

4.

WHERE GOD DWELLS

The Lord our God does not live in a house which is made by human hands. This is very clear in His word where we read: "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24). Of course most believers understand that this means God does not reside in some kind of temple or cathedral of earthly construction.

No matter how ornate, beautiful or elaborate they may be, God is not attracted by earthly temples and does not live in them. Although some people are awed by extravagant religious constructions and mistake this soulish feeling for a spiritual blessing, the truth is that God does not and never will inhabit such earthly things. Further, we also must understand that He does not live in some kind of gilded box in the front of a cathedral, nor in any sort of image, be it made of porcelain, plastic, wood or precious metal. Most true believers today understand this truth.

But what many fail to see is that God also does not live in human organizations. By this I mean that He does not inhabit Christian groups which have been put together by human effort. Here is a point which may be very difficult for some to understand. While most know that God does not dwell in a house of brick or stone, many have a very strongly instilled concept that He does in fact live in any

group of believers who call themselves a “church.” We easily imagine that God lives in our particular organization.

Yet as we receive a heavenly revelation, we begin to understand that God’s house is a living thing. It is not a static structure, but something which is full of His life. The body of Christ – the home in which He lives – is a living organism. It is not an organization. Such a living dwelling is not a product of human effort or will. It is not something which man can put together. It is a result of His supernatural life. It is something which has grown up and taken on the form which He desires as a result of His own eternal life.

Therefore, we can easily understand that our Lord will not dwell in any Christian group unless it is a product of this very Life. It is not sufficient for our church to be biblical. It is not enough for a group of believers to seem to conform to some New Testament pattern. It is only His living bride, His body, which attracts Him and in which He desires to live for eternity. Only that which is a product of supernatural life will serve to be His habitation.

As we begin to see with more clarity the house of God, we are led to conclude that if our group is a result of human effort, God will not live there. If our “church” is the handiwork of organizational capacity, earthly exertion, special leadership (no matter how charismatic it might be), administrative ability or popular attractions, it is not really the house of God.

Simply putting the name “church” on our group will not qualify it to be His eternal habitation. Merely organizing something that looks nice or seems religious from an earthly point of view will not be approved. Anything which is made with human hands is totally unfitted to be God’s dwelling place.

THE FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCKS

The basis, the fundamental building blocks of God’s house, are individuals, not groups. He inhabits men and women personally. We read that we are the temple of the

living God and that He will dwell in us (II Cor 6:16). Also we read that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Cor 6:19). So it is individual men and women who are the basis for the dwelling place of God.

Therefore, in order for the house of God to be built up, the believers who are part of this house must grow up in His life. It is necessary for them to mature and become what He wants them to be. This individual growth of each member is what causes His house to be built up. It is not simply the joining together a great number of people which will do the job, but the growth of the individuals which makes the whole more living.

Let us take this thought a little further. If we wish to construct the house of God, we must concentrate our work on the basic building blocks, which are the individuals. We must focus our efforts on helping each one grow in Christ. We must learn how to minister Christ to each one in a way which will cause them to mature spiritually. In this way, the house of God will be built up.

If we wish to build up the temple of the Holy Spirit, there is only one way to do it. We must daily fill ourselves with God's supernatural life. We must cultivate an intimacy with Jesus, eating and drinking of all that He is so that we are filled with Him. Next, we can "minister" or serve this life to the other believers (or even unbelievers) with whom we have contact. By our sharing the living Jesus with others, they too will grow up into all that He is.

Far too many today are instead working to build up some kind of group. Their focus is on the appearance of the whole. They are trying to mount some kind of structure which believers can fit themselves into. They are organizing, administrating, planning and doing. They are busy constructing a framework of how they think the church should be. They are working to get a group together which to them resembles a "church."

But so much of this effort does nothing to cause the members to grow up in life. Very often, this collection of individuals is just that – a group of believers whose lives are not really transformed into the image of Christ. Often,

many of these believers are only being held up by a structure which someone has made and are not really growing spiritually. Consequently, the group does not become a place where the presence of God comes and lives.

Since God does live in individual Christians, when they are together there is a manifestation of His presence. But this manifestation – the power of His presence – is entirely dependent upon the degree to which He resides in each individual. The more each one has made room for Him in their lives, the more powerfully He will be expressed in and through the group. The more spiritual maturity and love for Jesus each member has, the more the group will actually be His temple.

The emphasis of Jesus' teachings and the New Testament in general is on the individual materials, the building blocks so to speak, and not on the appearance of the whole. It is not God's desire simply to join together an impressive number of believers. It is not His plan for the church to be some kind of well-run organization. He is not attracted by this. He will make his home among us only to the extent that each one of us is permitting Him to make His home in us. His desire is that the individual members be sanctified, transformed and ready for Him to live in them and move through them.

