

“Who concerning the Truth Have Misaimed” — 2 Timothy 2:18

Misaiming concerning the Church

Misaiming: “Calling himself a ‘church-based evangelist,’ Bonnke remains committed to building local congregations through his soul-winning ministry. ‘I believe that biblical evangelism makes no sense if it doesn’t lead new converts into the churches,’ he contends” (“Fivefold Ministries Focus: Evangelism,” *Ministries Today*, July/August 2004, p. 10).

Truth: The above quotation is included in “Appearing in this issue,” the editorial preface to the July/August 2004 issue of *Ministries Today*, which features a cover story on evangelist Reinhard Bonnke in its continuing series on the “Fivefold Ministries” in Ephesians 4. The cover boldly proclaims, “Why We Exist: Reinhard Bonnke on Reclaiming the Church’s Reason for Being: the Lost.” This title seemingly suggests that the article will be predicated upon the biblical revelation that the church is “we,” that is, the believers who have been redeemed by the blood and regenerated by the Spirit through faith in Christ, rather than just a physical structure, a building made with hands, a local meeting place. The editorial reference to Bonnke’s commitment to building local congregations and Bonnke’s response, however, suggests the presence of a lingering confusion about the truth of the church, since both perpetuate an organizational understanding of the nature of the church. In essence, according to Bonnke, the church is a local congregation that can be built by swelling its attendance rolls through effective evangelism. New converts, however, do not need to be led into “churches”; they are the church, having been regenerated by the Spirit and baptized by this same Spirit into the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).

Although the cover identifies the church with the word we, the preface, more concretely, suggests that the church is really just an organization of people. This confusion is confirmed by the emphasis in the subsequent article, which chides churches that “make a show of interest [in the gospel], busy with activities, meetings, sessions and business—keeping things going, but ultimately standing still” (21). Bonnke also writes, reinforcing an organizational view of the church, “We may take up the pose, keep the church machine in vigorous motion, while the agenda of the board has no item

relevant to Christ’s agenda—the Great Commission” (21-22).

If the church is perceived merely as a “machine,” guided by a board with an agenda, it should not be surprising that the Lord is regarded as a metaphoric CEO with an organizational agenda as well. This is the case in this article, but it is not the reality in the Bible. While Christ is the Head of the church and the church is His Body, the biblical relationship between the Head and Body is organic, not organizational (Eph. 4:15-16). The church is produced through the impartation of the divine life that was made available through Christ’s death on the cross and through Christ’s resurrection from the dead, which regenerated the believers unto a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3). Being an organic entity, even the fullness of the One who fills all in all (Eph. 1:23), the church depends upon the growth that comes from our experience of the divine life by the organic operation of the law of the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2), a law which causes us to grow with the growth of God for the expression of God in Christ (Col. 2:19). This kind of growth is not reflected just in swelling numbers of converts, a consequence of a successful evangelistic outreach program. From such campaigns, how much is remaining fruit, fruit that develops through an organic abiding in the vine, Christ (John 15:4, 16)? The lost may be found, but they still need to be fed, to be nourished with words that are spirit and life so that they can organically grow in the divine life (1 Tim. 4:6; John 6:63), ultimately becoming a corporate full-grown man, who has been fully renewed in the image of Him who created him (Eph. 4:13; Col. 3:10). Because it is easy to fall into simplistic, organizational conceptions of the church, it is equally easy to mischaracterize the reason for the church’s existence. Simply put, the church does not exist for the purpose of evangelism; rather, the effectiveness of the ministry of an evangelist, as a gift given by Christ to His Body, is the extent to which it functions to perfect the saints unto the organic building up of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12). This point is addressed in the following misaiming.

Misaiming concerning God’s Purpose for the Church

Misaiming: “Until the Son of God came to earth, the only nation with knowledge of God—Israel—believed they

had Jehovah enshrined behind the curtain of the holy of holes in the temple in Jerusalem. But when Jesus died, that curtain was ripped from top to bottom.

“This supernatural event served as public notice from God that He was ‘out and about,’ not confined to a temple. He belongs to the whole world.

