

GOD'S HOUSE IS BIGGER THAN YOUR CHURCH!

Today's text: Isaiah Chaps. 66-67

Extracts:

“Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. *Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,*” says the Lord. “*But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.*” [Is. 66: 1-2]

In 1999, a self-professed Satanist, Jay Ballinger, was sentenced to life imprisonment after he had been found guilty of setting churches on fire in Alabama and several other states in America.¹ In March 2006, three Alabama-area college students were arrested and are being tried for setting nine rural churches on fire and their motive was allegedly just for the “thrill.” In reacting to the fires, Pastor Walter Hawkins whose church was affected said, “They burned the building but they can't burn the church because it is in us.”

It is interesting that the first place that is attacked by enemies of Christ is the nearest church building. The assumption seems to be that it is God's house. Therefore, when you destroy the building, you have destroyed God's house! Is the church building all there is to God's house? Is every church building God's house? Pastor Hawkins whose church was burnt has said that the church is in the worshippers. Is the church in you in deed God's house?

In today's lesson, we shall examine the theme of what constitutes God's house. It is an important subject because there is a growing tendency among some churches to demonize all other denominations whose place and mode of worship differ from theirs. Are their churches equal to God's house? Let us find out, using the 65th and 66th Chapters of the book of Isaiah as our study guide.

¹ Story based on Greg Fulton, “Unusual Suspects in Church Burnings,” *Time*, Wednesday, Mar. 08, 2006; www.time.com/nation

1. Where is your church built?

After John the Baptist had introduced two of his disciples to Jesus, they ran after Him and asked, “Rabbi, where are You *staying*?” He took them to where He was staying and they spent a day with Him [Jn 1: 38, 39]. That was in the early stages of the Lord’s earthly ministry. Later, after He had become well known, some one told Jesus, “I will follow You wherever You go.” Jesus responded, “Foxes have *holes* and birds of the air have *nests*, but the Son of Man has *nowhere* to lay His head” [Lk 9: 57, 58]. From those two stories, we can draw the conclusion that *where you live is your abode*. Foxes may wander around looking for food but at the end of the day, they return to their holes. Birds may fly to and fro but in the end, they wind up in their nests. How about human beings? From the Lord’s answers, *the abode for human beings could be a house or nowhere*. That is why some human beings are said to be homeless. In like manner, churches may be found everywhere but some of them can also be homeless!

Your church building may be one of the following:

a) *It is squatting!*

A squatter may be someone who has put an illegal structure on a piece of land that belongs to somebody else. Another form of squatting is when grown children who are capable of moving out to rent or own their apartments continue to stay with their parents. As long as the owner of the land does not lay claim to his or her property, the squatter in the first type can claim to own a house. However, one day, the legitimate owner may return and the illegal structure will be demolished. We heard recently of a big crisis in Harare, Zimbabwe when the government moved to reclaim extensive lands from squatters. No matter the political motive, the truth is that the affected people were squatters! In the case of those squatting with their parents or older siblings, it may all be over one day when they summon enough courage to ask the squatters to leave!

There are many church buildings that have been erected on vacant plots that belong either to the state or individuals. They have no valid certificates of occupancy and they may have lived there for so long that they may be under the illusion that all is well. Then, some day, the owners may assert their rights. A big church with a congregation running into thousands had that problem with the Lagos State Government (Nigeria) some years ago. The congregation prayed and fasted that no weapons fashioned against them by Satan and his forces should prosper. When the eviction notice expired, the bulldozers came and leveled the place! Was it God’s house that was destroyed? No, it was a human squatter’s house! People in God’s house obey governing authorities [Rom. 13: 1-2].

b) *Your church is a tenant*

A tenant is someone who leases an apartment or house that belongs to somebody else. S(he) pays rent in accordance with the terms of the lease agreement, but more commonly on a monthly basis. Under the terms of the lease agreement, there are limitations on what you can do with the property. For example, you cannot make structural modifications without the express approval of the landlord. You will peaceably enjoy your tenancy *as long as you pay your rents as and when due*. The day you fail to pay, the landlord can serve an eviction notice on you. If you do not comply, s(he) may seek legal authority to send you packing!

Again, many churches, especially the newer variety, operate from rented buildings. In order to be able to pay their rents, some pastors actually go hunting for heavy tithe payers or take bank loans in anticipation of it! Understandably, their churches are organized to meet the whims and caprices of such patrons. Sooner than later, the deception is revealed when God's grace expires.

A good example comes from Trinidad (West Indies) where a church with 1,500 worshippers was recently torn down.² The pastor had failed to pay most of a US\$0.67 million judgment against him. Having used his church as a pledge, the court bailiffs tore down the church building and carted away "a large man-made fountain, red plush carpet, chairs, potted plants, audio equipment, lighting furniture" and musical instruments Was it God's house that was destroyed? No! People in God's house must render to all their dues [**Rom. 13: 7**].

c) *Or your church may be proprietary*

Thank God, you live in your own home. You have used a mortgage loan that you may or may not have paid off. You are legitimately in charge. You can modify the house as you dim fit, subject of course to the building code in your area. You can sell the house when you are growing older or pass it to your children when you die. Nevertheless, you only have *leasehold*, not freehold on the land on which stands the building. This law is deeply rooted in God's word, which states, "The land shall not be sold *permanently*, for the land is Mine" [**Lev. 25: 23**] and "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein" [**Ps. 24: 1**].

