

# Are You Meeting in God's House?

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It is common to hear people refer to the building in which the church meets as God's House or the Lord's House or something similar. Probably you have heard it: "It's good to see you in God's House today," "We should be in the Lord's House every Sunday." Sometimes a loose reference is made to Scripture, such as Psalm 122:1: "Let us go into the house of the LORD."

Often, too, the part of the building where the meeting takes place is called the "sanctuary." People will say, "Let's go into the sanctuary." Church members will sometimes act differently inside the "sanctuary" than they do outside of it. Some churches may even have a sign on the wall of the "sanctuary" that quotes a Scripture, such as Leviticus 19:30: "Ye shall keep my sabbaths, and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD."

What I want to do in this article is look through the Old and New Testaments to see some of the places where these terms occur and what they meant in their context and typologically. I also want to determine from this evidence whether the common use of these terms, such as I have given above, is a correct understanding for Christians and whether an incorrect understanding can actually be harmful to Christian growth. Along the way, we might come across some surprises.

## Old Testament Usage

In the Old Testament, the term "house of God" is translated from the Hebrew *Beth-El*, which is also sometimes left not translated as a place name.

As a place name, Bethel is first found in Genesis 12:8 and again in Genesis 13:3.\* But the origin of Bethel as a place name, and the first place in the Bible where the term "house of God" is used, is in Genesis 28. We'll start in verse 10. I will emphasize with bold type where the terms we are examining appear:

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\* It may seem odd that Bethel appears as a place name in Genesis 12 and 13 before the account of its origin in Genesis 28. This is explained by the fact that Moses wrote Genesis centuries after these events, and, in Genesis 12 and 13, he simply used the name that he was familiar with at the time he wrote.

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And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the **house of God**, and this is the gate of heaven. And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place **Bethel** [which, remember, means "house of God"]: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first. And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be **God's house**: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob was out in the open, yet he called this piece of ground "none other but the house of God." Then he set up the stone he had used for a pillow. He set it up for a pillar and "called the name of that place Bethel" (which means "house of God") and said, "this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house." Here we have a piece of ground out in the open and a pillar being called the "house of God." So, contrary to what we might expect, "house of God" has no

necessary connection to a physical building. Please keep this in mind as we continue.

In Genesis 35, we see God telling Jacob to go to Bethel and make an altar to Him there. After this, Bethel seems to be mentioned only as a place name with no special significance attached to it.

In Exodus 23:19, we see the first use of the term "house of the Lord": "The first of the firstfruits of thy land thou shalt bring into the **house of the LORD** thy God. Thou shalt not see the a kid in his mother's milk." **What does "house of the Lord" mean here?**

It is referring to the tabernacle, the elaborate tent that God told Moses to build. In this verse, we see that it is where the Israelites were to bring the firstfruits. "House of the Lord" is only used in two more places (Exodus 34:26 and Deuteronomy 23:18) in the first five books of the Bible, or Pentateuch. Both of these times it is referring to the tabernacle.

There is no need to quote the rest of the places where "house of the Lord" is found in the Old Testament, but it is used in Joshua 6:24, Judges 19:18, and then three times in 1 Samuel (1:7, 24; and 3:15). All of these refer to the tabernacle. I will quote the last use of "house of the Lord" in the Old Testament as a reference to the tabernacle. It is in 2 Samuel 12:20: "Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the **house of the LORD**, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat."

The term "house of God" is used throughout Judges and 1 Chronicles to refer to the tabernacle.

Beginning in 1 Kings 3:1, "house of the Lord" begins to be used, not of the tabernacle, but of the temple that was built by Solomon after David's death. And beginning with 2 Chronicles 3:3, "house of God" also begins to be used of the temple.

So far, then, we have seen these terms used at first to refer to a piece of ground where Jacob had a vision of the ladder (which we know to be Christ) and the pillar Jacob set up. Then the terms are transferred to the tabernacle, then to the temple that replaced the tabernacle.

In Ezra and Nehemiah, "house of God" and "house of the Lord" are both used of the second temple that was built under Zerubbabel after

the Jew's return from captivity. The first temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

In the Psalms, we begin to see these terms used in a way that appears to have a double meaning; that is, a physical meaning and a spiritual meaning. For example, let's look at Psalm 23:6: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the **house of the LORD** for ever." What does David mean by "house of the Lord"? I believe that David is not writing just about the physical tabernacle of his time, but also about the heavenly temple where he will dwell forever.

Let's look at Psalm 92:13: "Those that be planted in the **house of the LORD** shall flourish in the courts of our God." Now, of course, people cannot really be planted in a building. So there is at least figurative language here and, perhaps, also a spiritual meaning referring to eternity.

