

Temple & Priesthood

The Mission of the Church Part 04
Selected Passages 6-1-2014

Summary: We cannot do what we are supposed to do without knowing what we are, hence the 18 metaphors for the church in Scripture. One is that we are a Temple (Holy Place – the place for people to approach the dwelling of God – so we must be separated from sin and must honor the church) and we are a Priesthood (offering sacrifices of praise, prayer, repentance, giving, sharing, love, faith, ministry of spiritual gifts, souls of men).

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Introduction

Identity and Mission

What is a church? According to the New Testament, the church is a field, a tree, a nation, a banquet, a flock of sheep, a kingdom, lampstands, yeast, workers in a vineyard, a pillar, a foundation, a bride, a body, a household, a temple, a priesthood – why so many different descriptions? Why do you suppose God devotes so much space in Scripture telling us what the church is? Why not just use all that space telling us what we’re supposed to do? I believe the answer is this – *Doing what God wants us to do requires knowing what God wants us to be.* I think one of the mistakes churches tend to make when they are writing their mission statement is to focus only on what they are to do, and not enough on what they are to be, because everything you do is shaped by what you think you are. If all your employees think your business is a rec center, but in reality it’s a library – you are never going to get them to do what they should be doing. You will tell them to be quiet and organize the books, and they might acquiesce for a while, but it won’t last because they won’t understand why (Why encourage silence in a rec center?).

Many times I have heard people say, “The Church is a hospital. Never mind all those metaphors in Scripture - I’ll just make my own. It’s mainly a hospital.” If that is how you think of the church, that will drive your priorities. Everything will become people-centered. And you might worship, but only in ways that seem to help people heal – so worship becomes just a means to a higher end (helping people). In the minds of other people the church is mainly a classroom – as long as you learn something, it’s a success. For others the church is mainly a social club. It is a place where you can meet people, make friends, and enjoy interaction with some nice folks. So anything that does not involve building relationships is less important. Others say, “No, the church’s main job is to transform culture,” and those people have a very different set of priorities. Your conception of what the church is will drive all your priorities in what you do in church.

Review

Today is sermon #4 in our study of the mission of the church in Scripture. And so far we have looked at the metaphors of the body of Christ, bride of Christ, and household of God. The body analogy helps us understand that each one of us is a different body part and every part must do its job in order for the body to function. The household analogy helps us understand that we are to relate to God as our Father and to one another as siblings, slaves, and stewards. The bride analogy calls to mind our responsibilities to be submissive to Him, to become beautiful to Him through holiness and purity, to be faithful to Him, and to love Him with exclusive love. We did not have a lot of time last time to focus on our responsibility to love Him, but obviously that is a huge part of what it means to be a church. Jesus called that the greatest commandment and it is the summary of all the commandments, so loving God with all our being is without question our highest and most important responsibility. That is why I believe the most important study that I have ever done in my lifetime is that series *Loving God with All Your Heart*. Loving God is not one of our responsibilities – it is everything. Every single thing we do must either be an expression of love for God, or an effort to deepen our love for Him, or an effort to bring others to love Him.

Temple

Mixed Metaphors

All of that is review – now let's move on to the next one. Actually, this next one isn't a single metaphor – it is a group of related metaphors – all connected to the Temple. The Bible refers to the church as stones in the Temple wall, it calls us the Temple structure as a whole, it calls us priests in the Temple, and it calls us lampstands in the Temple. Peter uses three of those analogies in a single verse.

1 Peter 2:5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house¹ to be a holy priesthood

So right there in one verse we are individual stones, then we are the whole temple, then we are priests in the Temple.

Presence of God

This is not the only place where the Lord uses the Temple metaphor.

Ephesians 2:21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 3:16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

2 Corinthians 6:16 What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

That is a lot of times to repeat the same metaphor. I think we would be safe to say that any church mission statement that ignored our Temple responsibility would be incomplete. What does that mean? You go to a swimming pool to swim, you go to a restaurant to eat, you go to a mall to shop – why do you go to a temple?

