

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH # 2

Last month we defined the church as *God's New Man, the Body of Christ and the House of God*. Another definition the Bible gives for the church, closely related to the House of God, is *the Temple of God*. The idea of replacing the Old Testament tabernacle with a permanent temple was first anticipated by David (I Sam.7) and was begun by Solomon four hundred and eighty years after Israel came out of Egypt (I Kings 6:1). Throughout the history of Israel, in spite of its destruction and rebuilding, the temple remained the center of their worship. The temple was referred to as "Herod's Temple" because he was forty-six years in building it. An important event, concerning the temple, that of Jesus cleansing the temple, is recorded by all four of the gospels. The temple was being desecrated by the Temple authorities and Jewish traders who were offering a method of money changing and the purchasing of oxen, sheep and doves, for temple sacrifices. This exploitation of pilgrims moved Jesus to wrath, and he drove them out of the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers, declaring they had made his "Father's house a house of merchandise." This infuriated the Jews and they demanded of him: "What sign do you show us as your authority for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple and three days I will raise it up," but he was speaking of the temple of his body" (John 2:18, 19, 21). Mark's record of this, in relating the charge against Jesus, reads: "I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands" (Mark 14: 58).

Those who witnessed these events and heard the words of Jesus no more understood and grasped their meaning than the Samaritan woman did when Jesus explained to her the true meaning of worshipping God (John 4:21-24). It was "when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the Scripture and the word Jesus had spoken" (Jn. 2:22). Today, two thousand years later, the modern church still does not understand the significance of this event. What Jesus really meant was his coming put an end to all the individual man-made, man-arranged way of worshipping God. He showed us the way to come to God without a physical temple. Scottish writer William Barkley in his *The Gospel of John Vol. 1* sums it up very succinctly in these words: "Our contact with God, our entry into the presence of God, our approach to God is not dependent on anything that men's hands can build or men's minds devise. We have our inner temple, the presence of the risen Christ forever with us."

The early church being Jewish, continued worshipping in the temple (Acts 2:46, 3:1-3) but it was Stephen who first realized that the physical temple was irrelevant for Christian worship. In his dying words he affirmed: "The Most High does not dwell in houses made by men, but as the prophet says 'Heaven is My throne and the earth is the footstool of My feet; what kind of house will you build for Me?' says the Lord, 'Or what place is there for my repose?'" (Acts 7:48, 49). Paul later confirms this when he declared to the Athenian Philosophers: "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is the God of heaven

and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:24, 25).

The Scripture portrays the church as a temple in two ways: that of the individual and the congregation. The Individual believer is a temple of God because the Spirit of God indwells them; "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you have been brought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body" (I Cor. 6:19, 20). The local church is God's dwelling place. The Apostle Paul warns the church in Corinth: "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and 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" (I Cor. 3:16, 17). On this subject George Eldon Ladd, in his book *A Theology of the New Testament* wrote: "The fact that the church is the temple where God dwells excludes the logical possibility of becoming 'mismatched with unbelievers' (II Cor. 6:14). This must refer to relationships with idolatrous pagans of such a sort that it compromised one's Christian testimony. It is clear that Paul does not prohibit all social contacts with unbelievers, 'since you would need to go out of the world' (I Cor. 5:10). The clue to Paul's meaning is found in the words, 'what agreement has the temple of God with idols?' (II Cor. 6:16). Any yoke with unbelievers that compromised one with pagans was excluded because of the holiness of the church."

The church is being built "on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple of the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:20-22). Note that Paul states that members are being "fitly framed together" and that they "grow into a *holy temple*" which is "a dwelling place for the Lord." There is definite difference in just adding to the members on a roll of a church and the growth of the holy temple of the Lord. In this statistically minded age, when the church is caught up in the church growth movement, and the controlling thought in most churches today is making their services acceptable to a generation that is only interested in being entertained for an hour on Sunday morning and having their felt needs met, there is little interest in being God's *Holy Temple*. So many elite men of the cloth today plead with people, almost implore them to join the church. Notice the Apostle says this is a *holy temple*. The Scriptures do not say a word about *size*, and nothing about the *ornate character* of the church. However, what they do say is that it is *holy*. This is a forgotten word in the religious system called "the church" today. And it is a dwelling place of God. It was when the church could say "silver and gold have we none" that it could go on and say, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6). The church today can make neither statement. It has silver and gold, has become great and powerful, but has forgotten holiness. Can the religious system today give the impression that they are a holy temple and God indeed dwells in them?

The next definition of the church we will discuss by bringing together two scriptural definitions: *The Bride of Christ* (Ephesians 5:23-32) and *The Bride, The Wife of The Lamb* (Revelation 21:9-22:5). In Ephesians five, Paul does not mention "The Bride of Christ" by name, but in discussing the fact that the marriage relationship is like Christ and the Church, he concludes by saying "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (ver. 32). He told the Corinthians "I have betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin" (II Cor 11:2). Christ's sacrifice was the redemption of the Bride: "He "loved the church and gave himself up for her; that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water and the word; that he might present to himself a glorious church, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25-27). How does today's religious system with all its rock bands, ear splitting music, and flamboyant preachers, compare with Paul's description of the church?