When we look at the prophets, we see the terms "house of God" and "house of the Lord" often used to mean the temple. Sometimes these are prophecies of the second temple that was built under Zerubbabel after the return from captivity, yet these prophecies were written before the return from the captivity. But some of the references are not to the physical temple.

In Ezekiel, beginning with chapter 40, Ezekiel is given a vision that obviously does not deal with physical Jerusalem and the physical temple. Baptist theologian and commentator, John Gill, says this: "Many Christian commentators have omitted the exposition of these chapters; and all acknowledge the difficulties in them. Something however may be got out of them, relating to the Gospel, and Gospel church state, which I am fully persuaded is intended by the city and temple; for that no material building can be designed is clear from this one observation; that not only the whole land of Israel would not be capable of having such a city as is here described built upon it, but even all Europe would not be sufficient; nor the whole world, according to the account of the dimensions which some give of it."

In Ezekiel 44:4-5, Ezekiel uses the term "house of the Lord" to refer to this temple in this vision. When we get to the New Testament, we will see more of what this vision might be about, but it is certainly not about a physical building.

Next, let's look at Hosea 8:1: "Set the trumpet to thy mouth. He shall come as an eagle against the **house of the LORD**, because they have

transgressed my covenant, and trespassed against my law." What is "the house of the Lord" here?

Notice that it says, "He shall come as an eagle against the **house of the LORD**, because *they* have transgressed my covenant." This is a prophecy against Israel. John Gill says of "house of the Lord" here, "meaning not the temple at Jerusalem, but the nation of Israel." So here we see "house of the Lord" being used, not for a place or a pillar or a building, but for a people. "House of Israel," "house of Judah," "house of David," and so on refer to people because the Hebrew word *beth* means both a house building and family or household, and so "house of the Lord" can very well mean people of the Lord.

In Joel 3:18, we read, "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth of the **house of the LORD**, and shall water the valley of Shittim." What does Joel mean here by the "house of the Lord"?

How physically should we take this? Will actual, physical mountains drop down new wine? Will actual physical hills flow with milk? Does Joel really mean that a fountain will come out of the temple?

Here's what John Gill says of this verse: "And a fountain shall come forth of the house of the Lord; not meaning baptism, as some; nor Christ, the fountain of grace, life, and salvation; but the Gospel, the word of the Lord, that fountain full of excellent truths and doctrines; of the blessings of grace; of exceeding great and precious promises; and of much spiritual peace, joy, and comfort: this is the law or doctrine of the Lord, that should come out of Zion, or the church, Isa 2:3; the living waters that shall come out of Jerusalem, Zec 14:8; and the same with the waters in Ezekiel's vision, that came from under the threshold of the house, Eze 47:1; it seems to denote the small beginnings of the Gospel, and the great increase and overflow of it in the world, as it does in all the above passages: this is referred by the ancient Jews to the times of the Messiah." And when are the times of the Messiah? When is the Gospel being preached?

Right now, in this church age. And what, then, does Joel mean by the "house of the Lord" from which flows the Gospel? The church! And I want to point out here that the Greek word translated "church" in the King James Version and many other versions of the New Testament is *ekklēsia*. This word does not mean a building. This is very important. *Ekklēsia* does not mean a building. It means an "assembly" or "meeting."

Now let's look at Micah 4:1: "But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the **house of the LORD** shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it." Clearly, this is prophetic language. Gill writes, "the mountain of the house of the Lord', which is not literally the same, but what that was typical of, the church of Christ, should be greatly exalted and enlarged."

Albert Barnes, in his *Notes* on this passage, quotes someone, and I could not figure out who, but someone is quoted as saying, "This 'mountain,' the church of Christ, transcends all laws, schools, doctrines, religions, Synagogues of Jews and Philosophers, which seemed to rise aloft among men, like mountain-tops, yea, whatever under the sun is sublime and lofty, it will overpass, trample on, subdue to itself."

The last place "house of the Lord" is found in the Old Testament is in Zechariah 14:20-21: "In that day shall there be upon the bells of the horses, HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD; and the pots in the **LORD'S house** shall be like the bowls before the altar. Yea, every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness unto the LORD of hosts: and all they that sacrifice shall come and take of them, and see the therein: and in that day there shall be no more the Canaanite in the **house of the LORD** of hosts." Is this talking about a physical building? Is it talking about physical bells on horses or physical pots?

It reminds me of Revelation 22:15: "For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie." All of these, including the Canaanite in the Zechariah Scripture, are representative of the reprobate. If this is not a physical building, and the reprobate are outside of whatever this is, what are they outside of? Well, of course, the reprobate are not a part of the true church of God.

