

The Church: Anchored in Perpetual Growth

A Building, Temple, & Priesthood

In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit

Introduction: Machu Picchu is a place that holds much awe, wonder, and mystery. Dominating the 1400's and into the early 1500's in what is Peru today, the empire once sprawled up and down the coast of South America with a distance equivalent to the length of the United States. In the center of the empire stood the capital city of Machu Picchu with walls, buildings, and a palace that have stood the test of time over the last 500 years. Built into and terraced in a mountain that received over 80 inches of rain a year, the Incas engineered with both drainages to mitigate the excessive water issues and created foundations to withstand inevitable erosion. Experts today are still amazed at the feat that withstood regular earthquakes and have been preserved so well, some have theorized that aliens are behind the build (the same ones who built the Pyramids in Egypt).

But the most remarkable feature of Machu Picchu are the buildings built with stones, no mortar, and immense size without the use of modern day technology or moving equipment:

*One of the most remarkable aspects of Machu Picchu architecture is the precision with which the stones were cut and fitted together. The Incas used a technique called ashlar masonry. This technique involved **cutting and shaping individual stones to fit together perfectly without the use of mortar**. The precision of this technique is evident in the **seamless joints between the stones**. These stone joints are so tight that it is impossible to fit a piece of paper between them.¹*

These pictures, this construction, is an apt and beautiful picture of how the Bible describes the church as **a building, one that is built up into a Temple, made up of a royal group of priests**. This metaphor allows us to continue our growing definition of “*what is a church*”. We have seen that it is a group of redeemed people who are “*called out*” (ekklesia) and who assemble together intentionally, committed to holiness, growing toward maturity, loving each other, submitted to Christ’s Lordship and under the extension of Shepherding leaders called *elders*. Now we will see in this next and final metaphor that we will consider, we will see that the church is called together to **worship together** base on our being joined together in Christ, and we **scatter** to witness or proclaim the excellencies of Christ as royal priests. There are two main passages that we will consider this morning. Let’s read these together:

Ephesians 2:19-22 “So then you are no longer **strangers and aliens**, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.**”

1 Peter 2:4-12 “As you come to him, **a living stone** rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ **you yourselves like living stones** are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a **holy priesthood**, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in Scripture:

*“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a **cornerstone** chosen and precious,*

¹ <https://www.quechuasexpeditions.com/machu-picchu-architecture-the-buildings-of-the-incas-explained/>

and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

⁷ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

*“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the **cornerstone**,”*

⁸ and

*“A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense.”*

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

*⁹ But you are a **chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession**, that you may **proclaim the excellencies of him** who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

*¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as **sojourners** and **exiles** to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles **honorable, so that** when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”*

Before unfolding these verses, we want to remind ourselves of a few things. **1)** God has described the church in such a way that it gives us **clarity** as well as **flexibility**. He gives us principles, guidelines, and some particulars, but does not tell us what it will look like in every culture. That means that the church can thrive in any and every culture, looking differently in each, but having the same core and essence wherever it is seen. *Why is this so important?* A church building like this one is impossible to possess in places where the government disallows it or that the church must remain hidden. That does NOT mean having a building is wrong at all --- most gathered churches would love to have one --- but it is NOT essential.

2) A church can start in a *minimalist* way, but it will move toward organization and maturity. There have been movements around the world and the U.S. that says we don’t need buildings, programs, or structure to have a church. While that is true, what often happens in churches that try to keep it without structure (no pastor or paid staff, inductive Bible study in a group, meeting in homes, no elders or hierarchy, etc.) is that they also do not move toward the Biblical teaching on **elders/pastors**, which then leaves it open to disunity, false teaching, and lacks clarity. This continues to be a discussion among our own mission organization, but we at Grace believe that a church must move toward qualified elders/pastors, regardless if they have programs or a building.

3) We believe the church is God’s instrument in reaching the nations and making disciples. A concerning trend in missions is the fact that young people want to be deployed overseas, but they are not involved in a disciple making church, staying uncommitted to a local assembly and simply living an individual Christian existence. Healthy churches should produce healthy disciples, and healthy disciples should be active in disciple making, including missions, raising children, and evangelism. When churches are unhealthy, a fervor and sacrifice for missions and discipleship fades. Many will say they are disenchanted by the church, or have been burned in the church, or that the church is too political/hierarchical/traditional/not traditional enough/etc. But we are not committed to the church because it’s easy or makes us feel good. We are committed to the church because it is **God’s design for His people and our mission in this world!!!** And since it is God’s design and since it is built by Him, it is both built to **grow and last**. Our goal is not to find new expressions of the church, but to live out the realities that He’s called us to, to His glory, and see Him grow it into His image.