Perhaps an analogy would help here. Let us suppose that a very wealthy person contracted with a builder to make him a house out of granite blocks. But let us imagine that the contractor used other materials instead. He wanted to build the house faster and cheaper. So he used 2x4's and plywood. Then to make it look like granite, he put some plastic facing on the outside which appeared to be genuine rock. It is possible that in the end he achieved something which looked like the original plan.

When the owner of the house comes to look at it will he be pleased? Will he be satisfied with the work? Or will he refuse to live in such a house which is made out of cheaper, inferior materials? No doubt he will not pay for the work and not move into this imitation house. How much less will the God of the universe live in something

which is not made with the correct materials and not built according to His plan. In this case, just as it is with the church, it is the individual materials which are essential, not merely the appearance of the whole.

This distinction is very important. If we are going to co-labor with God and build up His house, we must understand where it is that He lives. He does not live in Christian organizations which have been put together by man and held together by earthly means. Yet we often find well-meaning servants of God laboring to get a large number of believers together under the same roof. They are using their personality and talents to rally people around them and/or their ministry supposing that this is God's house.

Many people today are talking about how to make "their church" grow. The main idea seems to be to find out how to increase the number of people who attend the meetings. Various methods are being employed to achieve this end including new buildings, new programs, or some new emphasis on gifts, experiences etc. But simply increasing numbers does nothing to build up the house of God. Unless this increase comes from unbelievers actually being born-again, God's house is not edified in this way. Building up a religious organization is not the same thing as constructing the temple of the living God.

God's idea is not principally to construct a group, instead it is to edify the men and women who make up the group. His thought is that we would build up one another. It is that we should help one another grow spiritually. As we grow this makes more "room" for Him to live and move inside of us and through us. As we build up one another in our holy faith (Jude 1:20) we are constructing the eternal dwelling place of God. This is our task. Jesus instructed us to go and make disciples. This means to aid others to come to know and to submit to Jesus. God then takes these materials and puts them together as it pleases Him (I Cor 12:18).

The manifestation of His presence in any gathering of believers depends on the hearts of the individuals so gath-

ered. It has nothing to do with how well the organization functions. It does not depend on the number of people present. God is not attracted by our programs or "ministries." So what are we building up? If His presence is attracted by men and women who are open to Him and not to our superstructure, where should we be investing our time?

Now some may argue: "But the Bible says that where two or three are gathered together, Jesus is there in the midst." Yes, Jesus does visit our meetings. But, once again, the intensity of His presence is going to be directly related to the openness of heart of the individuals involved. When the hearts of the people present are shut up, they cannot find His presence.

God's visitations do not depend on the doctrinal stance of the group. Neither are they based upon the outward appearance or any other such superficial factor. God looks upon the hearts of the individuals. Further, the quality of the ministry which we receive from Him, the depth of our experience in such circumstances, is directly related to the spiritual hunger and openness of those involved. All this is to say that the spiritual experience of the group depends on the individuals in whom God's work is being done.

GOD NEVER TOLD US TO ORGANIZE GROUPS

Nowhere in the New Testament are we instructed to try to build some kind of church group or organization. This is very important. We are never told to try to get a number of believers together and organize them into some kind of group. We are never taught that we must build up "a" church. We are never exhorted to try to put together some kind of Christian organization.

It is our job, being led by the Holy Spirit to build up one another. This is our part of the work. Then, it is the work which God Himself does to join us together. This joining is not a work which man can do nor a work which we have been instructed to do. A careful reading of the

book of Ephesians will help the reader see this more clearly. It is God who raises "us up together" and makes "us sit together in the heavenly places" (Eph 2:6).

Jesus explicitly said: "I will build My church" (Mt 16:18). We learn that "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). It was God Himself who put this group together. The early Christians were not laboring to convince people to join their group, but to introduce them to Christ. They were not trying to form any kind of society, but to live by the Holy Spirit and share Jesus with the world. The church or churches which appeared were a spontaneous result of ministering Jesus. They were the automatic fruit of the preaching of the gospel. These results were not effected by believers trying to organize groups, but a product of Jesus being lived out through them.

We read in Zechariah 6:12,13 that it is the work of the Son of God to build up the temple of the Lord. Here we read: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, saying; 'Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, and He shall build the temple of the Lord; yes, He shall build the temple of the Lord. He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on His throne.' "

God also asks: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house you will build Me?" (Is 66:1). The answer is that there is no house which we can build for Him. There is nothing which we can construct that will please Him. None of our human, earthly organizations will work. No matter what we may build, no matter how good or scriptural it may appear, we cannot, ever, build anything in which God will dwell. Only He can do it.

