

Here Be Idols

By Nathan Warner

“Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.”

(1 Corinthians 3:16-17 NASB)

A Tale of Two Sanctuaries

I’ve read about an abandoned church building in England that I’ll call Thameside where the congregation dwindled to the point that the church decided to close. This sanctuary of worship to God became neglected real estate put up on the market for anyone to buy. The flock that once filled its sanctuary as the Body of Christ instead flocked to sanctuaries of fleshly desires. Abandoning the Church of God for idols, they left their building to be used for the world’s purposes.

Closer to home, I’ve seen another sight – a great, garnished church I’ll call Crosswaters. It’s a place that’s on fire with zeal. People come from everywhere to pack its parking lot full and flood the offering with outpourings of cash. It is an energetic scene bursting with bands, lights, and action, but there is no spiritual substance. The message they preach is not the truth of the Word of God. People press in to experience miracles (self-help and magic) and have miraculous experiences (emotional outpourings). They don’t come to hear about repentance of sin, eternity, suffering, or obedience to Christ, and they’re in luck because they never have to. The gift shop sells books, DVDs, T-shirts, coffee, and anything they can manage to put a sticker onto. In doing these things, they have exchanged God in their church for idols from the world.

Both of these churches are a pattern seen among the Israelites in the Old Covenant. Some Israelites abandoned the temple to worship idols in groves and mountaintops, while others brought their idols into the Temple itself, crowding out the sacrifices to God. While Thameside and Crosswaters seem remarkably different on the outside, they are both illustrations of how idolatry affects the Church. At Thameside, people left God’s House to ruin in order to spend their time and energy on idols. These idols are the things that are perishing with the world, such as a pint at the pub, a football match, shopping, a meal, a television program, etc. These people may still call themselves Christians and wear crosses and own Bibles, but they spend all their time and energy on worldly pursuits. At Crosswaters, the leadership quietly replaced God with idols, bringing the dead things of the world into the Church, converting His House into a place of business. To make this happen, they set up men in place of Christ and promoted the teachings of men over the teachings of God. These “Believers” spend a lot of energy “doing church” and from a distance may seem like Christians on fire for God, but like whitewashed tombs, their insides are dark with idolatry. Their works will perish because the world they love is doomed to perish in fire.

It’s clear that both Thameside and Crosswaters destroyed the sanctuary given to them by God. And while both churches are guilty of idolatry, Crosswaters’ sin is much more serious. It keeps up the appearance of love and obedience to Jesus and proclaims God is good, but the character of God they proclaim is a different god entirely. Like the Pharisees, they present themselves as “Believers,” even gatekeepers for God, but will not let anyone into His Truth, nor will they go in themselves (Luke 11:52). Despite their differences, both of these churches illustrate what

happens when people's priorities change from the eternal to the temporal. Their purpose in life automatically becomes death because what they pursue is also futile vanity for it also will pass away. Instead of denying themselves for Jesus, they deny themselves nothing but Jesus. Before we throw too many stones, however, we should realize we are all guilty of idolatry on some level. We spend so much time stockpiling tinder in bank accounts, homes, cars, jobs, desires, lusts, and all things of the flesh. These are the things that will be burned up by fire. So often we forget the abiding gift of our Salvation: *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body"* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). How could we forget the price God paid to give us eternal life freely?

Attending to God Comes at a Price

The time and energy a Believer puts into worshipping God (at church or in the Body) is time and energy lost to the world – it is given to God and does not profit the flesh. Many of us have felt at least once in our lives that we could be doing something "important" or that "needs doing" instead of attending church, studying the Word, or praying. We sense those distracted moments while at church or in prayer when something other than God is filling our thoughts. What happens when these momentary temptations take root and grow? Perhaps we begin to resent the time we are spending at church, in prayer, and in the Word. Is attending to God worth our effort if it costs us a balanced schedule, a happy family, a great marriage, a successful career, a full bank account, real friendships, and satisfying intimacy?