Here is something you need to know: There are two different words in the New Testament translated “Temple.” One is *hieron*, and that refers to the entire Temple complex – all the various courts as well as the Holy Place itself. The other term is *naos*, and that refers specifically to the Holy Place (or Sanctuary)

¹ The phrase “House of God” or “House of the LORD” appears over 100 times in the Bible. And every time it refers to the same thing – the Temple.

where no one but the priests could ever go because it was the dwelling place of God. Every time the church is called God's Temple, the word is *naos* – the Holy Place. And so the point of this analogy is to teach us that the church is the dwelling place of God on earth. We are the headquarters of His presence in this world. God exists everywhere, but His presence is not everywhere because when the Bible speaks of God's presence it refers to the place where God turns His face toward you with favor.) And the place where that happens is called the Holy Place.

2 Corinthians 6:16 ... we are the Holy Place of the living God. Just as God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them

Our being a Holy Place means we are the place where God's presence lives. In fact, according to Hebrews 12:18-24, when a person comes into the church that person is exposed to a greater expression of the presence of God than the one at Mt. Sinai, when God appeared on the mountain with fire and smoke and thunder and earthquakes.

Under Construction

But there is a problem with that. Raise your hand if in your life you have ever been to a church where it was not easy to experience the presence of God. If the church is the Temple, then how do we explain the fact that sometimes you go to a church and it is next to impossible to draw near to God, and in other churches it's easy?

1 Peter 2:5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house

Each individual church is a Holy place under construction. This part of our identity is a work in progress. That is why it is so hard to find a good church. How many of you enjoy driving through a construction zone? It's no fun. You get delayed and everyone is frustrated because the road isn't what it should be yet.

And to make matters worse, you so often see the people who are supposed to be working, and one guy is digging a hole while seven other guys are just standing around watching. People who get frustrated with church usually think of themselves as being like the aggravated driver who is being inconvenienced by the delay. But if you are a Christian, you are not the driver. You are one of the workers. And if you are complaining, chances are you are not the one guy who is actually digging the hole. You might be one of the seven standing around.

You see, commuters hate construction. But I can tell you at least one person in our congregation who loves construction and wishes there were more of it. Dale. He's a crane operator. When there is no construction he has no work. The thing that determines whether you love construction or hate it is this – are you a crane operator looking for work or are you a commuter looking for convenience? When you walk in here do you have the mentality of a consumer walking into a store or restaurant – expecting good service? Or do you have the attitude of an employee walking into your place of work – hoping to serve well?

When you see problems in the church, and it is hard to encounter God here because we are a temple under construction, that should make you happy. Why? Because you are a brick!

1 Peter 2:5 you also, like living stones, are being built...

When you come to a church like this one that has some problems, and isn't firing on all cylinders when it comes to functioning as the dwelling place of God; when you come to a church that is a few bricks shy of a full wall, that is good news for you because you're a brick. It is ludicrous for a brick to complain about an unfinished wall. The missing problems in this church – the missing pieces in our wall – those are job security for you.

Consumer or Stone?

I think part of the problem is we tend to think of the church as an establishment that we frequent as consumers. You stop at Starbucks and get coffee, you go to a theater to take in a movie, and you stop by church to get some teaching and fellowship and music. We carry our consumer mentality into the church, expecting prompt, friendly customer service. That kind of attitude will kill the church. If you attend here, you are not a consumer frequenting a business. You are a major stone in a load-bearing wall.

It just pains me to think about all the important works that go undone because people have that detached, consumer mentality. What does a crowd at a concert ever accomplish? Nothing. They make a mess and go home.

