

The Church *as the Dwelling Place of God in Ephesians*

by Watchman Nee and Witness Lee

The church is the dwelling place of God. A person's body is his dwelling place. Strictly speaking, we do not live in a house; we live in our body. This is why the Scriptures liken our physical body to a dwelling place. In 2 Corinthians 5:1 Paul calls our fallen body an earthly tabernacle dwelling, a temporary dwelling, in contrast to a dwelling not made with hands, which will be our resurrected body in the future. Just as our body is the place in which we exist, our habitation, so the church is the Body of Christ to contain Christ and to express Him. Hence, it is the dwelling place, the habitation, of the Triune God.

The church as the new man is a matter of life, the church as the Body of Christ is a matter of expression, and the church as the bride of Christ is a counterpart. To speak of the church as the dwelling place of God, however, conveys the central thought of building. We need to be built up; this thought is very much revealed in Ephesians, as in 2:20-22 and 4:12 and 16. The church is the temple of God because it is God's habitation, God's dwelling place.

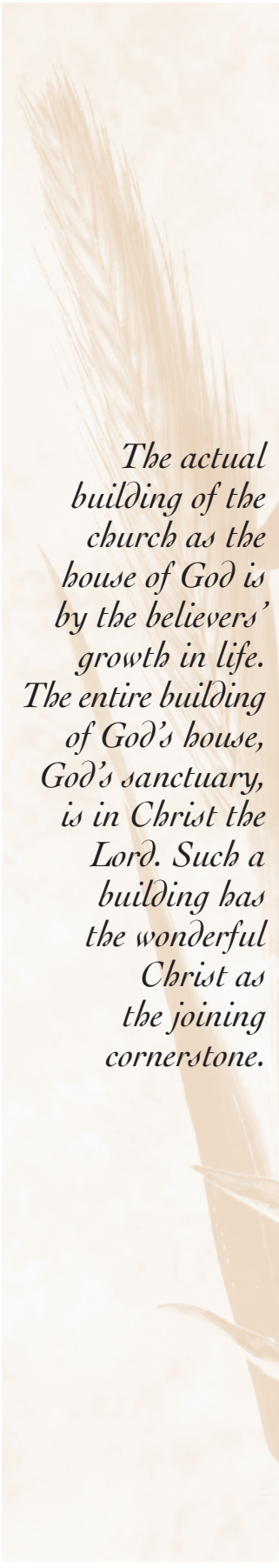
Christ Being the Cornerstone of the Dwelling of God

In Ephesians 2:20-22 Paul says, "Being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone; in whom all the building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit." These verses reveal that Christ Himself becomes the cornerstone of God's dwelling place in our spirit.

The foundation of the church is Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). Because the mystery of Christ was revealed to the apostles (Eph. 3:4-5), the revelation they received is considered the foundation on which the church is built. This corresponds with the rock in Matthew 16:18, which is not only Christ but also the revelation concerning Christ, on which Christ will build His church. Therefore, the foundation of the apostles and prophets is the revelation that they received for the building of the church.

In Ephesians 2:20 Christ is referred to not as the foundation (Isa. 28:16) but as the cornerstone, because the main concern here is not the foundation but the cornerstone that joins together the two walls, one wall being the Jewish believers, and the other, the Gentile believers. Here, not Christ but the apostles and prophets who received the revelation concerning Christ are stressed as the foundation. When the Jewish builders rejected Christ, they rejected Him as the cornerstone (Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7), the One who would join the Gentiles to them for the building of God's house.

In Matthew 21 the Lord Jesus indicated, in a figurative way, that the Pharisees would



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reject Him. Verse 42 says, "Have you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this has become the head of the corner. This was from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'" By this word the Lord revealed that after His resurrection He would become the cornerstone to join the Jews and the Gentiles. Referring to Christ, Peter said to the religionists in Acts 4:11 and 12, "This is the stone which was considered as nothing by you, the builders, which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no other, for neither is there another name under heaven given among men in which we must be saved." Peter's word shows that salvation implies building. God's intention in saving us is not to bring us into the heavens. Rather, it is to join us to the Jews so that He may have His building. Many unbelieving Jews despise the Lord Jesus because they do not want to be joined to the Gentiles. As long as a Jew does not believe in Christ, he may be separated from the Gentiles, but as soon as such a Jew believes in Him, he is joined by Christ, the cornerstone, to the Gentile believers. Whether we are Jews or Gentiles, we have been saved in order to be joined together in Christ for God's building.

According to Ephesians 2:21, in Christ, who is the cornerstone, all the building, including both the Jewish and the Gentile believers, is fitted together and is growing into a holy temple in the Lord. Here being fitted together is to be made suitable for the condition and situation of the building (4:16). Moreover, since the building is living (1 Pet. 2:5), it is growing. It grows into a holy temple. The actual building of the church as the house of God is by the believers' growth in life. The entire building of God's house, God's sanctuary, is in Christ the Lord. Such a building has the wonderful Christ as the joining cornerstone.

