of Emperor Shah Jahan. He was devastated by her death and he resolved to honour her by constructing a temple that would serve as her tomb.

Her coffin was placed right in the centre of a large parcel of land and construction of the temple began around it. No expense would be spared to make her final resting place magnificent. This entire building was all about her. It's beauty would reflect her beauty. It's importance would reflect her importance to the Emperor and to that whole kingdom. It's entire purpose rested on her and in her and the building would always draw people to focus on this one person - at least that was the plan.

However, as the weeks turned into months, the Shah's grief over his wife's death was gradually replaced by a passion for the building itself. He no longer mourned her absence. The construction of the building consumed him and its original purpose and origin was completely forgotten. One day, whilst walking through the middle of the construction site, the Shah's leg bumped against a wooden box. The Emperor brushed the dust off his leg and ordered the worker to throw the box out because it was an obstacle to the workers and it didn't fit into the new emerging design.

What Shah Jahan didn't know is that he had just ordered the disposal of the coffin of his late wife. And so the one person this building was intended to honour was forgotten, and the building became an end in itself, not the means by which a great woman would be honoured and never forgotten. Well I am sure you get the point of that illustration - and it's a confronting point indeed.

Many centuries ago, something tragic happened - the presence of the risen, living Christ in the midst of His living Church building was overshadowed, ignored or denied as a new kind of building sprang up on hilltops and street corners all over Europe.

Centuries later these European designed church buildings made their way to this 'great south land of the Holy Spirit' and our landscape was also studded with these structures which we now can't get rid of, can't afford to maintain and, in many cases, they have become the greatest obstacle to us actually *being* the Church.

Now I must say that I was delighted when I first walked in the front door here many years ago and looked at the large sign in our foyer which directs you to the various rooms and locations in this complex. My heart was warmed when I read that the 'worship centre' was off to the right and not the 'Church.' Sadly, the word 'Church' is still used to describe a physical building by millions of Christians and many of us still talk about where we 'go to Church' or ask 'which church are you part of?' like there's more than one.

So let me clear up a false report. I have heard and read a number of times now that our 'church' was devastated in the recent flood, but nothing could be further from the truth! The Church which Jesus is building, which is the only Church there is from God's perspective, has not been devastated in this flood - the true Church which Jesus is building is actually being released, reborn, re-energised and revealed more clearly in our hearts, *because of this flood!*

Long before the Holy Spirit led the Apostle Peter to write this letter, God knew we would be meeting in this upper room today, six weeks after a massive flood forced us out of our worship centre. Through Peter, the Holy Spirit is now calling us back to our original purpose, which is to proclaim the praises of Him who called us. We live in a world of darkness, a world that doesn't know God. It is our calling and our responsibility to *"proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light."*

We don't exist so that people can say how great our building is. We don't exist so that people can say how great this bunch of people is. We don't exist so that people can say how great our welfare programs are. We exist so that people can look at us and say, *"How great is our God!"*

"Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain." (Psalm 127:1a). God is rebuilding His Church right now, right in front of our eyes and each and every one of us has the incredible privilege to be part of that re-birth, renewal and reinvigoration of the temple of God, the Church of Jesus Christ – the dwelling place of God.

We will return to our worship centre some day, but in the meantime, God is removing any barriers which may be in our hearts and minds which might prevent Jesus from building His true Church. And I have sensed some urgency on God's part. He is moving quicker than I have experienced in a long time. Perhaps He doesn't want to wait any longer. God is long-suffering but eventually He says:

"Enough! I am building My Church ... because there are millions more living stones out there who are yet to find their place in My building – and I need to raise up a people who know why they are here, a people who will hear My voice, respond to My call and release My presence wherever they go. I need My chosen people, My royal priesthood, My holy nation, My special possession ... to once again declare the praises of Him who called them out of darkness into His wonderful light."

Brothers and sisters, once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. How then shall you live?

Let those who have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to us today.