### **New Testament Usage**

Now what happens in the New Testament? As we found with the Hebrew word meaning "house," the Greek word for "house" (*oikos*) means either a dwelling place or a family. In the Gospels, we find the term "house of God" still referring to either the tabernacle (in Scriptures that look back to the time of the tabernacle, such as Matthew 12:4) or the temple. The temple at the time of the New Testament was what is called Herod's temple. Herod's temple was not a new temple, but was an expansion of the temple built under Zerubbabel. *But after Jesus' resurrection, the temple is never again*

referred to as the "house of God" or "house of the Lord." Why do you think this is so?

The temple was vital to the Old Testament ritual, but all of that ended with the Old Covenant, and Jesus Christ ended the Old Covenant by completely fulfilling it (Matthew 5:17-18; John 19:30). Later, the destruction of the temple in AD 70 confirmed that it was over. Under the Old Covenant, the temple acted as a type or shadow of the true "house of God" or "house of the Lord." We'll see if the New Testament clearly tells us what that is.

I want to point out what Jesus said of Himself in John 2:19-21: "Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body." So, Jesus here calls His body a temple. Why?

To answer this, we must see what all of the Old Testament Scriptures referring to "house of God" and "house of the Lord" have in common. Remember that they referred to a place out in the open, a pillar, a tabernacle, a temple, a people, a prophetic vision of a future people, and a heavenly place. But they all have this in common: Whether in type or in reality, they all refer to *where God dwells*. Because of what he saw in vision, Jacob saw that place out in the open as where God dwelt; Jacob erected the pillar to depict the dwelling of God; the tabernacle typified God's dwelling with His people; the temple also pictured God's dwelling with His people, it was a shadowy type of heaven, and—as we see in this Scripture in John—it was also a type of Jesus. These ideas of the temple—1) that it pictured God dwelling with His people, 2) that it pictured heaven, 3) and that it pictured Jesus—are completely related.

1) Remember what the angel told Joseph of Mary: "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matthew 1:20-23). Jesus was God dwelling with His people.

2) Have you ever heard the expression, "Where the King is, there is the capital"? What did Jesus preach in His ministry on earth? "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom

of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). What did He tell His disciples to preach as they went before Him? "And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 10:7). The kingdom of heaven was at hand in Jesus.

3) In John 2:19, when Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," Jesus was relating Himself to the temple, which was typical of the dwelling place of God. Jesus was saying that the temple pictured heaven and yet this dwelling place of God was in the midst of His people Israel, and it pictured Jesus because God was in Jesus and Jesus was, therefore, God with His people—Emmanuel. Do you see how the physical types of the Old Testament really focus on Jesus and His people, who today are the church (not a building, but the assembly of people)? Can you begin to see why it is wrong, so very wrong, to go back to the shadows and call a building the "house of God"?

But there is more to this wonderful picture. In 1 Corinthians 12:27, the church is called the body of Christ: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." This same thought is found in Ephesians 4:11-12: "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."

Now let's go back to Ephesians 2, verses 19-22: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the **household of God**; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an **habitation of God** through the Spirit." The term "household of God" is almost identical in the Greek to "house of God." The church is here called the family (or household) and the temple of God and the habitation of God which God inhabits through the Spirit. Is not the Father in Jesus and Jesus in the Father and we in them and they in us? "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:21).

Look at Acts 7:48: "Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?" Scripture clearly tells us that God doesn't dwell in temples or any buildings made with hands. Those who

are ignorant of this concept ought to become familiar with it. And, for those who are familiar with it to deny or ignore it and still call a building the "house of God" is heinous.

Now look at 2 Corinthians 5:1-4: "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life." Notice how Paul is contrasting his earthly body, which he calls a tabernacle (which is a temporary dwelling), with an eternal, heavenly building of God not made with hands. In his commentary on these verses Matthew Henry says of the heavenly building that it is, "What heaven is in the eye and hope of a believer. He looks upon it as a house, or habitation, a dwelling-place, a resting-place, a hiding-place, our Father's house, where there are many mansions, and our everlasting home...this happiness shall be enjoyed...immediately after death, so soon as our house of this earthly tabernacle is dissolved." As we saw in some of the Psalms, Paul seems to be referring to the heavenly temple.

Then, in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, we read, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are."

Now let's read 1 Timothy 3:14-15: "These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the **house of God**, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." What is the "house of God" here?

Paul clearly says it is "the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." It is the church, the *ekklēsia*, the assembly. This is talking about God's people, not the building in which they meet. And notice that it is the *pillar* and *ground* of the truth. Does this sound familiar?

