

Part 4: The Church is Not God's People

Indeed, God is sovereign. Yet, while the temple was central to Jewish life and culture, He allowed it to be razed in 70 CE by the Romans and never to be rebuilt afterwards. "The emperor Julian allowed to have the Temple rebuilt but the Galilee earthquake of 363 ended all attempts ever since."¹ There is no doubt that, for lack of a proper way to state it, "temple worship" was central to the Jewish faith until then. But in regard to the Jewish faith, was the temple really where the Jews "worshipped"?

Let's consider a definition of "worship" from the English Oxford Dictionary: "The feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity; Religious rites or ceremonies, constituting a formal expression of reverence for a deity. "The church was opened for public worship."

Church necessarily has a problem with individual worship. If the individual can please God with personal worship, what do we need church for? Does formal worship at a designated place and at a designated timeframe somehow complete worship? The notion finds no place in the Bible. However, the church makes so-called "corporate worship" efficacious to a right standing with God.

Certainly, worship took place at the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple located in Jerusalem, but what did these structures represent in the overall picture of God's relationship with His people? Beginning with the tabernacle in the wilderness, it is obvious that it was not the focus of "corporate worship." In fact, these places were where individuals came to participate in rituals designated by the law. Prayer, Scripture study, and other religious memorials took place in family dwellings, and often led by "elders." Corporate gatherings were the following: God would call the people as a whole to gather in an assembly for a purpose. We see this at Mount Sinai when God ratified His law with the Jewish people, ie., the first covenant. Another example is Nehemiah's rededication of the law traditionally known as the "great assembly." That biblical account is well worth reading (Chapters 8-10). The foreigners among God's people were excluded from the meeting, and as Nehemiah read the law, the Levites helped with understanding among the people. This is very similar to aspects of the ekklesia.

These assemblies play a greater role in defining God's people than temple worship, and the assembly tradition of the Old Testament correlates closely with the New Testament ekklesia. The concept of assembly lives on, but **service** to the old covenant through temple ritual passed with Christ's death on the cross. Temple worship was not corporate worship to begin with, and was the individual's way of serving under the old covenant.

In addition, when the new covenant engrafted the Gentiles into the promises of God, a calling of all God's people to assemble in one place ceased and was replaced with incremental family assemblies which represent God's "great assembly" of people called out from what is common. Again, temple worship was never a corporate worship to begin with, worship was the task of the individual while assemblies were corporate for purposes of taking care of some sort of new business with God. While the ekklesia broke bread and studied the apostles' doctrine from house

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_in_Jerusalem

to house, they gathered together corporately with the apostles to discuss the administration of needs concerning the Gentile widows. This is indicative of the assemblies. Corporate assemblies are biblical, but while it can be argued that God should be worshiped in such activity, corporate worship is not biblical.

Under the old covenant, God's people did not meet routinely at the tabernacle in corporate fashion. For one thing, the priests would have been overwhelmed and people would have waited for days to offer their sacrifices. This wasn't a mega church building with 600,000 members necessitating several scheduled services on Sunday. God's people served the old covenant individually at the tabernacle throughout the week at different and sporadic times.

For certain, the synagogue, to some degree, was institutionalized due to Greco-Roman cultural influence and its religious concept of receiving saving graces at various temples representing a plethora of gods. But the word "synagogue," like ekklesia, refers to a gathering of people in one nonspecific place. It's a gathering of people, not a place.

In Hebrews 10:25, many translations use the word "meeting" in regard to the neglect of gathering together. Nevertheless, many other translations have it right by using the word, "assembling." It's assembly for purposes of conducting God's kingdom business; specifically, encouragement and ongoing good works. It is interesting that the prefix is "epi" which refers to being on something rather than in something; the place is nonspecific. It is interesting to note the correlation between Hebrews 10:25 and 2Thessalonians 2:1 in which the same word for "assembling," or "gathering" is used for the rapture, "episunagoge." The Hebrew writer encourages us to not neglect assembling together as we see "the day" getting closer and closer. This probably refers to the great assembly via the rapture when all God's people assemble with Christ "in the air." Regarding the 1st century church, this was known as "the gathering," or really, "the assembly," and fairly, "the great assembly." This assembly takes place "in the air" someplace between earth and heaven and is a meeting to take care of some sort of eschatological business. Hence, to reject the rapture, as church orthodoxy is fond of doing, is to remove a beautiful motif from the Bible.

God's people meet together for the important business of fostering good works, which is worship. While the assembly should be worshipful, the good works that result from the meetings are the more prominent acts of worship. In contrast to church orthodoxy, assemblies are not for imputation of more salvation overseen by additional mediators other than Christ. ALL churches of every stripe are driven by this orthodoxy, and while some deny it intellectually in their confusion, they function in this way according to church tradition.

