



Sermon Transcript October 10, 2021

An Appeal for U.N.I.T.Y. “T” - Together We Build 1 Corinthians 3:5-23

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 10, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
1 Corinthians 3:5-23

5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. **6** I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. **7** So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. **8** He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. **9** For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. **11** For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. **12** Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— **13** each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. **14** If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. **15** If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? **17** If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. **19** For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, He catches the wise in their craftiness, **20** and again, The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile. **21** So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, **22** whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, **23** and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

Introduction

We are making our way through 1 Corinthians 1-4 and the verse that sets the tone for these four chapters is 1 Corinthians 1:10. Paul writes, *“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that you be united.”* That word *appeal* is a strong word. It means “to exhort” or “to beg” or to “entreat.” Some English translations translate it with the word *urge*. *“I urge you, brothers.”* It is the same word you find in Romans 12:1. For eleven chapters, Romans 1-11, Paul rehearses for us the gospel, the good news of Jesus. It is the “good news” that *“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”* has come to us by God’s grace. And then we come to Romans 12:1 and we hear Paul make his strong *appeal*. *“Therefore, I urge you brothers . . . or . . . I appeal to you therefore, brothers . . . present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God . . . Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* Gordon Fee says of this word *urge* or *appeal* it is a “call to conform their behavior to the gospel, not as law but as a response to the grace that is in Christ.”¹ Because of what Jesus has done in your life, Paul says, *“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that you be united.”*

Perhaps you can’t really appreciate the strong appeal for unity if you don’t appreciate the church. I would have to say, the church has lost its luster in the minds and hearts of many in our day. I am not really talking about those who consider themselves outside of Christ this morning. My concern is that the church has lost its luster in the hearts and minds of those who call themselves followers of Jesus. That is who Paul is making his appeal to. He makes his appeal *by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*. And yet, many who name Jesus their Lord, don’t have a high view of the church.

Now don’t get me wrong, all the statistics prior to the pandemic indicated that church attendance was in decline for every major age category for the past 20 years. But add to that the fact that most prognosticators anticipate that 20% of those who were “regular” prior to the pandemic are not coming back. Carey Nieuwhof said that “you can make a strong argument that the current low return-to-church attendance numbers reflect where the church might have ended up a decade from now. But because of the pandemic, we just got there a lot faster.”² Many of these people will still claim to have faith in Jesus, but they have little regard or time for the church.

Michael Svigel says that part of the problem is that we have bought into several myths about the church that cause us to have a low view of the church.³ MYTH #1: The Church is Merely a Human Organization. You might hear it put this way. “Church is

about religion. Jesus is about relationship.” The implication is that we “can do Jesus without church.” MYTH #2: The Church is a Supermarket of Spiritual Groceries. So we approach church like a consumer. This leads to church shopping, church hopping and sadly for some, church dropping. Instead of seeing the church as a family and as a place of commitment, we evaluate it primarily on what services are available for me. We have become consumers of church and members looking for club benefits. MYTH #3: The Church is Just a Gathering of a Few Believers. It is just “two or three believers gathered at the diner in his name.” This misses the fact that there are certain marks that make a church a church. There needs to be orthodoxy (proper belief), order (proper leadership) and ordinances (baptism and communion). These are things we submit to when we belong to a church. MYTH #4: The Church is Optional. There may be many reasons that cause a person to pull away from the church and to see the church as being optional. True, being part of a church family is a challenge. I like what Hansen and Leeman say about life in the church. “God does not invite us to church because it’s a comfortable place to find spiritual encouragement. No, he invites us into a spiritual family of misfits. He welcomes us into a home that is rarely what we want yet just what we need.”⁴ The church is not optional. It is essential.

In our passage this morning, Paul helps us understand the reason for the urgency of his appeal for unity in the church. His urgency for unity is born out of his high regard for the church. Listen to the word pictures, the metaphors, Paul uses in our passage to describe the church. In verse 9 he says to the church, “*You are God’s field.*” And then he adds, “*God’s building.*” He says in verse 16, “*Do you now know that you are God’s temple.*” And then he ends by hinting at the mystical union between Christ and his church, by saying “*and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.*” Before we even try to understand these metaphors, we can make one simple observation. The church belongs to God! “*God’s field . . . God’s building . . . God’s temple . . . You are Christ’s and Christ is God’s.*” That, in itself, ought to heighten the value of the church to you. The church is the apple of God’s eye and it is essential!