People who just skip around from church to church like a consumer trying out a variety of restaurants, and they aren't contributing by being a stone in the wall – those people have effectively excommunicated themselves from the church. If all you are is a consumer, you are not a part of the church. And if we all did that, there would be no church. Everything God is calling us to do requires a community of people. Especially the task of functioning as the dwelling place of God. When you drive to church on Sunday you need to not only be asking, “As a part of the body, what can I do today to dispense grace and supply what’s needed to other body parts,” and not only, “As a child in this household how can I show love to my siblings, and serve them?” and not only, “As a part of the bride, what can I contribute today to this church’s beauty and purity in God’s sight, and love and faithfulness to Christ?” – but on top of all that you should be driving to church asking yourself, “What am I going to do when I get there to make sure Agape Bible Church really succeeds today in functioning as a temple, where people who are seeking an encounter with the living God can find it?”

How to Be More of a Temple

1) *Live in Harmony*

“How do I do that? What could a person like me possibly do at church to cause the place to be more of a dwelling place of God?” The answer is in Ephesians 2. The context of Ephesians 2 is about unity in the church, and the removal of hostilities and the joining together of Jew and Gentile. And it is in that joining together that we become more of a dwelling place of God.

Ephesians 2:21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

In Israel, mortar was very expensive to produce, and so when Herod built the Temple of Jesus’ time, he used no mortar. Instead of putting mortar between the stones to fill the gaps, he had the stones cut with such precision that there were no gaps. To protect against earthquakes they would cut different sizes and shapes to break up the lines. And then cut the stones to fit perfectly together. The more we are at odds with each other – the more we have factions – this group is looking down on that group, and we don’t trust that leader, and our way is better than their way, and we are followers of so-and-so (“I am of Paul, I am of Apollos...”) – all of that destroys our unity and makes us less and less the dwelling place of God.



2) *Maintain Holiness*

When we do that we are destroying the church.

And destroying the Sanctuary of God is a very serious matter.

1 Corinthians 3:16 Don't you know that you are God's Holy Place and that the Spirit of God lives in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's Holy Place, God will destroy him; for God's Holy Place is holy, and that is what you are.

That is not to say all disagreement and debate destroys the church.

In Romans 14, Paul teaches us how both sides in a debate can (and should) remain fully convinced of their view, and still have unity and harmony because of their humility and love and respect for one another. Loving debate can actually build up the church – if we are speaking the truth in love (Eph.4:15). Colossians 3:16 commands that we instruct one another. That is what debate is – instructing one another. It is not differences and debate on minor issues that destroy the church. It's arguing and fighting and trying to come out on top of your opponent and mistrust and suspicion and unforgiveness and holding grudges and assuming bad motives and refusal to communicate clearly and unreconciled relationships and gossip and grumbling. Those things destroy the Temple, and God will destroy the people who do that to His church. Jesus gave His life to make us a Temple, and He is serious about protecting that.

And the same could be said for any kind of unrepentant sin. All sin does damage to the church, but if we repent, God restores and heals. But when we drag unrepentant sin into this place, that is like dragging a dead pig into the ancient Jewish Temple. When your spouse hurts you and you are facing the temptation, “Should I respond in anger? Should I give the silent treatment? Should I retaliate?” Or when you face some other temptation, and you are about to give in – does it ever occur to you that if you do, you are functioning like Nebuchadnezzar, who came and smashed the Temple of God to rubble? We need to keep things like selfishness, anger, lying, vengeance, impurity, greed, envy, ingratitude, and pride out of here. Whenever Jesus rebuked one of the churches in Revelation it was always for either unrepentant sin or tolerating false teachers – never anything else.

If we are going to function as the dwelling place of God we must be holy, which means we must separate ourselves from the world.

2 Corinthians 6:14 Do not be yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? 15 What agreement does Christ have with Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? 16 And what agreement does God's Holy Place have with idols? For we are the Holy Place of the living God, as God said: I will dwell among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be My people. 17 Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord; do not touch any unclean thing, and I will welcome you. 18 I will be a Father to you, and you will be sons and daughters to Me, says the Lord Almighty. 7:1 Therefore dear friends, since we have such promises, we should wash ourselves clean from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

If we are going to function as God's dwelling place, we must be separated from the world. Developing the kind of friendships with the world where they influence us toward worldliness instead of the other way around is like dragging idols into the very Holy of holies.