We cannot build the house of God. The best we can manage is to co-labor together with Him. This co-laboring is done by helping prepare the materials. It is then He who puts them together in a way that pleases Him.

The early church, which we think of as being some kind of group, was the work of God and not of man. It was a natural, spontaneous result of the work of Jesus Christ in the hearts of individual men and women. It was He who

joined them together. It was also His responsibility to keep them together if He so chose. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the apostles running around trying to rally believers and form them into separate groups.

Far too many believers are trying to mount some kind of structure or framework for the church. For example, they think that if they can provide meetings, preaching, singing, various "ministries" such as Sunday school, youth groups, etc. that believers can then fit themselves into this organization. They can use this structure upon which to hang their spiritual lives. The members then are carried along passively by the activities and "ministries" of this organization.

Unfortunately, this is exactly the type of work which we spoke about in the previous chapter. It is trying to fabricate a structure and hope that it will fill up with life. It is trying to make stems, petals, flowers and leaves out of silk and wire and not simply letting the life of the plant grow. Any kind of structure or organizational framework which human beings can make will never become the eternal house of God.

Our goal, our only goal, is to minister Jesus Christ to one another and to the world. Our calling is to build up individuals. Our job is to edify the temple of God which is men and women.

God will then use these building materials and put them together in a divine arrangement which only He can do. He will build His church. He will do the building together of the separate parts. Our part is to minister Jesus Christ to one another and leave the results with Him.

HOW IT WORKS

When we succeed in ministering Life to someone, then they will love God more. They will learn to walk in intimacy with Him. They will learn to hear His voice and obey Him. Consequently, they will wish to be with others who have this same love. So they will seek out fellowship. They will naturally look for chances to meet together with oth-

ers for prayer, worship and sharing. Thus, the house of God will grow and be built up.

As each one follows the leading of the Head and shares their portion of life with the rest, the house of God will begin to appear. All the features of church which we see in the New Testament, including meetings, ministries, gifts, etc. will begin to appear automatically among any group of believers who are loving and following Jesus. His life will produce this. His life will always and only produce the church. He will lead them into all that He has for them.

This concept is very simple, yet very profound. If we, as little children, simply love and follow Jesus every day, the church will come forth. The house of God will appear as a result of His life. This building will be the product of a supernatural work. It will be something which Jesus builds. Here there is no room for human hands. There is no need for the plans and schemes of men. There is no need for organizational frameworks and human structures. As we simply live Jesus, His life will produce the church. In fact, there is no other way to arrive at this goal.

Please pay careful attention to this. There is no other way to build up the temple of the Lord other than allowing the life of Jesus to do it. As He lives in and through us and others, there will be a supernatural structure being built. As we follow Him every day, ministering Him to others, His dwelling will appear. The dispensation of eternal life will result in the building of God's house. The life of God will always grow up into the form of the church which He desires. Anything else is just a human substitution.

NOT IMPRESSIVE

This way of building is never going to be impressive. Those who choose to build in life are never going to be famous, in demand or popular. Their works are never going to compete in terms of grandeur and numbers with the schemes of men. God's way has always been a lowly, humble way. We need to prepare our mind for this. We must realize before we begin that our work is not going to

stroke our ego or cause our popularity to spread. Our hearts must be prepared to simply obey Jesus and never look for results which the world will find impressive. It is only by humbling ourselves and becoming like little children that we will succeed in entering into the Kingdom of God (Mt 18:3).

When the first shoot of a plant breaks forth from the earth, it is never ostentatious. It does not look like much. Yet, it is the real thing. Therefore, we should never judge our work or any other work in worldly terms. We must never look for success, numbers, fame, etc. to see if what we are doing pleases God.

The only standard for our work is whether or not we are obeying God. If we are faithfully following Him in all that we are doing, then it will be approved. On the other hand, if we are ambitious for success and all the trappings which go with it, then we will have much trouble trying to build God's house in God's way.

THE NEED FOR FAITH

Building in the simple way of life requires faith. It demands that each one have a faith relationship with Jesus Christ. We must believe that if we only follow Him every day, doing what He leads us to do, He will produce the results. This requires much faith. We must believe that Jesus will do what He said He will do – build His church. We must trust that as we do our small part of God's plan, He will take care of the rest.

If we do not have such faith, then we will begin to try to do things ourselves. Since the way of life is often slow and unimpressive there will always be a great temptation for man to help God out a little bit. There will often be things which we imagine should be done to accelerate the process. There will frequently be the opportunity to reach out our hand and try to do the work of God for Him.