The new birth transformed worship from an individual outward serving of the old covenant, to an inward serving of the new covenant. The temple of God is gone, and all of its priests are gone. The temple is now our bodies, and we are the priests of that temple. Our offerings are no longer at the temple in service to the old covenant which was a shadow of things to come, but we now avail our body members to offer "living sacrifices" to God in Christian living which is theologically known as "sanctification." We assemble together to discuss how we make our individual temples increasingly more holy (sanctified) for God. We are the body of Christ made up of individual temples with ONE head and ONE mediator of the new covenant. When Christ died on the cross,

the curtain dividing the Holy of Holies was rent from the top down allowing access to all of God's children because we are ALL High Priests.

God's High Priests do not meet at a purpose build temple with other priests to obtain an ongoing covering for sin; we are temples ourselves and the priests thereof, and our sacrifices are good works, not a covering for sin that Christ ended on the cross.

As we discussed prior, apostolic secessionists unleashed an onslaught against the ekklesia, and the following lengthy excerpt describes the beginning of church history, not ekklesia history:

Throughout the New Testament, the Greek word ekklesia always refers to an assembly of people, not a place. Ekklesia, in every one of its 114 appearances in the New Testament, refers to an assembly of people. Christians did not erect special buildings for worship until the Constantinian era in the fourth century. The first churches consistently met in homes. Until the year 300 we know of no buildings first built as churches.

When Christianity was born, it was the only religion on the planet that had no sacred objects, no sacred persons, and no sacred spaces. Although surrounded by Jewish synagogues and pagan temples, the early Christians were the only religious people on earth who did not erect sacred buildings for their worship. The ritual bareness of early Christian worship should not be taken as a sign of primitiveness, but rather as a way of emphasizing the spiritual character of Christian worship.

While the Emperor Constantine (ca. 285-337) is often lauded for granting Christians freedom of worship and expanding their privileges, his story fills a dark page in the history of Christianity. For far too long, historians have accepted the claim that the conversion of Constantine caused the triumph of Christianity. To the contrary, he destroyed its most attractive and dynamic aspects, turning a high-intensity, grassroots movement into an arrogant institution controlled by an elite who often managed to be both brutal and lax.

Church buildings began with him. Shortly after becoming emperor in 324, he began ordering the construction of church buildings. He did so to promote the popularity and acceptance of Christianity. If the Christians had their own sacred buildings — as did the Jews and the pagans — their faith would be regarded as legitimate.

Constantine's thinking was dominated by superstition and pagan magic. Historians continue to debate whether or not Constantine was a genuine Christian. Almost to his dying day, Constantine still functioned as the high priest of paganism. In fact, he retained the pagan title Pontifex Maximus, which means chief of the pagan priests! In the fifteenth century, this same title became the honorific title for the Roman Catholic Pope.²

² http://briansbits.com/pagan_church.php

No religion contradicts its intellectual confession via its functionality like the church. While being fond of saying, "The church is the people, not the building," the following is the reality:

The modern concert-style church building was profoundly influenced by nineteenth-century revivalism. It is essentially an auditorium. The building is structured to emphasize the dramatic performance of the preacher and the choir. Its structure implicitly suggests that the choir (or worship band) performs for the congregation to stimulate their worship or entertain them. It also calls excessive attention to the preacher whether he is standing or sitting.

Church buildings continue to maintain the unbiblical division between clergy and laity. And they encourage the congregation to assume a spectator role. The arrangement and mood of the building conditions the congregation toward passivity. The pulpit platform acts like a stage, and the congregation occupies the theater. In short, Christian architecture has stalemated the functioning of God's people since it was born in the fourth century....

We have been taught to feel holier when we are in "the house of God" and have inherited a pathological dependency upon an edifice to carry out our worship to God. The church building has taught us badly about what church is and what it does. The building is an architectural denial of the priesthood of all believers. It is a contradiction of the very nature of the ekklesia — which is a countercultural community. The church building impedes our understanding and experience that the church is Christ's functioning body that lives and breathes under His direct headship.

If every Christian on the planet would never call a building a church again, this alone would create a revolution in our faith. John Newton rightly said, "Let not him who worships under a steeple condemn him who worships under a chimney."³

However, these practical objections are symptoms of a much larger problem: the church is not only a bad idea, it is antithetical to a doctrine of saving faith on every level. When church worship focuses on maintaining salvation through "worship," true worship will for certain occupy a much lesser priority. The church is not God's people, it is a place where people go to keep themselves saved as opposed to those who worship in spirit and truth.

It rejects the biblical definition of body, new birth, the temple, assembly, and the true identity of God's people... to name a few, and next we look at its redefinition of election.

³ http://briansbits.com/pagan_church.php