

Corporate Identity in Haggai's First Sermon

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Introduction

A Christian bears the identity of Christ: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me..." (Gal. 2:20). "For to me, to live is Christ..." (Phil. 1:21). Christ calls the believer to abandon his former life of self-promotion and worldly, individualistic advancement for true life in Himself. Salvation brings a new, redeemed identity in Jesus Christ: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

While individual transformation in Christ is immediately grasped at least at some level at conversion, it may take time for the believer to understand his corporate identity with the church. Conversion is an individual awakening by the Spirit. A sinner is not saved by joining a group of believers, but by the new birth from above. One might expect some degree of an individualistic spirit in the newly converted, even after uniting in membership with a local church. Yet, this spirit must never be encouraged to persist.

Church culture in America became increasingly individualistic as churches adopted pragmatism from the business world as a primary means for church growth, conflating faithfulness in ministry with the number of people the church attracts to a meeting. Making the church marketable for a specific demographic of unbelievers played to the sinner's tastes and blurred the distinctiveness of the Gospel's call to community in Christ with a selfish, consumeristic idea of fulfillment. A healthy brotherhood in the body of Christ is weakened substantially under such a model as the Church competes for consumers rather than calling sinners to repentance and faith.

The problem is not confined to people who embrace man-centered, pragmatic methods. Churches committed to biblical fidelity often see their members drift away

from the center of church life. Corporate identity in Christ does not call for the death of an individual's personal spiritual walk, but rather demands the death of an individualistic spirit. As Andrew Snider wrote:

As one seeks to apply a biblical theology of worship, a tension one encounters is between worship considered on one hand as an individual attitude and lifestyle (being a living sacrifice and doing all to the glory of God) and on the other hand as an event and activity of the community of faith, the church gathered.¹

Haggai's small prophecy lands a big blow to the sin of neglecting the corporate life of Christ's local church. Haggai's message may not have as its primary subject the corporate identity of God's people, but it nonetheless depends on the reality of their corporate nature. Given the significance of God's temple in the life of His people, the historical backdrop of Haggai's prophecy, and Haggai's exhortations (particularly his first sermon), the vital necessity of an individual Christian to embrace his corporate identity in Christ is unmistakable. Looking at each of these matters in turn, the aim is to highlight God's desire for His people to gather for corporate worship for His name's sake.

God's Temple in the Life of His People

"Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD" (Hag. 1:2). Haggai's prophetic ministry occurred during the people's return from the Babylonian exile. It centered on the necessity of their obedience in rebuilding the temple. Grasping the weightiness of the Lord's command to finish the temple requires an appreciation of the temple itself. As evidenced by the verse cited above, the temple in its most basic sense symbolized the dwelling place of God. God's desire to rescue a people for Himself is one of Scripture's grand themes. God's directive to construct the temple displays His steadfast love toward His chosen people in restoring them to a right relationship with Himself.

The Lord freed the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt to lead them to His dwelling place. "And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God'" (Ex. 3:18). God called His people to gather in His presence. The tabernacle and the temple would become the unmistakable symbols of this reality. Exodus 29:44-46 reveals the heart of God in rescuing the Jews from Egyptian slavery:

I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel

and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.

Again, Psalm 132:13 exults in the reality of God's presence among His people: "For the LORD has chosen Zion. He has desired it for his dwelling place.»

In addition to the imagery of the Lord's dwelling place among His people, the temple of the Jewish nation stood as a symbol of divine victory, representative of the cosmos, a place for communication with and about God, the meeting place between heaven and earth, an emblem of the holiness of the Lord's people, a beacon of the unity and community of God's people, the embodiment of justice and peace, and, ultimately, the image of Christ Himself.²

As Gordon Fee noted, the Hebrew community in the time of Haggai "needed a physical symbol that represented the uniqueness of their community, differentiated it from other groups, and thereby helped save it from assimilation into the dominant cultures of the day."³ The temple stood as a visible proclamation of a unified people belonging to the one true and living God.

While individual Jews offered sacrifices to God at the temple, the temple stood preeminently as a symbol of corporate identity and worship. The temple functioned as a place of centralized worship for the Israelites and stood as a visible expression of their covenant relationship with the Lord. As the people of God, Israel demonstrated their loyalty to Him in the sacrifices presented at the temple.⁴ The temple was not intended to function as an outlet for people to practice an individualistic piety, but to anchor the individual's identity within the greater community of God's people (1 Kings 8:22-24; Ezra 6:16-18). In other words, the temple amplified a Jew's corporate identity by emphasizing corporate worship.