Our relevance comes from our difference, not our similarity

And the excuse a lot of Christians try to use now-a-days is that they are simply trying to make the gospel relevant in the context of our culture. They start using off color-language, and going to concerts with trashy music, hanging out in bars – all in the name of being relevant. My question is, “How is it relevant to bring them a message about how they can stay the way they already are?” If we are just like them, why should they listen to our message? They already know how to be the way they are. If you are stuck in a prison, advice from fellow prisoners about how to escape is not relevant. What is relevant is information from someone who has escaped and is telling you the way out. The very thing that makes our message relevant to the world is how different we are, not how similar we are.

Priesthood

Ok, so we are God's Temple. We are the holy dwelling place of God. But that is not all. Not only are we the Temple, but we are also the priests inside the Temple. We are like the bricks, we are like the building, we are like the lampstands, and we are like the priests.

The Function of a Priest

What is a priest? In Exodus 19:22 the priests are referred to as **“those who come near the LORD”** to offer sacrifices.

1 Peter 2:5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices

In Old Testament times, if you wanted to worship God, you bring your animal to the priest, and then he takes it in to the altar in the Holy Place because the priests were the only ones who were allowed to go in that close to God's presence. And we are called priests so that we understand that is our role – to offer acceptable sacrifices to God. That is part of the mission of the church.

It's what we do.

Worship

In Old Testament times there were two kinds of sacrifices – sacrifices for sin, and sacrifices designed to express worship and love for God. That first kind isn't offered anymore because those were just a picture of Jesus' sacrifice of Himself on the cross to pay for all our sin. Now that Jesus has done that, we don't need pictures of it anymore. But the other kind of sacrifice is still in place – gifts of worship. Worship sacrifices are still very much a part of what we do.

Offering Sacrifices

So how do we offer worship sacrifices? If I told you, “Hey, remember that you're a priest. So don't leave here today without putting an acceptable sacrifice on the altar,” what would that mean? We know it is not literal animals anymore, so what is it that we offer? That is a very easy question to answer. All you have to do is look up the word “sacrifice” in the New Testament and see what the writers of Scripture describe as being like sacrifices. One of them is right here in our text. Just peek ahead to verse 9.

1) Praise

1 Peter 2:9 ... you are a royal priesthood ... so that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness

That is why we devote a major portion of our time together on Sunday mornings to singing praises to God. That is part of our role as priests.

Hebrews 13:15 Therefore, through Him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of our lips that confess His name.

If we are going to fulfill our mission as a church, Agape Bible Church must be a place where genuine praise is rising up to God. And so we sing every Sunday. The singing is not for the purpose of preparing you for the sermon. Just the opposite – I preach for the purpose of making us better worshippers. Coming together as a church and offering heartfelt praises to God is as close to the center of our mission as anything else we do.

2) Prayer

And the same is true of our prayers. Revelation 5:8 says our prayers function like incense.

People ask why we don't have adult Sunday school. I would love to *teach* a Sunday school class. That is one of my favorite things to do in life. But we made the hard decision to set that aside in favor of an hour of prayer every Sunday for the whole church, because corporate prayer is so important. And if you want the whole church involved, you've got to do it on Sunday morning. That is one of the main reason we have our prayer groups. If your prayer group tends to take up the whole time with requests and never gets around to actually praying – speak up. We need to pray together, and we need to worship and sing praises. Why? Because it is our God-given *mission*.

After Solomon spent 20 years building the first Temple, in 2 Chronicles 6 he prayed a lengthy prayer of dedication, and the gist of it was this: “God, when people come to this Temple to pray – listen to their prayers. Especially when it's a prayer of repentance.”

3) Repentance

Psalm 51:17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Repentance and getting right with God is worship, and the place to do it is the Temple.²

Isaiah 56:6 foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him ... 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”

The Temple is the place you go to worship and pray and get right with God when you have sinned.