In relation to a church building, some of us take it too far. Where they cannot register the house in their personal names, they ensure that their family members (wife, children) are in charge. When they die, one of their children succeeds them as the pastor. Unless such succession is God-led,

² Richard Charan, "Demolition gang tears down church," www.trinidadexpress.com of Thursday, 26 January 2006

we are dealing with family estate, not God's house! One day, a storm of life (natural or man-made, such as a scandal) comes and levels the building. Is it God's house that has been destroyed? No, but God owns the land!

From the foregoing, you can appreciate the answer that Jesus gave when He said, "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." This is also the point made in the book of Isaiah that we shall soon examine.

2. Features of God's house

By human definitions of a house, God will be homeless because, in His own words, "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made" [Is. 66: 1, 2]. In other words, God's house is bigger than a mere *building*. What then are the key features of God's house? Here are some of them:

a) *Location*

Since God is *Omnipresent*, that is, everywhere *at the same time*, then He lives everywhere. He does not sleep. Therefore, He needs no bedroom! He does not travel. So, He has no need for guesthouses. Even when He sits down, His throne is in heaven while His footstool is on earth [v. 1].

By His *choice*, God may point to specific locations where *He may find us*. Notice that expression, "where He may find us." When Paul was writing to the Galatians, he said, "Now after you have known God, *or rather are known by God...*" [Gal. 4: 9]. That is like correcting himself quickly and putting it the right way. It is God that finds us, just as it is the police that finds the criminal! You cannot go to the White House and be looking for the President of the United States *unless he is the one who has invited you!* So, God may choose to manifest Himself to us in a specific church building, as in Solomon's temple [2 Chron. 4: 13-14], and to extend special privileges to us when we worship there [2 Chron. 7: 12-15]. Since such a place has become sanctified by virtue of the Lord's presence, that is why Jesus cast business people (masquerading as church leaders) out of the temple in Jerusalem and chided them quoting Jeremiah's prophecy, "'My house is a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of thieves" [Lk 19: 46].

Since God's throne is in Heaven, then He also shows Himself to us there. That is why Jesus told His disciples, "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and

receive you to Myself; *that where I am, there you may be also*” [Jn 14: 2-3].

Some day, after the Second Advent of Jesus, God will create new heavens and a new earth and the New Jerusalem will be descended “out of heaven from God”, and “He who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make things new’” [Rev. 21: 1-8]. That will be a fulfillment of God’s word when He said in the book of Isaiah, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind” [Is. 65: 17]; and “the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me” [Is. 66: 22]. That is how the faithful shall inherit the earth [Ps. 37: 9].

b) *Tenants in God’s house*

Tenancy in God’s house is spiritual, not physical. In His own words, “On this one will I look: on him who is *poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word*” [Is. 66: 2]. Therefore, when God manifests Himself in earthly buildings that we call church, His attitude to our rituals and offerings [v. 3] depends on the state of our hearts. When we are humble, repentant and have the fear of the Lord, He will show His approval. When we are in labour (i.e., expecting blessings), He will bring it to pass in due season [v. 9]. However, if our relationship with Him is not right, He will see our worship as “abominations” and choose our “delusions” and bring our “fears” on us [v. 4].

Those who use their churches to do business are on their own. They are like tenants who have defaulted on their rents! Those who use their churches to perpetuate sin and wickedness are courting the wrath of God. They should not be surprised when He visits their iniquities on them and their fellow travelers, when He uses the cudgel of correction to drive them out of His temple. In the New Jerusalem, “there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, *but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life*” [Rev. 21: 27].

3. Conclusion: in His presence

In His discourse with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus told her [Jn 4: 21, 23-24]:

Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem worship the Father... but the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father

is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.

God owns the land on which His house is built. Jesus is its foundation while the Holy Spirit is the estate manager. If those qualities are present in your church, God will manifest Himself there. His presence will radiate among your members in their worship, hearts and lives. Your church building becomes a part of God's house. That is the kind of building referred to by the Psalmist when he said, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord'" [Ps. 122: 1]. That is the kind of God's house David referred to when he enthused, "one thing I have desired of the Lord; that will I seek: *that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple*" [Ps. 27: 4]. That is the kind of house where God can take a rest, as Habakkuk reminds us, "The Lord is in His holy temple. *Let all the earth keep silence before Him*" [Hab. 2: 20].

However, if your church *chooses* to remain spiritually filthy, worldly and rebellious, you have chosen to shut God out. You have made yourself spiritually homeless. You may have the most beautiful church building in town. You may have the largest congregation in the country. You may air the most popular TV ministry in the whole world. All are abominations before the Lord if you have placed emphasis on wrong things.

In today's lesson, God commands you to *repent*, to *be humble* and to *practise the fear of the Lord*. Then and only then can your building become a part of His house.