It is hard to overstate the significance of the temple in galvanizing the Jews into a single household of faith. The setting of Haggai showcases God's sovereign grace in preserving His people's unity and identity and further reveals the gravity of neglecting the construction of the temple.

The Background of Haggai's Prophecy

The historical scene of Haggai demonstrates God's control over history. God's covenant with the people at Sinai promised blessing and longevity in the land of promise as the people obeyed God's commands. At the same time, it warned of economic and national disaster in the event of their disobedience. True to the warning of the Lord, the Israelite nation was destroyed and exiled in light of its unfaithfulness to the Word of God. The northern kingdom of Israel was taken over by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom was laid waste, and the people were displaced by the Assyrians.

The southern kingdom of Judah outlasted her northern sister, but it eventually fell to the Babylonian empire in 586 BC. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed and many of its people were taken away as exiles to live in Babylon. Ian Duguid has noted, “However, the Babylonians had a different policy of exile from the Assyrians: instead of dispersing conquered peoples in small groups throughout the empire, they resettled them in communities in the Babylonian homeland. Thus, in the providence of God, the Judean exiles retained their identity.”²⁵

Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonian empire in 538 BC, replacing it with one of his own making. Upon conquering Babylon, he decreed that the Jews, kept in exile by the Babylonians for some fifty years, could return to their homeland and rebuild the temple of the Lord. Funding for the construction of the new temple and the return of temple furnishings demonstrated the new king’s resolve in supporting the Jews’ return to Jerusalem.

Zerubbabel joined the first wave of returning exiles and soon replaced Sheshbazzar as governor of Judah. He was the grandson of Jehoiachin and was heir to the Davidic throne. Joshua, the high priest through Jehozadak in the line of Aaron, also returned with the first wave of returning exiles.

Ezra 1-6 reveals the experiences of the returning exiles. Ezra recorded that the people experienced early progress in laying the foundation for the new temple. At the same time, they suffered opposition from various adversaries in the land, causing a lengthy cessation of the temple construction. Haggai and Zechariah urged them to finish and dedicate the temple.

The events described in Haggai and Zechariah took place eighteen years after the first wave of Hebrew exiles returned to the land. Ezra portrayed a joyous scene in the early days of the return. The people laid the foundation of the temple. They built an altar and offered burnt offerings to the Lord. They kept the Feast of Booths and sang songs of worship to God.

The leaders and the people had begun with an encouraging start, but soon opposition, divided loyalties, and discouragement precipitated a period of inactivity for nearly sixteen years. The people may have continued sacrifices, religious rituals, and celebrations to some degree, but clearly they decided, in disobedience to the command of God, to bring all work on the new temple to a halt.

God sent Haggai to prophesy to the Jewish leaders and the people from August until December of 520 B.C. Haggai delivered four messages to God’s people over the course of these five months. His first and third messages are related in tone and language, as are his second and fourth sermons. Haggai was initially sent by God to exhort the people to build the temple. He returned with encouragement from the Lord as to the promise of His presence, glory, and peace. In his third proclamation, Haggai spoke of God’s cleansing and blessing. Haggai’s final sermon pointed the people to the future hope and glory of God in overthrowing the nations, coinciding with the restoration of the Davidic kingdom.

The timeframe of Haggai drives home the serious nature of the people's offense against God and their great need for repentance. The date of Haggai's first exhortation, a day of a new moon festival with accompanying public worship, tells of God's desire for corporate worship. Haggai's name means "festival" or "pilgrim to a festival."⁶ Perhaps God intended the name of His prophet to call the people's attention to His desire for corporate worship.

The particulars of Haggai's first sermon further underscore the severity of the people's offense. Their delay in building the temple was a failure to showcase the glory of God Who sovereignly rescued them from the land of Babylon in fulfillment of His Word through His prophets.

Haggai's First Sermon

God sent Haggai to rebuke the people for neglecting to build His temple and to stir them up to complete its construction. At their core, Haggai's sermons reveal God's commitment to His glory. Building the temple of the Lord takes precedence over everything else because nothing less than His glory is at stake: "Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified," says the LORD" (Hag. 1:8). God's motive in rebuking, disciplining, correcting, and eventually granting repentance to Israel was to declare His glory among His people and all onlookers.

The Israelites' disobedience revealed a sinful disregard for the glory of God's name. According to His gracious character, God sent His word to turn His people's hearts to Himself. His words were unmistakable. The time for the rebuild was long overdue, and they were paying the price in terms of diminishing returns from their livelihoods. Thankfully, the leaders and the people repented and eventually completed the new temple.