Worship as an end, not a means

And so when we ask the question, “What are we? Are we a hospital or a social club or a mission board – what is a church?” Answer – a church is a worship center. We are both a temple and a priesthood – the place of worship and the ones offering worship. If you want food, go to a grocery store, if you want entertainment, go to a movie theater, if you want books, go to a library, but if you want to experience the presence of God and worship Him, go to church.

It is important for us to understand this as our identity so we don't think of worship as a means to some higher end. Churches who think the only thing that matters is winning the lost will turn their corporate worship into a tool to win the lost. They structure everything in the public worship service to be appealing to unbelievers. The largest church in our area actually plays secular songs in the service. Why? Because worshipping God is not their final goal. It is just a stepping stone or tool to be used for their highest goal, which is getting more people in the building.

Other churches think of worship as tool for making disciples. We want people to grow spiritually, so we use the worship time to reach that goal.

There might be a lot of side benefits that come from worship, but none of those are the ultimate goal. The highest goal of worship is worship. We don't worship in order to accomplish something else – it is an end in itself. We don't worship in order to win the lost; we win the lost in order to increase worship by adding more voices to the choir of worshippers. We don't worship in order to bring people to maturity; we bring people to maturity in order to deepen their worship.

This is why we have to remember what we are. If you think we are mainly a hospital, then we will use worship to heal people. But if we understand that we are a holy priesthood – a bunch of professional worshippers, then we will realize the centrality of worship.

Have you ever thought through why the church is compared to golden lampstands in the holy place in Revelation 1-3? I would like to know what the missional crowd would say the reason for that metaphor is. If we only exist to interact with the world, why are we portrayed as being furniture in the Holy Place?

² David said that in a time when the sacrificial system was still in place. Even in Old Testament times these spiritual sacrifices of worship were more important than the physical pictures. The offerings of the heart have always been what matters to God.

You know who got to see the lampstands in the holy place? Nobody (except the priests). No one else was allowed to ever go in there. Part of the mission of the church is to simply function as beautiful furniture adorning the holy dwelling place of God.

So we take corporate worship very seriously at Agape. Just about every procedure we have in the way we do our corporate prayer time comes not from tradition or the preferences of the worship leader, but rather from our studies of what the Bible says about how to do corporate worship. Most of that is summarized in the sermon series titled *The Worshipping Church*. If you haven't gone through that series I would strongly urge you to do so. I really think that is one of the most important studies we have done.

4) Ministry of Spiritual Gifts

So is the use of our spiritual gifts.

Romans 12:1 Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship...

Then he goes on to talk about the ministry of our gifts. What does it mean to be a priest? It means we offer God sacrifices like that – the ministry of our gifts. Whatever your ministry role is at Agape, I hope you take it very seriously. If you work in the nursery or help with greeting or whatever you do – I hope you are never, ever offering shoddy work, or grudging work (where you are saying, “What a burden”), or half-hearted work. This is a priestly role! You are in the holy place at the altar, and it is something of cosmic, eternal importance.

5) Giving

Another thing the Bible calls a sacrifice is giving. When the Philippian church gave a generous financial gift to support Paul's ministry Paul referred to that as **a fragrant offering, a welcome sacrifice, pleasing to God** (Php.4:18). Giving is such an important part of what it means to function as a church. If you are not putting anything in the offering box, or if what you are putting in there is not bringing joy to your heart, you are malfunctioning as a priest. That is why we do the offering during the singing time – so we don't forget that this is an essential act of worship. We don't just give to fund the work of our mission. Giving to the Lord IS our mission. Offering the firstfruits of all our increase with joyful hearts in worship IS an acceptable sacrifice, and so as a holy priesthood, giving is right at the center of our mission.

6) Sharing and Good Deeds

So those are five things Scripture identifies as sacrifices. What else? How about generosity and good deeds?

Hebrews 13:16 Don't neglect to do good and to share, for God is pleased with such sacrifices

7) Faith and Love

How about faith and love?

