

The Holy Spirit makes us God's temple

Ice-breaker: If you could choose before birth what kind of body you could have, what kind of physical prowess would you like it to be capable of? (E.g. a 1500m runner, or a gymnast, or an All Black prop forward, or a competitive dancer, or a mountaineer.)

For a while I used to supplement my stipend by buying and selling photographic equipment online. Years of poring over photography magazines, looking at advertisements and reading reviews for equipment I couldn't possibly afford had finally paid off. With an extensive knowledge of cameras from the 1960s forward, I knew a bargain when I saw one, and in that brief period when people were starting to buy digital cameras and when their discarded film cameras were still valuable, I made my move. I got adept at scanning the Ebay and Trademe listings, though it was always a bit hit or miss. What exactly did people mean by "great condition" or "hardly used"? I would bid on the auctions never quite knowing what I had

bought until the packages arrived from Detroit or Kowloon or Motueka. No matter how they were described in the advertisement, one glance at the gear when I unwrapped it told me a lot about the person who had owned it, and particularly, precisely what that person's commitment to photography had been.

The most disappointing arrivals, from a trading point of view, were the cameras from professionals: top of the line models, usually functioning pretty well, but with dings and cracks and scratches and stains all over them. The best were from affluent amateurs: beautifully kept and unmarked, sometimes arriving inside their original, decades-old packaging, but with less obvious problems: light seals hardened, squeaky mechanisms in mirrors and shutters from lack of use. The story told by these bits of kit were eloquent. Some people are interested in taking photos, and their gear is a means to an end, and is well used. Some other people are interested in owning cameras

and their gear is a trophy or a status symbol to be polished and cherished. Most people are somewhere in the middle, but it was all there to be seen, plain as day when the box was opened.

As it is with our bodies. Paul says that we are members of Christ. That is, we are the means by which Christ is made present on this planet. Or, in other words, we are a kind of temple where the holiest presence in the universe chooses to make a home. That's a claim which is, on the face of it, so preposterous that it's no wonder most of us have trouble believing it. And the measure to which we have trouble believing it is right here, to be seen, plain as day, by ourselves and by those we don't succeed in hiding from. What we do with our bodies is an absolutely accurate indication of how holy we regard them as being. And for most of us, the signs all point to "not very".

You will know the extent to which you treat your body as the temple it is, but Paul's intent in pointing out the incongruity between what we are and how we treat ourselves isn't to cause guilt and despair. Neither is it to call us to steely resolve and a "must do better" attitude. The primary requirements of our spiritual lives are twofold: Intention and consent. We can't make ourselves holy, but it helps if we want to be. We can't make ourselves holy, but it

helps if we give permission to the one who can.

We open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit, and the work of transformation is started in us. Step by tiny step, we become what God knows and intends we can be.

Gospel passage: Luke 2:25-28

"There was a man, Simeon, who lived in Jerusalem. He was just in his dealings and devoted in his worship. The Holy Spirit was on him as he waited patiently for God to make his presence known to Israel. The same Holy Spirit had told him he would not die until he saw the Lord's Anointed – the Christ. One day, moved by the Spirit, he went into the Jerusalem Temple. At the same time Jesus' parents were bringing the child there for ceremonies required by customary law. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and blessed God, saying ..."

A significant reason why Jesus was executed through crucifixion was the challenge he made to the significance of the physical Temple in Jerusalem, built of stones and timber. It was the most special place in Israel for fellow Jews who understood the Temple as the place in which God dwelt. Here, Jesus as an infant is brought to the Temple and his uniqueness as God's Anointed One is affirmed.

Read the passage: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20



Reflections on the passage

Through 1 Corinthians 3 and 4, Paul continues to argue against Corinthian factionalism, in favour of unity in Christ. Their foundation as a church is Jesus Christ (3:11). They do not belong to a human leader – they belong to Christ (3:23). Yet Paul stakes his claim (or at least reminds them of it) that he should have a special place in their hearts, “in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (4:15). In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tackles a serious issue of immorality in the congregation which has been badly mishandled. Then 6:1-11 continues Paul’s concern about factionalism: church members are suing one another in court. This had to stop.

Our passage, 6:12-20 begins with a concern which flows over from chapter 5 and 6:9-10. While Christians have extraordinary freedom, “All things are lawful for me” (possibly a boast of the congregation?), that does not mean that “anything goes,” when it comes to either food or sex (6:12-13a).

Verses 13b-18 focus on “fornication” (the Greek word is *porneia*) which in this context likely means a focus on some Corinthian Christians who exercised their notion of “freedom” in order to sleep with temple prostitutes (an

acceptable custom for Corinthian males). Paul offers a complex argument in favour of his simple command, “Shun fornication!” (18). The essence of the argument is that our bodies as Christians now belong to the Lord (13b-15a) and Christ our Lord would never be “united to a prostitute” (15b-17), so neither should we be.

Our focus, in this study on the Holy Spirit, comes in the last two verses of the passage, which effectively underline what Paul has been saying about fornication with temple prostitutes: our bodies are “a temple of the Holy Spirit within you”. That means we are not in charge of what our bodies may or may not do, rather the Holy Spirit is in charge. In these verses Paul is taking an image he has used in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 about the whole church, “you are God’s temple ... God’s Spirit dwells in you” and saying that each member of the church/temple is also God’s temple in that place and at that moment in which the Holy Spirit dwells.

If the Holy Spirit is alive in each of us and in the church as a whole, then the freedom Paul spoke of back in verse 12 is not a freedom to indulge our physical appetites. It is a freedom to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives, a freedom to do what God wants. “You are not your own,” Paul writes at the end of verse 19, “For you were bought



with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (20).

Paul doesn't spell out what this means for the factionalized Corinthian church. Recalling our passage above from Luke's Gospel, there was only one physical Temple for the Jews – the Jerusalem Temple. In the transformation of understanding that Jesus brought, (that the new dwelling place of God was not a physical building but the physical people of God), any talk of the church being a temple of the Holy Spirit means one united church, not many temples. And any talk of each believer being a temple of the Holy Spirit is based on the starting point of the one church, which has many members. We will see this developed in 1 Corinthians 12 – Study 4 in particular.

For now, we are invited to reflect on what it means that God is so intimately involved in our individual lives. We are encouraged to understand that the Holy Spirit of God lives within us and that we belong to the church as a living entity empowered by the same Spirit.

Questions

- **In your own words, why does Paul say it matters what we do for good or ill with our bodies?**
- **We can all think of ways that we dishonour or degrade our bodies, whether through lack of exercise, overindulging, or worse. How can we positively honour the bodies we've been given?**
- **“I will not be dominated (mastered) by anything” (verse 12). What are some of the things that tend to ‘master’ people today?**
- **“...Glorify God in your body” (verse 20b). In practical terms, what might this mean for how we live today in a Western society?**

Prayer

Almighty God,

you have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts

and set us free from the bondage to sin;

give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,

that we and all your people may be brought

to the glorious liberty of the children of God;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.