“Ultimately, the cross reminds us of why we exist as the church and the price that was paid for us and for those who have not yet heard. We are here on earth to spread the message of the cross, to move from the simulated reality that the Christian life can often become, to be ‘out and about’ as Jesus was, burning with a consuming fire for the lost” (Reinhard Bonnke, “The World Is Waiting,” *Ministries Today*, July/August 2004, pp. 21-22).

Truth: The central thrust of the argument contained in “The World Is Waiting” is that the church’s reason for existence is the execution of the Great Commission given by the Lord in Matthew 28:19, which says, “Go therefore and disciple all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The execution of the Lord’s charge certainly is essential to carrying out God’s economy, God’s plan, but this, in fact, indicates that the gospel is a means rather than the end. This article misaims in its suggestion that the church’s reason for existence is to save the lost. If this were so, all of the Lord’s gifts to the church would have been in the category of evangelist. But He also has given apostles, prophets, and shepherds and teachers because all of these gifts are needed for the perfecting of the saints unto the building up of the Body of Christ, which is the church, for the expression of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13). In this regard, the church does not exist for the sake of evangelism; rather, evangelism serves to carry out God’s purpose for the church by gathering material for God’s building (Hag. 1:8), material that can be perfected (Eph. 4:12), fitted together (2:21), and built into a dwelling place of God in spirit (v. 22).

The true reason for the church’s existence comes out of God’s desire for a mutual dwelling place for God and man, which would corporately bear His image and exercise His dominion throughout the universe and eternity (Gen. 1:26). This mutual dwelling place is typified by the temple. God directs all of His work toward gaining an enlarged expression of Himself. The purpose of His choosing in eternity past was for sonship (Eph. 1:5; Rom. 8:28-29), for expression, not merely for mercy and justification. He created man with a human spirit so that He could be received and contained by man (Zech. 12:1). He became incarnated in the flesh not only to accomplish redemption for fallen man but

also to be the tabernacle and temple of God so that redeemed sinners could become a mutual abode of God and man (John 1:14; 2:19; 15:4). As the last Adam, He resurrected as the life-giving Spirit to impart Himself into humanity so that God’s transforming work can sanctify our entire being, from the center, our human spirit, to our soul, and ultimately to the redemption of our body (1 Cor. 15:45; 1 Thes. 5:23; Rom. 8:23). The process of transformation has both individual and corporate aspects.

Given that central role of God’s dwelling place is the real purpose of the church, it is disappointing to read the article’s use of the rending of the veil in the temple and its allusion to an impetuous and impatient God who desires to be “out and about.” This illustration, even teaching, is used to support the premise of the article that evangelism is God’s goal for the church. Since the article, however, misaims on the point about the reason for the church’s existence, it should come as no surprise that the illustration also misaims and even undermines the truth that God desires to dwell among men, both in and through the temple. God was not unwillingly “confined” to the temple—He chose to dwell in the temple (Isa. 66:1), and His rending of the veil from top to bottom symbolizes His willingness to receive redeemed humanity back into His presence and even His willingness to be joined with redeemed humanity in an atmosphere of mutual fellowship and enjoyment for His glorious expression.

When man fell by not partaking of the life of God, as symbolized by the tree of life, and instead ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, symbolizing the sinful nature of Satan, the offense to God’s righteousness was complete, and fellowship with unredeemed humanity became an impossibility. Instead of grace, there was enmity and wrath. As a consequence of this offense, God barred the way to the tree of life with the use of cherubim and a flaming sword. Cherubim were also sewn into the veil in the temple, blocking the way into the Holy of Holies until God’s righteousness could be satisfied. Christ’s death on the cross satisfied God’s righteousness (Rom. 8:3-4) and enabled the fellowship between God and man to be restored. Thus, the veil was rent, not to let out an imprisoned God but rather to allow redeemed humanity to enter into the Holy of Holies, that is, into God Himself so that God and man may mutually abide in one another. God does not need to go out; rather, the believers need to come in, to come forward, as indicated in Hebrews 4:16 and 10:22. When redeemed humanity comes forward into God, God’s purpose is fulfilled, and the reason for the church’s existence is manifested. We have to come forward to God to work together with Him (2 Cor. 6:1), even when this work is the work of evangelism. It is a

shame that such an illustration, which so fundamentally distorts the desire of God's heart, would be used to reinforce a fundamental misaiming concerning the purpose for the church's existence. It is equally a shame that it would be used, even unwittingly, to elevate the work of an evangelist beyond its true place and function in the Body of Christ and thus actually hinder the growth and manifestation of the Body of Christ, the real purpose of the church.