We turn now to a little-known and less accepted revelation that describes and defines the church in symbolic language that will be rejected by the majority of commentaries and accepted authorities on the book of Revelation: the chapters generally accepted as a description of the destiny of the believer, either at death or at the judgment, Revelation 21 and 22. Christians are confused about the subject of heaven. Our songs and hymns further add to the confusion. We sing "I have a mansion just over the hilltop" and then turn the page and sing "Lord build me a cabin in the corner of glory land." When sermons, especially funeral sermons, go beyond what is written in trying to describe heaven for the sake of those grieving the loss of a loved one compounds the confusion. When most people think of heaven they think of a materialistic, metallic city somewhere in the sky which is the home of the redeemed when they leave this world. This concept and indeed the description of heaven is based in part on Revelation 21 where John describes the city. But does Revelation 21 describe heaven as our eternal abode? (Dare we ask such a question)! Nowhere in this chapter is it said the city is heaven. Note verse 9: "and one of the seven angels ...came and spoke to me saying, "Come here, I shall show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." The angel did not say "I will show you heaven." rather I will show you "the bride, the wife of the Lamb." No one can dispute the fact that the bride of the Lamb is the church (Eph. 5:27,32). Note verse 10: "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." He is giving the details of the statement in verse 2 "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband." The city, the church, is a work of God's grace brought down from heaven by His Son. It sojourns on earth but is a community having its origin in God. He does not say we go "up" to dwell with God, rather He comes "down" to dwell with us. That this is a present reality is seen in Hebrews 12: 22: "You have come to Mt. Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."

The symbolism of the rest of the chapter describes the church as it should be. It reflects the glory of God in a world of darkness (ver. 11). Christ, the lamb, the true light, drives away the darkness of ignorance, misery, guilt and moral pollution. In and through him and his work the glory of God becomes manifest in the church. The holy city needs no natural or artificial light (ver.

23). The Word is God's light (Psalm 119:105) which is the message of the church and it has no need to use gimmicks to reach people for Christ. It has walls great and high (ver. 12-20). Walls represent Salvation (Isa. 26:1; 60:18). Only the church has the message of salvation. The wall also divides between the holy and profane (Eze. 42:20). The church is a holy people, separated from the world. The 12 foundations are the teaching of the Apostles which they received from Christ the Corner Stone (Eph 2:20). This means the foundation of the church is Christ (I Cor. 3:11). The twelve gates (ver. 13) are for entrance. Jesus first entered heaven itself (Heb. 9:12, 13) and made it possible for us to enter into the very presence of God. This is the prerogative of the church (Heb. 10:19-22). Contrary to modern religious thought, there is only one street in the city (ver. 21; 22:2) and only one way to God and this is only through Christ Jesus (John 14: 6). There is no sanctuary in the city (ver.22) No sanctuary is needed, for the fellowship of believers with God is direct and immediate. Both God and Christ dwell in the believer (John 14:23), therefore they become the sanctuary of the church. The nations will walk in the light of the church and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it! (ver. 24). This is an astonishing statement. Yet Isaiah 60, which is a prophecy of "the city of the Lord" (ver. 14) or the church, states: "the nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising (ver. 3) and "the wealth of the nations will come to you" (ver. 6). Further "the nation and kingdom which will not serve you will perish" (ver. 12). We do not yet see this happening, as the Hebrew writer said "but now we do not yet see all things subjected to him" (Heb. 2:8) but we do see Jesus" and what he has done and who he is. This aspect of the church will someday be fulfilled.

Now, if what John sees is the bride, the wife of the Lamb and the wife of the Lamb is the church does this not destroy the hope of the Christian of "going to heaven someday?" The hope of the Christian as revealed in Scripture is the redemption of his body: "We ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we await eagerly for it" (Rom. 8:23-25). Not only will our body be redeemed, but the whole creation will be set free from the curse: "For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected so futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself also will set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-22). This means the "heaven" in which the saints will dwell for eternity is a redeemed earth. (Isaiah 65:17-25). After all, did Jesus not say, "the meek shall inherit the earth" (Mt. 5:5)? This contradicts the thought that we will inherit a "cabin in the corner of glory land" or a "mansion over the hilltop." The promise God made to Abraham and his descendants was "he would be heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13).

With the final divorce and destruction of the unfaithful wife (Old Testament unfaithful Israel) in A.D. 70 (the destruction of Jerusalem), the marriage of the church to Christ became an accomplished fact; the Lord's Supper (communion service), fully reveals the reality of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).