As we unpack these metaphors, we are going to discover our place in the church and we are going to see how we contribute to the church. We have been making our way through 1 Corinthians 1-4, identifying five methods to help us maintain our unity.

U - Unceasing Gratitude for God’s people

N - Never Leave the Cross. It is the power for those who are being saved.

I - Impart the Mindset of Christ. The cross shapes how we live together.

T - Together We Build . . . God’s view of the church shapes our view towards the church. Together we serve one another and this leads to our unity.

God's Field - Servants Together

Paul begins with an agricultural metaphor to describe the church. *"You are God's field."* A field is a place where things come to life and they grow. Jesus used the metaphor of the field to describe what the kingdom of God was like. He told the parable of the four soils, indicating that as we sow the seed of God's Word, some of it will fall on good soil and produce fruit. The parable of the Mustard Seed tells us that even though the kingdom of God seems small and insignificant, it will grow to be the largest of the plants. In other words, Jesus said what Paul is saying here about the church. God is at work through the ministry of the church. Through the church, God brings people to life. Through the church, God grows people in their faith. Twice Paul says it is *God who gives the growth*.

What does that mean for us? Paul says that we are *servants* who get to participate with the work that God is doing in his field, the church. Now don't forget, Paul is dealing with the division that existed in the church at Corinth and their division seemed to be centered around leaders and personalities. These leaders, Paul included, were put on a pedestal and lifted above the others. And so Paul starts by saying, *"What then is Apollos? What is Paul?"* At the end of the day, we are nothing but servants who make our contribution by fulfilling God's calling on our lives. Paul planted the church in Corinth. Apollos came after Paul and watered what Paul had planted. But at the end of the day, Paul says, *"Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything."* In fact he says that he and Apollos are *one* and they are *fellow workers*, servants together.

Here is what Paul understood about the church. When you serve and participate with what God is doing in the church, God uses you to bring people to life and to grow his people. Did you catch what Paul said at the beginning of this passage? He said that he and Apollos are *servants through whom you believed*. While recognizing that God is the one that brings about spiritual life, Paul is humbled by the fact that he uses people like you and me to bring about belief. He uses people like you and me, serving together, to help people grow in their faith. The church is the field where God is at work.

Don't lose sight of who Paul is talking to here. *"You"* . . . church at Corinth . . . *"are God's field."* The church at Corinth? Really? That is right! This church with all of its problems is *God's field* where God is at work. This whole letter is outlined around five major problems plaguing this church. This letter is one of four letters that Paul has written to this church and these letters are pretty tense because of the issues Paul is addressing. Is this not encouraging to us? This is not to suggest that problems in a church should be ignored. Paul is not ignoring them. But it does suggest that life in the

church is filled with challenges and problems. Like we already noted, the church is a “spiritual family of misfits . . . a home that is rarely what we want, yet just what we need.” In God’s field—the church—as we serve him together, he is at work changing lives. Some of it you will clearly see. Some of it you may not even be aware of until you get to heaven. In a few weeks at our baptism service, you will hear stories of what God is doing in this field—Wethersfield EFC. You can be sure, that God is at work in his church. Why would we not want to be involved—serving together—where God is at work? When we serve together, we contribute to the unity of the church.

God’s Building - Careful Builders Together

Paul changes metaphors rather abruptly in verse 9. Immediately after referring to the church as *God’s field* he switches images and says that the church is *God’s building*. This building has a foundation. He says in verse 11, “*For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*” Paul said that when he planted the church he was *like a skilled master builder* in that he laid the foundation of the church. The word that is translated *master builder* is the word from which we get the word *architect*. The “building” of the church is designed with Jesus as the foundation. When you go back to Acts 18 you can see that Jesus was the foundation of this church in Corinth. Paul’s message to them was that Jesus was the Christ. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-2, Paul reminded them that when he came to them and planted the church that he *decided to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified*.