Misaiming concerning a Corporate Overcomer

Misaiming: "The church in Philadelphia, as revealed in Revelation 3:7-13, is the corporate overcomer the Lord is seeking and needs for His glory and the fulfillment of His purpose. She may be called an overcoming church...Not only will there be individual overcomers—thank God for them—but also a corporate, overcoming church...Such a church, we believe, now exists...Let us pray that we in our circle of fellowship might be such a church...If we are overcomers, either individually as Paul in 2 Timothy, or corporately as Philadelphia in Revelation 3, we will receive a crown...*Nothing* in the prophetic calendar remains to be accomplished before the overcomers, both individual and corporate, are raptured to the throne of God" ("A Corporate Overcomer," *Rivers...of Living Water*, Fall 2003, pp. 4-5, 11-12).

Truth: This passage has the potential to delude believers into thinking that they can be assured of being an overcomer at the judgment seat of Christ simply by virtue of meeting with "an overcoming church." While the New Testament alludes to the thought of a corporate overcomer, it is within the context of their corporate manifestation after a believer's individual appraisal and recognition at the judgment seat of Christ. The overcomers are individually determined at the judgment seat of Christ but corporately manifested as a bride to marry Christ and as an army to destroy Antichrist after the judgment seat of Christ (Rev. 19:7-21).

Being an overcomer in Revelation 2 and 3 is not based on the condition of the church; it depends upon the Lord's determination of an individual believer's condition in relation to His specific charge to that church, a condition which will be manifest only at the end of one's sojourning on the earth. While the Lord commended the church in Philadelphia as a corporate entity, singling her out as a church that had already gained the crown, He still sounded out a call for overcomers in Philadelphia, as He did in all the seven churches, indicating that it is possible to be in Philadelphia and not be an overcomer. This alone should dispel the notion that Philadelphia is a "corporate overcomer." Although the Lord spoke to

Philadelphia as a whole, His call for the overcomers at the end is toward individual believers, as evidenced by His repeated use of singular personal pronouns:

He who overcomes, *him* I will make a pillar in the temple of My God, and *he* shall by no means go out anymore, and I will write upon *him* the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which descends out of heaven from My God, and My new name. *He* who has an ear, let *him* hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev. 3:12-13, emphasis added)

Inclusion within the ranks of the overcomers is not a matter of a church's corporate standing but of an individual's standing. The challenge to the believers in Philadelphia is to not lose what has already been gained, that is, to not fall into degradation. The overcomers in Philadelphia are those who hold fast and remain firm to the end. C. A. Coates in *An Outline of the Revelation* enunciates a believer's individual responsibility to become an overcomer:

There is an overcomer even in Philadelphia. Whatever character an assembly may have, overcoming is always individual. This requires individual energy in spiritual affections. It would be a very great privilege to walk with saints who had truly Philadelphian character, but we should have to recognise that each one who had this character was individually an overcomer. No matter how spiritual the persons may be with whom I walk, I can only have the Lord's approbation and reward by being an overcomer myself. (58)

Witness Lee echoes this thought in *The Training and the Practice of the Vital Groups*:

No church is an overcoming church...We should not expect the local church to be an overcoming church...The church life is the right place for you to be an overcomer. But this does not mean that as long as you are in the church life, you are an overcomer. It is one thing to be in the church life. It is another thing to be an overcomer in the church life. (15, 27)

Since this article suggests the possibility that a local church can be a corporate overcomer, it conveys the erroneous thought that a believer can be an overcomer by virtue of simply meeting with "an overcoming church." Such a mistaken thought will motivate believers to look for an "overcoming church," comparing this and that, often through the lens of one's self-reflection and concepts, and inevitably distracting them from simply keeping His Word and not denying His name. And in this misaimed effort to find an "overcoming church," even if it comes out of a well-intentioned heart, many believers will loosen their tight grip on the

Lord's Word and name and thus leave them wanting at the judgment seat of Christ.