THAMESIDE: If these are the things that are on our mind all the time, then we most certainly will resent our time spent in church, prayer, and the Word, because we'd rather SPEND our time seeking what we "really need" in the world instead of "wasting" time on "non-essential things." After all, if Salvation is a "VIP ticket" that you've already received, then get out there and live life! Check off "Salvation" from your list and move on to the next big thing! God is love, so He understands me, and He's got my back.

CROSSWATERS: On the other hand, perhaps we fear our salvation is tied up in church attendance and prayer and walking away is a mighty big risk. Yet, we would really rather be SPENDING our time and energy on the "real things" that affect our lives in the world. Well then, how about we bring the things we want from the world into the Church so we can serve ourselves while serving God? And maybe people from the world will come into the Church and hear about God, so we're actually doing God's work while we do work for ourselves. It's the best of both worlds!

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST: *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth"* (Matthew 6:24). Bringing the world into the Church is love of the world, not love of God. Attending to God is worth it because He desires it of us if for no other reason than thankfulness for our Salvation. We have to go beyond realizing that all our idols are not worthy of Him. We have to come to a place where we realize not even our lives are worthy of Him, so that we can say, *"Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him"* (Job 13:15 KJV) – though I am robbed of everything in the world, even my life, yet I will attend to God. Church, prayer, and the Word are time spent on the eternal—that which will last forever. It'll still be a part of us a million years from now. Right now, it's "lost" time to this present world but gained in eternity through the work of Jesus Christ and the gifts He will give. That isn't to say that God won't give

us worldly blessings – of course He does, and there is nothing wrong with asking Him in prayer for these blessings as part of our relationship in Him. However, these things should never come before Him in our hearts because worldly blessings are nothing in the face of eternity. They will perish, but our Salvation will endure forever. God desires the sacrifice of our time and energy to Him, the Bridegroom of the Church (Ephesians 5:25-27), just as He created our human relationships to require the sacrifice of time and energy to each other. A sacrifice acknowledges it may not be convenient or easy for us. We may have to let some things slide to attend to prayer, the Word, and church. Think of the Israelites who had to give the best of their flock and production to God – not the move you’d make if your mind was on what you’ll make at the market, right? Sacrifice to God may mean we fall behind in the world, but if we turn away from Him and sacrifice our time and energy to worldly things instead, we become enemies of God: *“You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God”* (James 4:4). In the same way, if we still say we love Him, but love the world just as much, we are also adulterous.

The Temple of Our Bodies

Both Thameside and Crosswaters are examples of “community idolatry” – when a Body of Christ turns from God to idols. Community idolatry isn’t restricted to a building because the Church is anywhere two or three gather together. Idolatry doesn’t begin in the Church, however, because each Believer is a sanctuary for the Spirit of God. Churches are pictures of our own bodies, just like the Jewish temple was a picture Paul used for the Believer’s body: *“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?”* (1 Corinthians 6:19). This is where idolatry begins – in the sanctuary of each person’s body, for *“what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be My people’”* (2 Corinthians 6:16). God takes idolatry in each body seriously. Do we? Do we catch ourselves feeling like our spiritual lives are a “waste of time” – like the Thameside church – and that the answers to our difficulties are out in the world? Or, are we fooling ourselves into thinking that the worldly things we focus on are actually God’s business – like the Crosswaters church – substituting the world in place of God? The macro-idolatry (large scale) of the culture always begins with the micro-idolatry (small scale) of the heart.

Though speaking about the Jewish temple, I believe that when God says, *“I have chosen and consecrated this house that My name may be there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually”* (2 Chronicles 7:16), it can also be used concerning our bodies under the New Covenant. Is it any wonder then that when Israel destroyed the Temple of God (just like Thameside and Crosswaters), God gave them over to destruction? Therefore, *“do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE,’ says the Lord. ‘AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,’*

Says the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Just as we are now temples for the Spirit of God here on earth, so on the New Earth, God will be our temple and we will dwell in Him, for John looked on New Jerusalem and “*saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple*” (Revelation 21:22). This will be the completion and the fulfillment of the great mystery of each Believer that Jesus spoke of to His Heavenly Father concerning the Children of God—“*that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us*” (John 17:21a). Even so. Amen.