Philippians 2:17 I am poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith

Ephesians 5:2 walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.

The Philippians' *faith* was a pleasing sacrifice, and Jesus' *love* was a pleasing sacrifice that we are to imitate.

The church exists as a place for praises, giving of offerings, corporate prayers, confession of sin, and getting right with God. That is what a Temple is for, and that is what priests do.

8) *The souls of Men and Women*

Let me give you one more: the souls of men and women. Listen to how Paul described his ministry in Romans 15. He said, "I am...

Romans 15:16 ... serving as a priest of God's gospel ... that the Gentiles might become an acceptable offering

This is where we finally answer the question that many of you have been asking, "Where does reaching the lost fit in to our mission?" One of the sacrifices we offer God in worship as priests is the souls of men and women. And that is where I would like to pick it up next time.

Conclusion

What Did You Contribute Today?

For now, let me just leave you with this. When you are driving home from church, and you are evaluating how things went, get in the habit of asking yourself this question. What did I do to contribute to Agape functioning as dwelling place of God? Did I do my part in making sure that when people came, they were able to experience the presence of Almighty God? Was I involved in the church being the church? Did I contribute to unity and harmony and holiness? Or is it possible I did some things that actually hindered that? Are there some things I did or said that made it less likely that people would walk away having encountered God – like drawing attention to myself so people are thinking about me instead of God? Or having some sinful attitude that would provoke God to withdraw His presence? Don't ever forget – you are the church. If this is going to be a Temple of God, that will only happen when each of you is contributing to our holiness.

The Gravity of the Priesthood

And each one of you is a priest. If that doesn't make you tremble, think back to the first two priests in the Aaronic line – Nadab and Abihu. After they went through the extensive and exacting preparation process, they were finally ready for their first time actually going into the Holy Place. God called the entire assembly of Israel to come to the Tabernacle to watch.

Imagine Aaron standing there popping the buttons off his shirt – so proud of his sons; chosen by God, prepared, now standing here in front of the entire nation. If you could see inside Aaron's mind as he looked at his sons standing there all decked out in the priestly garb, about to go in to the very presence of God, no doubt he was thinking something like, *This is the happiest day of my life!* Listen to what happened.

Leviticus 10:1-11 Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his own firepan, put fire in it, placed incense on it, and presented unauthorized fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them to do. ² Then flames leaped from the LORD's presence and burned them to death before the LORD.

Imagine you are there. The stunned silence of everyone present feels like it should never be broken. Aaron's face is white as a sheet. He is standing there in shock, looking at the charred remains of his sons. You and all the Israelites around you are standing there like statues in disbelief. Even the little children are quiet, not moving a muscle. And the first one to break the silence is the voice of Moses, who turns and faces Aaron and says these words:

³ So Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD meant when He said: 'By those who come near Me I will be regarded as holy; And before all the people I will be glorified.' And Aaron remained silent.

Among the priests, who approach the presence of God in worship, God *will be* regarded as holy. Functioning as a priest is a serious matter.

The next time you are tempted to sluff off your rotation as a greeter or you take some ministry lightly or check out during the prayer time in your prayer group – remember what happened to Nadab and Abihu. The priesthood is an awesome thing, and we would do well to pause in the car before walking in here to remind ourselves, “I’m a priest of the living God and I’m about to enter the sanctuary!”

Benediction: Psalms 4:3 Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord will hear when I call to him. ... 5 Offer right sacrifices and trust in the LORD.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) How would you describe your current position as a brick in the construction of the Agape Temple? (Firmly set in your place, fitted up tightly against the surrounding bricks, or realizing there are some corners that make you unusable in the wall right now, or sitting off by yourself on the ground at the construction site, or back at the quarry not even hewn out of the rock yet, etc.)
- 2) As a priest, which are your strongest areas of sacrifice and which are the weakest? (Corporate praise, corporate prayer, repentance, ministry of your gift, giving to God, sharing with others, faith, love, or the souls of people)