In a spiritual sense, we have come full circle. Jacob first used the term "house of God" to refer to the ground and a pillar. And what happened on that piece of ground where Jacob set up the pillar? He had seen a vision of Jesus Christ as a ladder with God's messengers, the angels, going up to heaven and coming down from heaven. Where does truth

come from? From heaven. Who puts truth into the church? Jesus Christ through the Bible. Who do we pray to? God in heaven. Through whom do we pray? Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our link to heaven. Look at John 1:51: "And he saith unto him [Nathanael], Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man."

Are you beginning to see the wonderful, beautiful, precious truths that are trampled upon and hidden by calling a structure of wood, and brick, and stones the "house of God" or "the house of the Lord"? All through the dark ages, when God's people were meeting in ordinary cottages and barns and fields and caves, they called the buildings of the established church "heaps of stones." They understood a truth that many today have lost.

I want to diverge slightly here and ask, Why is it wrong to call the room in which the people meet "the sanctuary"? In the Old Testament, the sanctuary was a sacred place, specifically the holy places of the tabernacle and temple. But notice Isaiah 8:14: "And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem." If Jesus Christ is the stone of stumbling and rock of offence, as we know from Romans 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:8, then He is also the sanctuary. Jesus, our Savior, is our Sanctuary. A physical building is not our sanctuary. Jesus, not a building, sets us apart for holy use.

In Hebrews 8:1-2, we read, "Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such a high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man." This is referring to Jesus Christ, our High Priest and minister of the sanctuary and true tabernacle set up by God. Notice: "But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, *not of this building*; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.... For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to *appear in the presence of God for us*.... So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.... Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest [the true sanctuary] by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he

hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh” (Hebrews 9:11-12; 24; 28; 10:19-20).

If our High Priest is the minister of this heavenly sanctuary, if we enter that heavenly sanctuary through His flesh and by His blood, are we not denigrating all He has done to go back to the physical shadows and call a room in a building of wood and bricks a sanctuary?

Some would say we are to call this room the sanctuary because this is *the* place to worship God. Jesus specifically refuted this. He told the Samaritan woman at the well, “Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father... But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (John 4:21, 23). God is not worshipped in one place better than in another. God is worshipped in spirit and in truth. Christians do not have a particular place in which they must worship God. And they are not specially sanctified by a particular building or room. Christians are sanctified by Christ dwelling in them through the Holy Spirit and can worship God anywhere.

The next place in the New Testament where “house of God” is mentioned is Hebrews 10:16-25: “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin. Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the **house of God**; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” What is the “house of God” here?

Commentators agree that it is the church, the assembly; not a building. In verse 25, we are told not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. The Greek word translated as “assembling” in this verse, *episunagōgē*, is nearly unique to the Bible. The only other place it is used is in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, “Now we beseech you, brethren, by the

coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him," where it refers to the gathering of the saints at the last day. A similar word, *episunagō*, is translated "gather together" in Matthew 24:31 and similar passages: "And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." Quite frankly, despite what we so often hear from the pulpit, it is doubtful that Hebrews 10:25 is talking about attending church. Given the use of the word *episunagōgē*, it is far more likely talking about not forsaking, as some scoffers have done (see 2 Peter 3), the blessed hope of Christ's return and our being gathered to Him (the, "and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching," at the end of the verse adds weight to this understanding).

The last place "house of God" is found is 1 Peter 4:17: "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the **house of God**: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?" Again, what is the "house of God" here?

A few commentators say that this is a reference to the temple and the judgment to come on the Jews. But this does not fit the rest of the sentence, which is clearly speaking of the church and believers as contrasted with those who do not obey the Gospel. Again, I believe this to be referring to the assembly.

What have we seen? We have seen that "house of God" and "house of the Lord" started off being used in the Old Testament to refer to the ground where Jacob had a vision and the pillar that he set up on that spot. It was then used to refer to the tabernacle, and then the temple. Then we saw that it was used in some Psalms with a sort of double meaning, the immediate meaning being the temple, but also with a spiritual application of our eternal dwelling with God. We also saw it in prophetic books as referring to our heavenly dwelling or to the church in this age. And we also saw that, past the Gospels and the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is never again used of the temple, or, in fact, of any physical building. The "house of God" is now spiritual, the body of Christ, the temple not built with hands, the assembly of the firstborn.

Why did I go into all of this? When we begin to use unbiblical definitions for words or terms, or import shadowy Old Testament definitions into the New Testament, we can start to lose sight of the truth. In fact, I believe many have already lost sight of the truths I have brought out in this article. We don't go to God's House, we *are* God's House.