THE MAKEUP UP THE BUILDING

Far too often when we think about the church we associate it with a physical building – “Let’s go to church”. Now, as a HUGE disclaimer, there is nothing unbiblical about having a building, and in fact, it is a blessing of the Lord to be able to steward one. However, if this building went away for whatever reason, we would still BE a church. During the COVID years it was actually a confirming reality for those who were here since we still met, worshipped, loved, baptized, preached, and cared for each other, even when we could not meet inside these four walls. The picture of a building, however, does give us a visual of how we should think about ourselves AS the church.

Foundation:

1 Corinthians 3:10-11 *“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**”*

Every good builder knows that any building worth building is only as good as the foundation. Jesus Himself used this illustration in Matthew 7 comparing a wise man who implemented His words to a man who built his house on a rock, versus a foolish man who built his house on sand. I grew up in the Bay Area in a city where part of the city was built on landfill, which means every earthquake shifts the ground and foundation of the buildings there, including our own home. The foundation of the church, like every metaphor of the church, is **Jesus Christ**. Now, Ephesians 2 also references that the church was built on the foundation of *apostles and prophets*, so does that mean there are two foundations? Not exactly, since God gave the apostles and prophets as gifts to the NT church, who were recipients of foundational knowledge and special revelation that displayed the truth and reality of Christ. But Jesus also played another, differentiating role in the foundation.

Cornerstone

Eph. 2:20-21 *...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the **cornerstone**, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord”* (cf. Ps. 118:22)

Again, for us non-builders, we do not appreciate the nature of a cornerstone in the foundation of a massive structure (see screen for a picture). It was also referred to as the *“head of the corner”*. *“The cornerstone, unlike the foundation stone, was **visible and controlled the design of the building**. It was the stone that brought **unity, harmony, and symmetry** to the edifice.”*² Foundations are typically not seen, but not so with the cornerstone. It is designed to be seen and remembered. That’s why Jesus is called the “precious cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:6; Isa. 28:16), since He is the head, the chief, the husband. Without the cornerstone, there is no building.

Stones

1 Peter 2:5 *...you yourselves like **living stones** are being built up as a spiritual house,”*

There are two main things to see here as those who makeup the house. The **first** is that we are living stones connected to a “living stone”, which is Christ (1 Pet. 2:4). He gives us life. Our life, like our hope, is living and active, ongoing and eternal. When we stay connected to the Cornerstone we cannot help but be nourished and grow (like the metaphor in John 15 about abiding in the Vine). The **second** is that

² Robert Saucy, “The Church in God’s Program”, p. 34-35.

Peter did not use the word “petros or petra” here, which would have been a word for a rock you would find in a field. Instead, he used the word “*lithos*”, which is the word for a ‘worked stone’, one that is shaped, hewn, and crafted to fit perfectly with the others. This was how the Old Testament Temple was built, as 70,000 burden bearers and 80,000 stonecutters were used (1 Kings 5:15) in order to have each piece fit together perfectly:

1 Kings 6:7 *“When the house was built, it was with stone prepared at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the house while it was being built.”*

When God created the church, he fit each piece together perfectly, even though each stone may be a different shape or size. The only mortar used is that we are “in the LORD”, since we are “*joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*” (Eph. 4:16). **What are the implications of this reality?**

- 1) *You are not here by accident but by Divine Initiative and calling* – You are a stone that God chose out to be a part of His building that displays His glory and the excellencies of Christ.
- 2) *Every church is built to grow* – God’s church is full of living stones and a growing building. Growth happens BOTH individually in maturity and corporately. The church WILL grow numerically as it’s living stones play out gospel realities in everyday life, as every aspect of life is transformed by the truth of Jesus. A church that stops growing is either disobedient or disconnected from their foundational cornerstone.
- 3) *You are vital to the building up of THIS church* – In a building with every stone fitting together perfectly will lose its structural integrity if a stone is removed. That means there is no such thing as a “meaningless” living stone. Each of us is given God’s grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift (Eph. 4:6), meaning each of us is equipped by Christ to accomplish what He has called us to.