To build in life is to walk by faith and not by sight. But this kind of walk is very difficult for the natural man. It is very normal for human beings to depend upon something

tangible. They easily trust in what they can see, hear and feel. Consequently, men constantly tend to gravitate toward something outward and earthly. Any man or woman of God who wants to build with His life must continually be on guard against this human tendency.

Religious structures provide just such tangible props for the human soul. Human organizations often have a very strong appeal to the natural man. It is always much easier for men and women to feel comfortable with something mental, regularly scheduled, visible and verifiable.

Such religious systems do not require much faith. They don't demand a complete submission to God from the participants. They provide plenty of room for believers to be drawn along by their many activities, entertainments and programs whether they are truly seeking Jesus with all their heart or not.

This is the reason that human organizations seem to prosper while the way of simple childlike faith is neglected. Such systems have the name of Christianity but provide plenty of room for the natural man also. Often such human structures provide just enough religion to satisfy the consciences of the attendees along with a good dose of social functions and other activities to keep the natural man happy too.

A genuine walk of faith demands continual contact with and obedience to Someone invisible. This walk in the spirit is not done by using our natural senses. This means that we must maintain an intimate relationship with our Savior who is very intangible to the natural man. It is only through this spiritual communion with God that we can succeed in living in obedience to Him and build His eternal house. It is as we receive the flow of life from Him that we can minister it to others also and so construct something which pleases Him.

DON'T FORSAKE THE ASSEMBLING

There is an important admonition in the scriptures which urges us not to forsake the "assembling of ourselves

together" (Heb 10:25). This is an essential word for all believers. If we are loving Jesus and following Him, we will naturally want to be with other Christians as much as possible. Our "assembling" with them will be one of the strong desires of our heart. An obedient Christian will always be seeking this. Therefore, meeting with other believers for worship, prayer and mutual edification will be a notable feature of any living church experience. In fact, this desire or the lack thereof is a good test to see if we are really walking in intimacy with Jesus.

However, in no way can this verse be considered as a command to try to put together a group or human structure. This is not what the scripture says. This exhortation is meant to stimulate believers to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit and seek out fellowship with others. Since our flesh naturally does not want to be in the presence of God, alone or with other believers, there is a tendency to avoid meetings and fellowship. Therefore, we are urged to not allow our flesh to dominate us and to make an effort to continue to seek communion with others.

As we serve one another through the Spirit of God, we and they will grow and God's house will expand. When we use our gifts and ministries to build up individuals, the temple of God is being constructed. God Himself will put the pieces of His house together as it pleases Him (I Cor 12:18). This then is where He will live for eternity, in and among spiritually edified men and women.

Let us think logically about this together. When we appear before the Lord, what will we present to Him? Will we demonstrate to Him the manner in which we conduct our meetings? Will we show off our new dance routines or theater pieces? How about our many different special groups for the youth, young couples, singles etc.? Will our patterns, practices and plans be of interest to Him? No!

What God will be interested in seeing is how His transformation work has progressed in each individual. His attention will be focused on the spiritual growth in each and every one. What He will want to examine is how each one of us has been changed into His glorious image.

Therefore, since these things are His goal, should they not be our focus also? Should we not be using our time and energy building up that which is on the heart of our Lord? Should we not leave behind building up things which will not last and concentrate on those which do? Let us ask ourselves honestly: Will our organization stand the test of Judgment Day? Will our groups and activities shine forth as the brightness of the sun on the day of the Lord? How much of our effort then is simply useless and wasted, when we could be building up that which will last for eternity?

In the church of Christ today, many have another goal. They are striving to build up an organization which is large, growing and successful. In all fairness, I think it would be true to say that most of these organizations believe that spiritual growth is one of their goals. They imagine that maturity will be a result of their efforts.

Perhaps some think that they will join together a group of people or "church" and then they will use this organization as a means to edify individuals. They suppose that they will use their group to further God's work. Perhaps their motives are good even if their practice is deficient.

The problem with this method is that joining this group together and then holding it together must be done by human, natural means. Instead of simply ministering Christ, we are faced with the task of providing various props and activities to attract people while we try to work on their spiritual state. We must try to keep them interested in something other than the person of Jesus Christ while we try to help them spiritually. This is really an awkward way to do the work of God. Also, as we will see later on, it is not doing God's work in God's way.

WHAT ARE OUR MOTIVES?

Another important question which we all need to consider carefully before the Lord is: what are our motives? We need to honestly examine our hearts. When we are attempting to put together a group, our motives then

become divided. Yes, we want to serve others in the name of Jesus, but we also want them to join with us in our group. No doubt, we believe our group to be the work of God, so perhaps it is difficult for us to see that building up our organization is not the same as building the house of God. But it is not.