So now Paul turns his direction to those who come after him. He is mainly talking to leaders here who will build on what Paul has started. He said, “*I laid the foundation, and someone else is building upon it.*” And here was his instruction to those leaders who are building on what Paul has started, “*Let each one take care how he builds upon it.*” He says to the leaders at the church of Corinth, make sure the building you are building aligns with the foundation. I think he is saying this to the leaders of the church in Corinth. “If Jesus is the foundation of the church, make sure Jesus remains the focus of your building.” It is in line with what we said that past few weeks. We never leave the cross. We are to have the mindset of Christ. Now he is saying, build on the foundation of Jesus.

In fact, I think that is the difference between the one who builds on this foundation with *gold, silver and precious stones* and the one who builds with *wood, hay and straw*. The *gold, silver and precious stones* is what is compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified. The latter, *wood, hay and straw* is anything else. In the case of the

Corinthians, it is the quest for *wisdom*. In our case, it is individualism. It is reducing the gospel down to do's and don'ts—moralism. That message won't stand the test of fire when we have to give an account for how we built the church. Spurgeon used to get antsy when he would hear a sermon that was learned—filled moral truth, ethical practice and inspiring concepts—but not a word about Christ. A Christian message without Christ is not a Christian message. He would say, like Mary Magdalene said about Jesus when she couldn't find him in the tomb, "They have take away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him. I have heard nothing about Christ."⁵ Tim Keller agrees with Spurgeon. He says that "unless we preach Jesus rather than a set of morals of the story or timeless principles or good advice, people will never truly understand the love of Jesus and nor will they be moved to obey."⁶

Paul says this about Jesus in 1 Corinthians 1:30. He is the "wisdom of God, the righteousness of God, the sanctification of God, and the redemption of God." Jesus is the beginning and the end and everything in between. This Jesus is the Jesus who loves to forgive his people and embrace his people and love his people. The church is the place where we carefully build on that foundation. Through lifting Jesus up, we are reassured of his love for us and we experience it in the embrace and the patience and the forgiveness of his church. If Jesus and his love is what we are offering, why wouldn't we want to be part of his people, the church?

God's Temple - Worshipers Together

Paul moves from the image of a building to the image of a very specific building—the temple. He says in verse 16, "*Do you not know that you are God's temple.*" He uses that phrase *do you not know . . .* about ten times in the book of 1 Corinthians. It implies that "you should know this." It is a good question for anyone who thinks that the church is just a human organization, something optional to our faith. To this person, Paul would say, "Do you not know that your church gathered is God's temple?"

To the Jewish mind, this will easily conjure up images of the Old Testament temple, the place where God dwelt among his people, Israel. Paul even says that here in this verse, "*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*" The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel ministered to the people of Israel while they were in exile, after the temple had been destroyed. In Ezekiel 40-48, he talked about a restored temple and from this temple a river would flow and it would give water and life wherever it goes. I remember as a kid singing a Sunday School song that was fun to sing, but I never understood what it meant. "I got a river of life flowing out of me,

makes the lame to walk and the blind to see. Opens heavens doors, sets the captives free. I got a river of life flowing out of me. Spring up oh well, within my soul! Spring up oh well, and make me whole. Spring up oh well, and give to me, that life abundantly.” The water that flows from the temple is the Holy Spirit who heals and restores our life.

In 1 Corinthians 6:19, Paul indicates that the Holy Spirit lives inside of us as individuals. He says that for the Christian, their body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. While that is true, that is not the point he is making here. Here he says, “do you not know that when you gather as a church, collectively, you are the temple of God where the Holy Spirit dwells?” When we gather as a church, the Holy Spirit dwells with us and he is giving water to dry and thirsty souls.

This image to the temple, would not be lost to the Gentile from Corinth. Most of them came out of a lifestyle where they had pagan temples and shrines, a building that “housed” whatever deity they were worshipping. But as they came to faith in Jesus, they came to affirm that there is *one* God. Gordon Fee put it this way, “since there is *one* God, that one God can only have *one* temple in Corinth, and they themselves, as a gathered community of believers, *are* that temple.”⁷ Paul’s concern about their lack of unity is that their division could “destroy God’s temple in Corinth.” They would cease to be the alternative that the church brings to their community. To bring them to their senses he says to them, “*Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?*” Don’t cease to be God’s alternative to your community.