The first four verses of chapter one are a stinging rebuke of the people's direct contradiction of God's will as to the timing in which to build the temple. Lord Sabaoth, "the LORD of hosts," addressed His people. This name underscored God's infinite, unstoppable power. The once exiled children of God were in their homeland because of God's sovereign might and purpose. In Isaiah 44 and 45, 150 years before Cyrus appeared on the world's stage, God declared that Cyrus would be His chosen ruler to liberate Israel. The prophecy came to fruition just as Isaiah had spoken.

The Lord of hosts rebuked His children for their failure to glorify His name by not building the temple. Cyrus was an instrument in God's hand. The temple was to be built to highlight the reality that God's mercy and might, rather than Cyrus or the Persians, had brought Israel back to her home.

God's nation, however, was saying that "the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD" (Hag. 1:2). Rather than call His people "My people," a common way in which the Lord addressed Israel, God referred to them as "these people." This designation highlights His people's estrangement. God laid open the

self-obsession of their hearts when He interrogated them as to the timing of building their houses. The people built paneled houses for themselves, revealing a measure of opulence in the construction of their homes (Hag. 1:4, 9). By contrast, the house of the Lord was lying in ruins.

The imagery conveys a sharp distinction between the Israelites' lavish homes to which they gave immediate attention and God's house which they left in desolation as if it were ruins from a long-forgotten past. Again, the root sin was that they did not prize the glory of God over their livelihoods and comforts.

Verses 5-11 reveal God's discipline and correction. Ironically, though the people employed their time in serving personal interests instead of accomplishing God's directive, they were not reaping the benefits from their various occupations. God did not allow their labor to prosper. He ordered the earth to withhold its produce and he diminished their wages. They may have had houses, but they were in financial distress when it came to the profitability of their work.

It is important to note that God was not condemning paneled houses, bumper crops, or booming businesses. In fact, He promised to bless His people with all of this prosperity if they would repent. God condemned the people's pursuit of these things to the detriment of seeking God. They had yet to learn that the primary means of supporting their families was not a solid work ethic or an ever-increasing investment in crops and businesses. God's grace was the only reason any of them had anything. The primary means of their provision was their investment in the worship of God above all else. God's providential discipline reinforced Haggai's message and paved the way for the nation to receive His correction.

Having been charged to consider the paltry yield of their self-serving labors, the people were commanded to «Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD» (Hag. 1:8). Laboring to serve their pleasures ended only in frustration and judgment. The leaders and the people should mirror God's heart for His glory and pleasure. They must take pleasure in God and those things which please God. Israel's obedience to the Lord in rebuilding the temple would restore His blessing upon their lives. The restrictions God placed on His creation would be lifted upon their repentance.

God directed the hearts of the people away from their individualism toward corporate worship with the promise of His restored blessing and presence. Mark Dever captured the significance of the people's need for the temple to this end:

From the people's standpoint, the rebuilt temple would be a clear and public statement that they still wanted and valued God. It would indicate that He was a higher priority than everything else clamoring for attention in their lives. It would be a mark of their faith in God and their recognition of his priority in their own national identity. From the nations' standpoint, it would be a sign that the God of Israel had not gone out of business when Jerusalem fell. From God's

standpoint, the temple was a visible sign of the covenant that bound him and his people together, and it represented his continuing favor to David.⁷

Obedience to Haggai's sermon demanded the people embrace their corporate identity as God's elect dedicated to ongoing corporate worship. The Jews were called to worship as a single household in the Lord. God's temple was the embodiment of a people united by their worship of the one true God.⁸ Haggai's exhortation to guard against a self-serving, individualistic spirit is an exhortation the local church must heed.

Principles of Local Church Identity from Haggai's First Sermon

Local churches have much to learn from Haggai. Andrew Snider remarked, "The uniqueness of that gathering (the Sunday corporate worship service) has been lost on many evangelicals."⁹ While the decline in overall church attendance is troubling, Snider's comments focus on evangelical misunderstanding of the significance of the Sunday service. He lamented the fact that many Christians "often tend to treat the Sunday worship service as a program to be attended or a mere collection of people who have gathered in the same room to be individual worshipers, rather than a corporate activity to be invested in as a collective unity."¹⁰

Iain Duguid wrote, "We too need to repent of the ways in which we have focused on building our own houses, not the Lord's.... As the body of Christ, the church is the new temple, made up of Jews and Gentiles being built together as a holy dwelling place for God."¹¹ If Old Testament saints brought the displeasure of God upon themselves by failing to rebuild the temple, how much more culpable are New Testament churches when their commitment to corporate identity and worship wanes? As Mark Dever explained,