Misaiming concerning the New Jerusalem

Misaiming: "The Bible ends with the wonderful consummating book of Revelation, which unveils the glorious goal of all God's work through the ages, the new Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem is the heaven that all believers are expecting, the eternal dwelling of all the saints with God" ("A Corporate Overcomer," *Rivers... of Living Water*, Fall 2003, p. 3).

Truth: The sentences quoted above are a regrettable juxtaposition of truth and error. The Bible does end with the wonderful consummating book of Revelation; the book of Revelation surely unveils the glorious goal of God's work through the ages; furthermore, this glorious goal certainly is the New Jerusalem. All this is true. However, the writer immediately goes on to identify the New Jerusalem with heaven, claiming that the New Jerusalem "is the heaven that all believers are expecting." Such an assertion is a serious misaiming, a grievous departure from the truth. It is necessary, therefore, to critique the error and affirm the truth.

This misaiming first teaches, correctly, that the New Jerusalem is the glorious goal of God's work and then asserts, erroneously, that the New Jerusalem is heaven. This leads irrefragably to the following conclusion: *The goal of all God's work is heaven*. Since the goal of God's work is the New Jerusalem and since the New Jerusalem is supposedly heaven, heaven must be the goal of God's work. That such a claim is contrary to the divine revelation in the Scriptures should become evident as we examine this misaiming in more detail, considering the wrongful identification of the New Jerusalem not only with heaven but with "the heaven that all believers are expecting."

The identification of heaven and the New Jerusalem made in the above misaiming is commonplace among Christian preachers and teachers. In writings about eternal life in heaven, it is often tacitly assumed and taken for granted that the New Jerusalem equals heaven and that the description of the holy city in Revelation 21 and 22 is a depiction of heaven. This mistake is made at the beginning of *Heaven: My Father's House* by Anne Graham Lotz. "This book," she informs us, "is developed from the following Biblical description of Heaven" (xi). The writer proceeds to quote Revelation 21 in its entirety, regarding it as a detailed picture of heaven, an error that pervades traditional Christian ideas about heaven and that is expressed by the misaiming we are examining.

Relevant here is John's statement in Revelation 21:2: "I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." If the New Jerusalem were the same as heaven, how could this holy city descend from heaven? Of course, this would be impossible, for heaven could not come down out of heaven. The fact that the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven proves that heaven and the New Jerusalem are distinct and separate. Thus, it is incorrect to claim, as the writer of the misaiming does, that the New Jerusalem is heaven.

The New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from God, is "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Significantly, in Revelation 21:9 the angel says to the apostle John, "Come here; I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." Immediately John was "carried...away in spirit," and he saw "the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (v. 10). This reveals that the New Jerusalem is "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (v. 9). The Lamb, the redeeming God, will marry the New Jerusalem. If the New Jerusalem were heaven, this would mean that heaven would be the bride, the wife of the Lamb, and that the Lamb would marry heaven and have an eternal marriage with heaven as His spouse. Such a notion is so ridiculous that it is virtually self-refuting.

As noted above, the claim is made not simply that the New Jerusalem is heaven but that it is "the heaven that all believers are expecting." What, we may now ask, is the kind of heaven that all believers are expecting? Although we regard it as unwise to say what "all believers are expecting," we certainly have the ground to point out that the heaven which many, perhaps most, believers are expecting is a material domain replete with mansions, sensual delights, and physical pleasures. This expectation is expressed in a familiar song about heaven: "I've got a mansion just over the hilltop, / In that bright land where we'll never grow old; / And some day yonder we will nevermore wander, / But walk the streets that are purest gold." Whereas some await a mansion, others anticipate a heavenly five-star resort (see Anthony DeStefano's *A Travel Guide to Heaven*). Sadly, believers are expecting all kinds of things in heaven that have no basis in the Word of God. Nevertheless, the quotation from "A Corporate Overcomer" cited above boldly claims that the New Jerusalem is the heaven that all believers are expecting. Since many believers are expecting mansions, golden streets, and world-class hotels in the heavens, and since the New Jerusalem is presented as the heaven they are expecting, the idea that the New Jerusalem is the fulfillment of the expectation of these believers and the satiation of their desires is erroneously reinforced.