This helps define who we are. We are worshipers together. There is a great statement about the church gathered in 1 Corinthians 14. Paul is saying that when we gather we should worship in an orderly way so that when the person outside of faith wanders into our gathering they might say to themselves, “*God is really among you.*” I can’t think of a better thing to say about the church gathered than to have someone say, “I sense the Spirit of God among you.” Or, “I can’t explain it, but my heart is being strangely warmed to the things of God.” That should not surprise us when someone gives that kind of testimony. “*Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?*” Where the Spirit is, there is life. We are worshipers together.

God’s Possession - Love Together

Paul ends this chapter with an outburst of praise. He does that often when he writes about the glory and grace of God. He can’t contain himself and worship spills out from him. So look at this “doxology” at the end of 1 Corinthians 3. “*So let no one boast in*

men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." It is a great statement at the end of this outburst of praise. He says, "*you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*" It is a phrase that reminds us that God is Triune: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. There is one God, but three persons. While these persons are distinct, they have existed in perfect love and unity for all of eternity. It is a truth that assures us that at the heart of who God is, God is love.

But look what he is saying here. "*You (church) are Christ's* just like *Christ is God's.*" In other words, we have been brought into the love and the fellowship of the Triune God. This is why Paul is making his appeal, urging the church at Corinth to *be united*. Our love for one another is how we show the world around us what God is like. I am reading the book *Gentle and Lowly* with a group of guys and this week we read about the "happiness of Christ." He quoted the Puritan, Thomas Goodwin, by asking what increases the joy, the happiness and the comfort of Jesus more than anything else? In other words, "what does Jesus love to do more than anything else?" The answer? It is "to show grace, mercy, pardon, relief and comfort to his people on earth— the church."⁸ How do we show the world that God? By being the church! By finding our greatest delight in one another as we show grace, mercy, pardon, relief and comfort. In doing so, we show them our God.

Conclusion

Has the church lost it's luster in your heart and your mind? My prayer is that the church has been elevated in your mind this morning. If there is any myth that has been shattered this morning may it be the myth that the church is optional. It is essential. We will never fully appreciate that call for unity if we have a low view of the church.

Wethersfield EFC, we are God's field and God is at work among us. So get in the game! Use your gifts and lets serve together knowing that God will use our service to accomplish his work. We are God's building and Jesus is our foundation. So let us be careful how we build. Lets make sure we make the main thing the main thing and no matter where you serve, point them to Jesus! We are God's temple and the Spirit of God is here giving us life. May it be said when we worship together that the Spirit of God is here. We are Christ's possession, the apple of his eye. His love freely flows to this group of misfits. He loves nothing more than to extend his grace, mercy, pardon, relief and comfort to us. May that be our greatest delight as we love together. In doing so, we show the world that Jesus is the Son of God. "T" - Together we build.

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- ¹Gordon Fee *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 53
- ²Carey Nieuwhof “Church Attendance is Dying. What Next?” <https://careynieuwhof.com>
- ³Michael Svigil *Retrochristianity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012) 148-158
- ⁴Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman *Rediscover Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021) 13
- ⁵Charles Haddon Spurgeon “Christ Precious to Believers” (sermon no. 242, March 13, 1859), in *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 5 (repr., Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), p. 140
- ⁶Tim Keller *Preaching* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016) iv
- ⁷Fee, 159
- ⁸Dane Ortland *Gentle and Lowly* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020) 35-36

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Which of the four “myths” of the church (pgs. 3-4) are you most tempted to believe? Why? Has the church lost some of its luster in your heart and mind? Why?
2. In the sermon, church was described this way: “God welcomes us into a home that is rarely what we want yet just what we need.” How does this description of the church fit your experience?



Diving Into The Word

3. Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-23

In this passage, Paul describes the church as 1.) God’s field 2.) God’s building
3.) God’s temple 4.) God’s possession.

What do you learn about the church from these word pictures?
Which stands out to you the most? Why?

As the church, we are called to . . .

Serve together in God’s field

Carefully build together in God’s building (point people to Jesus)

Worship together in God’s temple

Love together as God’s people who belong to Jesus

Which of these do you find the most challenging? Why?

How has God worked in your life through the church? Give an example.

What is a next step you can take to participate in the life of the church?



Taking It Home

4. How has this discussion increased your love for the church?
5. Spend some time praying for the church—WEFC.