If we have a motivation of wanting to build up our particular group or "church" it then becomes impossible not to have a kind of spider web hidden behind us. We speak of Jesus and the things of God, but we want people to join with us. We secretly want to catch them in our web.

But when we are only and sincerely interested in edifying someone in Christ, all double motives disappear. We then become free to simply build the house of God. We then have a great liberty to serve others with no hidden agenda. Whether they join with us or not does not need to become a consideration.

With this kind of attitude, we can serve others who do not agree with us. We can share Jesus with those in other "churches" without secretly trying to persuade them to drop what they are doing and join with us. We can minister without ulterior motives. We can simply speak what the Holy Spirit is speaking at the moment and love others with no strings attached. We can live Jesus Christ in great simplicity among other believers and those of the world.

When our only motive is to build up the house of God then we can serve and build up others freely. This kind of purpose allows us to live in a kind of childlike innocence and also in great liberty. When our goal is to edify individuals, then we can remain lowly servants. But when our motive is to gather a group together, then many other factors enter in.

Let us reason together about this. If we wish to form a group or "church," it must be set apart from the church as a whole. If it is not, then it does not have its own identity and therefore cannot be recognized as a group. Therefore, we must have some kinds of methods to separate men and women from the rest of the body of Christ and convince them to adhere to us, our practice or our teaching.

These methods include, but are not limited to: emotional and mental persuasion, political maneuvering, use of strong personality, a good sales pitch and the exhibition of spiritual gifts. Using various such means, we then convince a number of people that our ideas, practices and doctrines are best and that they should adhere to us, thus forming some kind of identifiable group or "church."

This, my dear brothers and sisters is something made with human hands. Therefore, it is a place in which God does not and never will live. It is not something which is made according to the heavenly vision so it cannot satisfy His heart's desire.

HOW GOD'S CHURCH WORKS

As we live and work for God with our focus being the edification of one another, it may be that He will join some peoples' hearts together. It certainly will happen that their love for one another will grow. There is no doubt that their communion with one another will become so enjoyable that they spend a lot of time in each other's presence. As they build up one another, God will knit them together in love (Col 2:2). Naturally, they will want to meet together for worship, prayer and mutual edification. This is something which God puts together, not a result of natural, human effort.

Someone looking at this from the outside might think of this as an organization. But in fact it is something organic, something living, something which God has done and not man. This "form" is a result of God's life growing up in and living through individuals.

This group has no walls or barriers to keep people in or out. It is not separate from the rest of Jesus' body. Those participating in this communion are not held by any sort of artifice, doctrine, human leader or practice. They are simply living by the life of Christ and serving one another. The result of this is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as He fills His temple, which of course is these individuals who have been built together by Him.

The early church was a result of just this kind of ministry. The disciples were preaching and teaching Jesus Christ. They were sharing Him with the world and ministering Him to one another. Automatically, they wanted to be with others who loved Jesus. The Lord then knitted them together in a manner which could be looked upon as being a group. But this was not a result of human effort. It was not Peter, James and John using their gifts and ministries to try to attract followers. It was not a result of an effort to organize anything. It was a spontaneous result of the ministry of the Holy Spirit to individuals.

Truly the Lord our God does not live in a house made with human hands. If what we are doing is a result of our own plans, energy and effort, then God will not dwell there. If our group is a product of administrative talent or organizational ability we can be sure that He will not call this His home. If what we are doing is really something natural and earthly, even if we have decorated it with "spiritual" labels, it will be burned up on judgment day. It does not matter how good it looks, it does not matter what others think of our work, anything which is made with human hands will never be the house of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is an extremely serious consideration. While we may have thought of various "churches" and religious groups as being holy or something very special in the eyes of God, it is time, no it is even past time, that we looked at them through the eyes of God. With His holy word open before us, let us carefully and prayerfully examine what we are doing in His light. The traditions of men along with all the rituals, practices and "services" which go with them, are not and never will be the temple of the living God.

In these last days with the coming of the Lord drawing ever more near, it would be wise for us all to examine our works before God. In His light, let us honestly consider the work of our hands and let Him expose or change anything of which He is not the author. May we, by His mercy, be found by Him to have constructed our works out of gold, silver and precious stones.

How we need to see a heavenly vision! How we need to ascend the mountain of God and look into His heart. How we need to build according to His heavenly plan and not according to earthly ideas and concepts. It is by following this supernatural revelation that our work for God will be vital, penetrating and genuinely fruitful. Further, it will accomplish much which is of eternal value.