If we started calling the paper and ink that a Bible is made of the Bible, instead of the inspired words, we might lose sight of what the Bible really is and allow it to become corrupted. Religious organizations that think of their buildings as the "house of God" can build beautiful structures and have spiritually dead people because they have lost sight of the truth.

Roman Catholics do this. They equate the Old Testament temple with the church building, even setting up a special priesthood based on the Old Testament Levitical priesthood. A religious group may have a very beautiful structure and call it the "house of God." But there may never be a "house of God" there because the people inside are dead. I would rather meet in a barn with the real "house of God" anytime. Let's not lose sight of the fact that we are far more beautiful than any building. We are far more sanctified by our High Priest than any room called a "sanctuary." We are in grave danger when we shift our focus away from the spiritual and to the physical.

We read in the New Testament that the church in Jerusalem met in the Temple (Solomon's Porch) and in private houses (Acts 2:46; 5:12). John Gill suggests that the Solomon's Porch meetings were not assemblies of the entire church, but were meetings held by the apostles for public evangelism. The church met in houses. Gill's position is supported by the fact that, as the church grew, this pattern was clearly followed. The apostles evangelized in places open to the public, such as the synagogues and the school of Tyrannus. But the assembly of the saints was in private houses (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2).

Some have suggested that the saints had to meet in houses to avoid persecution, but the Bible says nothing of the kind. And history shows that at least one of the reasons the Romans persecuted the Christians was *because* they met in private houses. The Romans were willing to accept Christianity as simply another religion to add to their "collection." They already tolerated plenty of other religions. As long as a religion was open to the public and licensed by the government, Rome was willing to accommodate it. What they would not tolerate were private meetings. Earle E. Cairns writes in *Christianity Through the Centuries*, "There could be no private religion.... The Christians held most of their meetings at night and in secret. To the Roman authority this could be nothing else than the hatching of a conspiracy against the safety of the state. Christians would not serve as soldiers until after 313.... The secrecy of the meetings of the Christians also brought moral charges against them. Public rumor made them guilty of

incest, cannibalism, and unnatural practices" (87). Christian assemblies were markedly different from the rites of the other religions in the Roman Empire because they met privately, not publicly.

All the other religions had public meeting places, but the Christians met in private houses. This, the Romans saw as evidence of sedition. Why would they be meeting in private if they had nothing to hide? What is telling is that the Christians continued to meet in private houses despite the fact that it brought them persecution. They obviously considered meeting in private houses and not meeting in a public building for their regular assemblies important enough to suffer persecution for it.

Gillian Clark of the University of Bristol writes, "Early Christian groups met in private houses, and no church building earlier than the mid-third century has yet been identified" (*Christianity and Romans Society*, 7). The first church buildings were built by Constantine after he had adopted Christianity as the official state church. In doing so, he simply followed the Roman custom of erecting temples to their gods. Prior to Constantine, Christians had no thought of a "sacred" place in which to worship. To the Christians, the people were the assembly. They rejected the concept of replacing the focus on Christ and His saints with a focus on a physical structure. The meetings were not open to the public because they were not occasions for evangelistic preaching to the general public.

Joan E. Taylor observes, "Constantine brought to Christianity a pagan notion of the sanctity of things and places" (*Christians and the Holy Places*, 308). Leonard Verduin writes, "Thus, before the Constantinian change had come full circle, the death sentence had been prescribed for either holding or attending a conventicle [a private assembly not sanctioned by the law]" (*The Anatomy of A Hybrid*, 99). Yet it is well documented that the faithful who would not give in to the institutionalized state church continued to meet privately and illegally for centuries. Of these secret assemblies, Verduin writes in another of his books that "one of the things required of a convert...was the promise not to go again into a stone-pile, a *cumulus lapidum*," as they called church buildings (*The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, 167). Even some who stayed in the established church during the Constantinian change deplored the new buildings: "We do wrong in venerating the Church of God in roofs and structures. Is it doubtful that the Antichrist will sit there?" (ibid.). This sentiment is documented at least into the sixteenth century when the Anabaptists called church buildings *stainhauffen* or "mere stone piles" (Werner O. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, 173).

We do not have to go to a so-called "house of God" building in which to assemble. Wherever we meet, there is God's house, because we are there. Those things that the terms "house of God" and "house of the Lord" referred to in the Old Testament were mere types of the spiritual reality—the true house of God, the assembly of the saints—that we have today. When we are thinking spiritually, we will see this. The true house of God is not any building. Brethren, we are Christ's house (see Hebrews 3:6).

Paul writes, "For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:6-8). Let's not forget 2 Corinthians 6:14-16: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.... And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it" (Revelation 21: 1-3, 22).*