

# Rebuilding Our Temple

A Sermon by Jeffrey Owen Smith

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What happens when you try to build a house with no foundation? Or even worse, what happens when you put the foundation on top of the walls or on top of the roof? The obvious result of this disorder is that the house will not be able to stand for long, and it will come crashing down when anything disturbs it.

This is the message that the Lord was giving the Israelites as they returned from captivity. The people were living in paneled houses, which was a luxury for them. They had established themselves with all that they needed and more, and yet they said, “The time has not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built.” Their lives were in disorder because they were not giving any attention to the rebuilding of the temple. What does this mean for us to ignore the rebuilding of the temple, and what are the consequences of not putting this temple in its proper order?

First, let’s look at what the temple means for us. The temple symbolizes what the Writings call “the church.” Although when *we* use the word “church” we are usually talking about a building, or a ceremony like this, or even the organization, the Writings often use the word “church” to refer to people who are living according to the Lord’s Word. When the Lord is calling His people to rebuild the temple then, He is actually calling us to build the church in our minds—that is—He is calling us to live according to His Word. ...

... The Lord calls us to build the church because, like the Israelites at that time, we tend to make things important that aren’t so important. We have things around us that serve a use, and maybe even serve as a foundation. When these things are taken out of their proper order, the result is what the Lord tells the Israelites: “You have sown much, and bring in little; you eat, but do not have enough; you drink, but you are not filled with drink; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes.” With these words, the Lord warns us that we will not find happiness or true success when our priorities are out of order. Our priorities are out of order when we put our natural interests over our spiritual interests, or when we put external ideals over internal ideals. The Writings tell us that even the church—that is, people living according to the Lord’s Word—this kind of church has an internal aspect and an external aspect, and this internal and external also need to be properly ordered. If they are not, then happiness and true success will be found wanting.

Let us look deeper into the different aspects of the church: the internal and external. This is the internal church: the internal church is the church in our minds. It is the spiritual way in which we live according to the Lord’s Word. We do this by practicing spiritual charity, which means rejecting our selfish and pleasure-seeking inclinations while looking to help our neighbor along *their* path to heaven.

And now this is the external church. The external church is simply the external way in which we live according to the Lord's Word. It includes the rituals, church services, and even the outward displays of charity like giving to the poor or doing our job.

And this is how the external and internal churches relate to each other. Both the external church and the internal church are important. But, again, they ought to be in their proper order, and like the Israelites giving undue attention to their own homes, we might consider the amount of attention and the precedence that we give these aspects of the church. As the body that serves the purposes of the soul, the external ceremony and rituals of the church should serve the spiritual uses that lead a person to seek an internal church in the mind, for this is what leads a person to heaven. Then, as a person is led more and more to that internal church, or living a spiritual life, the external acts of prayer, praising, and charity actually become the expression of that internal church.

The Writings' use of the word "church" can refer to the life and practices of a group of people or an individual. "The church" means people who live according to the Lord's Word, and of course, these people can be a group, or it can refer to the smallest unit—the individual who is doing this.

So, to recap: the idea of "the church" has an external and an internal aspect—both being necessary, but they must necessarily be in order with the external serving the internal. The term "church" can apply to both an individual and a group of people. Whether we are talking about an individual or a group, or even an organization, the principals that define the church are the same: make sure the things that we do in this natural world serve the spiritual purpose of helping the people around us get to heaven.

The Lord wants us to have these things in order. The Israelites were warned when their priorities were out of order. What might be some of the consequences of putting our church in the improper order?

For example, what if we put too much emphasis on the church being the organization? One result of this might be that the church experience becomes a transaction. We go to church and we expect a product. If something isn't being done, we complain that the *organization* isn't doing something about it. *The church needs to get greeters. What is the church doing about evangelization these days?* We become like clients who have expectations of a company providing a service. The church *is supported* by an organization, but the church is more than that.

And what if we put too much emphasis on the external aspects of the church? Over-attention to these external things detracts from its purpose. This over-emphasis on external things leads us to have ministers that are our favorites, and others that we don't like to listen to. We focus on the imperfections and doctrinal flaws of the sermon. We become critical of the tempo of the music or the choice of music. And we say church services that are done in different ways aren't really church. The church does consist of ceremony, ritual, and external charity, but the church is more than that.

The organization of the church and the external of the church are useful, and important. But they are there to serve a higher purpose: the internal church.

So, what does it look like when we put the proper amount of emphasis on the internal church, that is, when we make an effort to selflessly help others on their path to heaven? First of all, when we focus on the internal nature of the church over the external nature of the church, we begin to realize and feel that we ARE the church. Instead of seeing the church as something out there, we feel it as something in here. Instead of asking, “What is the church doing to help other people spiritually live better?” we can look at ourselves and ask, “What am I doing to help other people spiritually live better?” Instead of seeing all the ways that we think a church service is flawed, we can appreciate the efforts that other people are making to lead people to the Lord.

The collective internal church is not made up of all the same kind of people. The Writings give us three general categories of people in the church: people who love doing good things, people who love the truth and want to learn more, and people who are simply delighted by truths. Our church has these three kinds of people in it, but sometimes they misunderstand each other. The do-gooders might sometimes feel like the others don’t do enough good and pay too much attention to the truth. The truth-lovers might think that the others don’t know enough truth. And those who are just delighted by truths might have the opinion that the others try too hard. The reality, though, is that each of these categories is part of the Lord’s church, and the individual who is part of the internal church has heaven within. The individual who is in the church is an angel-person.

Imagine a church in which each member sees her or himself as the church. Each individual looks to support the greater mission of the spiritual church which is to help others get to heaven who are not yet on their way, or who are having a difficult time on their way. Yes, the organization, the external church, and the internal church can always be improved upon because we humans will never be perfect, but our support in the way of effort, ideas, and actions are what will help all levels of the church continue to get better at loving those around us.

We close with these words from Zechariah: “Let us continue to go and pray before the Lord, and seek the Lord of hosts. I myself will go also.” Thus says the Lord of hosts: “In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’”

*Amen.*

Readings: Haggai 1:2-7; AC 6587.2-3; AC 9276.2; HH 57