NATURE OF THE BUILDING

As was already referenced, the church is no mere building, but it is a **Temple**, which provides us the climax of the metaphor of the building itself. This provides even greater focus and clarity as to the nature of the church. We know that our individual bodies are called the “temple” and that is why we are not to do harm to our own bodies (1 Cor. 10:16-17). So each person is a temple of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), but we collectively and corporately are the Temple of God as a church. Let’s look at the implications:

- 1) **The Temple was the dwelling place of God** – When Solomon was given permission and the task of building the Temple from his father David and the LORD, his goal was simple:

1 Kings 8:12-13 *“Then Solomon said, “The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. 13 I have indeed built you an exalted house, **a place for you to dwell in forever.**”*

The LORD filled the temple in a cloud, and His glory would dwell there until He departed because of the rank idolatry and sin of His people (Ezek. 10:1-22). It was the longing of the heart of God’s people to be in His presence once again. In Christ, all who come to repent and believe have that access, since Jesus’ death satisfied God’s wrath and requirement, and the veil of the Temple was torn, and we now have the

Holy Spirit indwelling us. He is NOT distant nor estranged, but among and in. The church is NOT a place where we have to ‘welcome the Holy Spirit’ or that we need more of Him, but that we are each indwelt by Him and thus the presence of God (2 Cor. 6:16). This means that we can do all the things that would happen in the Temple: give our offerings, sacrifices, and prayers, but we do not have to go through a priest or a formal sacrificial system because God is glorified in Christ, and Christ has given us access. This access radically changes the way we worship.

- 2) **The Temple was a central place of corporate worship** – Corporate worship is essential, as it is an overflow of our personal worship daily. The church is where we worship together, to function together as living stones, and lift up praise in unity and love. But we do so now NOT in formality or bound to a place, but lift our praise in spirit and truth.

When the Samaritan woman at the well asked Jesus a question about locations of worship, whether it was designed for Jerusalem or in the secondary, artificial location of Samaria, Jesus answered: **neither**.

John 4:21-24 *“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; **we worship what we know**, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the **true worshipers** will worship **the Father in spirit and truth**, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

In Christ, as living stones, we worship **who we know**, we worship **in truth**, and we worship **in spirit**. This is more than just a service and more than mere singing, although it is all of that. It means that our lives are designed now to worship in all that we do. We worship God daily in our attitudes and actions, at our jobs, in our homes, in our free time, at practice, and our hobbies. We worship together in serving one another, in realizing that our time and money are not our own, so we willingly sacrifice both to the Lord. We no longer separate worship in our minds as “times of worship and not”, but rather “times of corporate worship and times of private”. We are informed of this by **Romans 12:1-2**:

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your **bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship**. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

We are now free to present our entire bodies and lives as an instrument of worship, since we are not bound by a place or a system, but rather our own sinful flesh. If we are to truly worship, it demands **sacrifice, holiness, a renewed mind, and understanding the will of God**. The only problem with a living sacrifice is we often want to crawl off the altar.

THE PRIESTHOOD

We come finally to identity of these living stones. We are a **chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and people for God’s own possession** according to Peter. The priests were mediators, functioning as God’s representative to the people. We do this IN the church when we worship, as we have permanent access to God, but we also do this OUTSIDE of the church in representing God to the world. There are two vital ways that we represent our God to the world, and they are the ways that disciples are made:

- 1) **We proclaim the excellencies of Christ our Savior** (1 Peter. 2:9) – This means that sharing the gospel requires VERBALIZING our faith and belief in Jesus. Not a script. Not a formula. Not a pre-recorded statement. We simply tell people about the greatness of a Savior who called US out of darkness and into the light, who gave us hope, and made us part of his family. We just dropped our daughter off to college, and I have NO PROBLEM telling people about what I think about her or what we hope she'll do there. It's not difficult talking about someone you love or are proud of. But sometimes we get locked up talking about Christ to others for some reason. The churches job is to **PROCLAIM**, not to save. Our obedience is based on that matrix, not on numbers.
- 2) **We conduct ourselves consistently with our calling** (1 Peter. 2:12) – Of course it will be difficult! Peter said they will speak against us as evildoers, since for the depraved heart of an unbeliever, up is down and wrong is right! But for us, in order to proclaim Christ, we must keep our lives not only **holy, but honorable**, a word that means *good, beautiful, or desirable*. In other words, our lives SHOULD be different, our attitudes should be counter-cultural, and our language should be set apart. They should see our lives and wonder what makes us different. But this is hard, and impossible unless we are being filled with truth regularly, loved deeply, and worship boldly with others in the church who have been called to the same.

What is the church? We are a group of redeemed people who gather together to worship God in Christ, through the Word of God and the Spirit of God, in order to proclaim the excellencies of Christ to the world and nations around us. We are uniquely fit together, lacking nothing, and placed perfectly by the Lord to be able to grow, mature, and thrive.

Our hope is that you will join us as we live out these realities OF the church AS the church together. We know the world around continues to shift like a boat without an anchor, but we have are anchored together in Christ, and that means we can live boldly, lovingly, wisely, and truthfully in the midst of it, and we can do it together, all to the glory of God, knowing that a better glory awaits.