Christ is the temple! And according to 1 Corinthians 3 and 6, we who have been incorporated into Christ and have been called his body are now the temple in which Christ's Spirit lives! This is the temple we want to see built up. If you are a true follower of Christ, you want to see the people who sit all around you Sunday after Sunday built up in Christ. Building his temple today does not have to do with the fabric or furnishings of a meeting-house. The true church will be built as God's truth is courageously preached, as we give ourselves to listen to it, and as we are convinced by it. This is what our congregations must not neglect!¹²

A healthy investment of one's life in the local church is required in obeying the message of Haggai. In a world that grows increasingly detached from all things religious, a current of busyness tempts modern church members with the same

self-centered focus of the Jews in Haggai's day. Often one's career, recreational habits, extracurricular activities, and the like lead to spiritual isolationism. Such responsibilities and activities are not in themselves sinful but quickly become sinful trappings when they drown out the call of God to a life devoted to the local church. Beyond these potential failings, Christians should guard against a type of spiritual life that leads to the neglect of church life.

Bolstered by the pervasive accessibility and convenience of the internet, parachurch ministries offer edifying resources to individual Christians and churches alike. Biblically healthy parachurch ministries enrich local church ministry by strengthening believers and providing congregations with useful tools which foster spiritual growth. However, if not carefully guarded, parachurch ministries often distract individual believers from the centrality of the local church. Even as the Hebrews focused on their houses and income to the detriment of corporate worship, Christians can easily fall prey to the sin of neglect due to an unhealthy pursuit of ministries outside their local church.

As Ephesians 4 teaches, the believer is at once gifted by God's Spirit to serve his brothers and sisters even as he stands in need of those same brothers and sisters in order to grow in Christ. Hebrews 10:24-25 clearly reveals God's will for the Christian regarding his dedication to the local assembly: "And let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

As Christ's return draws closer, a believer might be tempted to think that he is justified to place an increasing focus on himself, but this thinking runs counter to the Lord's command. Church life, the investment of one's gifts, talents, and resources in the local church, is to be all the more prominent as the day of Christ's return draws closer.

Furthermore, the neglect of the church often occurs because an individual member wrongly believes he has more to gain spiritually from an internet ministry or from inwardly-focused spiritual pursuits than from his church family. Such a mindset is sinful. It reveals the sin of pride as the member isolates himself and acts as if he has no need to be stirred up to love and good works by a consistent relationship with other believers. It also reveals the sin of selfishness as the member emphasizes his spiritual journey to the exclusion of active engagement in encouraging his fellow believers to love and good works. Haggai reveals the displeasure of God toward believers who neglect their corporate identity in favor of selfish and prideful isolation.

The greater sin is a failure to see God's glory through His people gathered for corporate worship. According to Haggai, excusing one's neglect of God's glory in His church by focusing on His glory in one's personal spiritual walk is counterintuitive

and sinful. The believer's personal growth, if biblical and God-honoring, will never lead to a diminished investment in Christ's local church.

Haggai's sermon not only spells out the problem of failing to embrace one's corporate identity in the Lord, it also provides the remedy for such spiritual narcissism. In order to regain an appropriate appreciation for one's corporate identity in Christ, the Word of God must be preached. The Word of the Lord wrought repentance in the hearts of the people. They no longer neglected His temple, but rallied together in obedience to God's Word and completed the temple for God's glory. For churches that experience a decline in their members' involvement and service, the great need is not an innovative program, but the faithful exposition of the Word of God that brings about repentance and renewal in Christ.

Conclusion

Haggai deserves careful attention in Christ's churches. God's presence with His people in corporate worship must be the heartbeat of every church. The Lord's sovereign reign and deliverance of His people, alongside His gracious rebuke, provide a much needed correction as well as a fresh perspective for many people in the Church today. Reading, teaching, and preaching the book of Haggai is a clear avenue toward reigniting the promotion of the believer's corporate identity in Christ through His local church.

NOTES

1. Andrew V. Snider, "Christian Identity and Christian Worship in Philippians 3:3." *The Master's Seminary Journal* (Fall 2011), 1.
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3. Gordon D. Fee and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., eds., *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 1.
4. H. G. Stigers, "Jerusalem Temple," in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Merrill C. Tenney, ed., Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 719.
5. Iain M. Duguid, *A Study Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*. EP Study Commentary (Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press, 2010), 5.
6. Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Biblical Studies Foundation, 2003), 23.
7. Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 887.
8. Gordon D. Fee and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., eds., *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 202.
9. Snider, "Christian Identity and Christian Worship in Philippians 3:3," 2.
10. Ibid.

11. Duguid, *A Study Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*. EP Study Commentary, 14-15.
12. Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made*, 890.