It is an incontrovertible fact that countless believers are looking for a heaven that is a literal, physical metropolis. This view is espoused by Thomas Ice and Timothy J. Demy in *What the Bible Says about Heaven and Eternity*. This book says that the New Jerusalem “will be earthly, in that it is physical and geographical” (17). Thus, even though the book of Revelation presents the holy city as a sign, a symbol with spiritual significance (1:1), and hence not a literal, material structure, we are told that the New Jerusalem is earthly, physical, and geographical. This may be what believers are expecting and what some allege the New Jerusalem understood as heaven to be, but it is contrary to the Word of God.

According to the Scriptures, the New Jerusalem is neither heaven nor a physical city; rather, the New Jerusalem is a person—a corporate person, the wife of

the Lamb, composed of all the redeemed, regenerated, sanctified, renewed, transformed, and glorified sons of God. The “glorious goal of all God’s work through the ages” is this marvelous corporate expression of the Triune God. One day, in the new heaven and new earth, this corporate organic entity, the completion of God’s eternal purpose and the fulfillment of His heart’s desire, will come down out of heaven from God. If, by the Lord’s mercy, we see the biblical revelation concerning God’s economy and if, by the Lord’s grace, we live according to this revelation by being one spirit with the Lord in the Body of Christ, God’s goal will become our goal, and we will long to become a part of God’s glorious, eternal corporate expression—the New Jerusalem, the wife of the Lamb.

by the Editors

Footnote from the Recovery Version of the Bible

“And I saw the holy city, **New** Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2).

New: The revelation of this book is composed of signs. Because of the profundity of the great and important matters in this book, it is difficult for man to speak of them exhaustively in plain words. Thus, all these matters are symbolized and depicted by signs, such as the lampstands, signifying the churches, and stars, signifying the messengers of the churches (ch. 1); Jezebel, signifying the degraded, fornicating Roman Church (ch. 2b); jasper and precious stones, signifying life and the redeeming God (4:3); the Lion and the Lamb, signifying the overcoming and redeeming Christ (ch. 5); the four horses, signifying the gospel, war, famine, and the spreading abroad of death (ch. 6a); the universal woman, signifying God’s redeemed throughout the generations, her child, signifying the strong, overcoming ones among God’s redeemed, and the dragon, the serpent, signifying the cruel and subtle Satan, the devil (ch. 12); the beast out of the sea, signifying Antichrist, and the beast out of the earth, signifying the false prophet (ch. 13); the harvest, signifying the people growing under God’s cultivation, and the firstfruits, signifying the ones who ripen early among those who are growing under God’s cultivation (ch. 14); Babylon the Great, signifying Rome, in both its religious aspect and its material aspect (chs. 17—18); and the bride, signifying the saints who are mature and are prepared to be Christ’s counterpart (ch. 19a). Besides these, there are many other signs. The final sign, which is also the greatest, is the New Jerusalem, signifying the composition of the totality of God’s redeemed saints throughout the generations, who have been regenerated, transformed, and glorified. It is not a material, lifeless city but a corporate living person as the bride, having Christ, such a wonderful person, as her husband (v. 2).

The New Jerusalem is a living composition of all the saints redeemed by God throughout all generations. It is the bride of Christ as His counterpart (John 3:29) and the holy city of God as His habitation, His tabernacle (v. 3). This is the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), which God has prepared for us and which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob long after (Heb. 11:10, 16). This is also the Jerusalem which is above and which is our mother (Gal. 4:26). As the bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem comes out of Christ, her Husband, and becomes His counterpart, just as Eve came out of Adam, her husband, and became his counterpart (Gen. 2:21-24). She is prepared by participating in the riches of the life and nature of Christ. As the holy city of God, she is wholly sanctified unto God and fully saturated with God’s holy nature to be His habitation.

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, God likens His chosen people to a spouse (Isa. 54:6; Jer. 3:1; Ezek. 16:8; Hosea 2:19; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:31-32) and a dwelling place for Himself (Exo. 29:45-46; Num. 5:3; Ezek. 43:7, 9; Psa. 68:18; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Tim. 3:15). The spouse is for His satisfaction in love, and the dwelling place is for His rest in expression. Both of these aspects will be ultimately consummated in the New Jerusalem. In her, God will have the fullest satisfaction in love and the utmost rest in expression for eternity.