The Dwelling Place of God Being in Spirit

Ephesians 2:22 says, "In whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit." *Spirit* here refers to the believers' human spirit, which is indwelt by God's Holy Spirit. God's Spirit is the Dweller, not the dwelling place. The dwelling place is the believers' spirit. God's Spirit dwells in our spirit. Therefore, the dwelling place of God is in our spirit. Verse 21 says that the holy temple is in the Lord, and this verse says that the dwelling place of God is in spirit. This indicates that for the building of God's dwelling place, the Lord is one with our spirit, and our spirit is one with the Lord (1 Cor. 6:17). Our spirit is where the building of the church, the dwelling place of God, takes place. This indicates that not only are the Lord Jesus and the Spirit of God in our spirit; the new man and God's dwelling place also are in our spirit. The church as the new man today is in our spirit. Practically speaking, when we are out of our spirit, we are out of the church. For this reason we must always turn to our spirit, exercise our spirit, and walk according to our spirit. We should not be out of our spirit or have our being apart from our spirit. We must walk, live, act, and have our being in our spirit. When we exercise our spirit in this way, we are in the church.

The Dwelling Place of God Being Local

As the believers experience the dispensing of the Divine Trinity corporately by living in the church, they are built in the church. Ephesians 2:22 says, "In whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit." The apostle Paul adds verse 22 as a kind of repetition. It seems that verse 21 is quite adequate: "In whom all the building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord." Why does he need verse 22? "In whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit." What is mentioned in verse 21 is the so-called universal church, the whole Body of Christ. But Paul mentions the local church in verse 22. *You* refers to the saints of the local church in Ephesus. The word *you* refers to the local saints. Furthermore, the word *also* indicates that the building in this verse is local. According to the context, the dwelling place of God in 2:22 is local, whereas the holy temple in the preceding verse is

universal. In verse 22 Paul is saying that the local saints, the saints in Ephesus, were being built together in Christ into a dwelling place of God. Therefore, in verses 21 and 22 Paul covers both the universal aspect and the local aspect of the church. All the building is growing—this refers to the universal aspect. The believers in a particular locality are being built together—this is the local aspect.

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Why does Paul use the term *holy temple* in referring to the universal aspect and the term *dwelling place of God* when speaking of the local aspect? What is the difference, if any, between the holy temple and the dwelling place of God? Apart from the universal temple, there is not another temple called the local temple. The temple and the dwelling place refer to two aspects of the same thing. Do not consider the temple a dwelling place. The temple is the place in which God's people contact God, worship Him, and hear His oracle. The dwelling place is a place of rest. God rests in His dwelling place. However, the temple and the dwelling place are not two distinct places. Rather, they are two aspects, two functions or usages, of the same building. The church is the place where God's people contact God, worship Him, and receive His word, and it is also the place of God's rest.

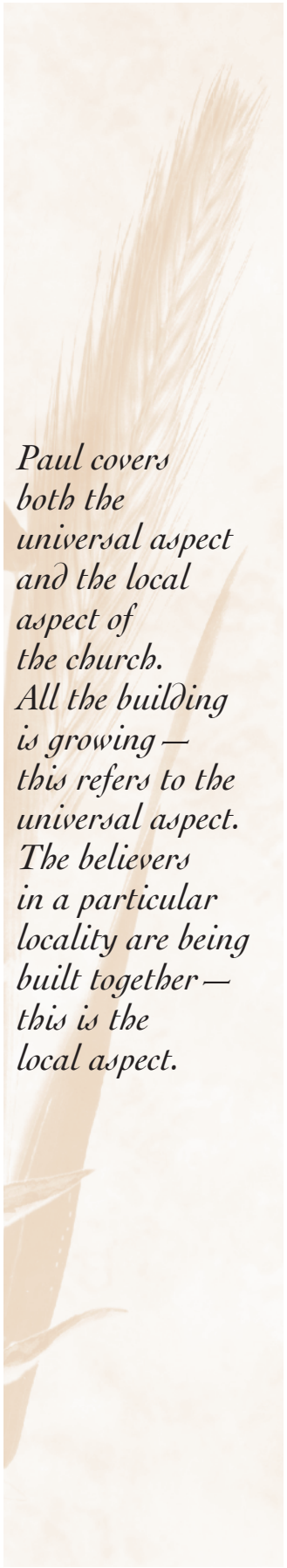
All the local churches are part of the universal church, not something in addition to it or apart from it. All the local churches added together equal the universal church. This means that apart from the local churches there is no universal church. Hence, the building of the local church is the building of the universal church. All the local churches have just one building. In this universe there is just one building with a universal aspect and a local aspect.

Bible teachers have always said that the book of Ephesians is not about the local church but the universal church. They are right in that this book covers the universal aspect of the church, but it still deals with the local church. "In whom you also are being built together..." This is the building of the local church. Do not say that as long as we have the universal church, it is good enough. Regardless of how much we have the universal church, we still need "In whom you also..."! We still need the local church, for without it, there is no practicality of the church.

The Dwelling Place of God Being a Matter of Mingling

The function of the church is of two aspects. One aspect is that it is the Body of Christ, and the other aspect is that it is the house of God, or we may say, the dwelling place of God, the temple of God. These three—the house of God, the dwelling place of God, and the temple of God—are one. The significance of the church as the house, the dwelling place, and the temple of God is in God being mingled with man. This means that God has found a people on earth whom He can be mingled with. This is the great mystery of godliness, God manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16); this is also the mingling of God and man. When a person lives in a house, it could be said that he is "mingled" with the house, but because the house is "dead," it cannot be truly mingled with a living person. However, our God is living and we are living; God is Spirit and we have a spirit. Therefore, God and we can be thoroughly mingled. The fact that we are the dwelling place of God, the temple of God, and the house of God means that God dwells in us and causes us to be mingled with Him as one so that we may be filled unto all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19).

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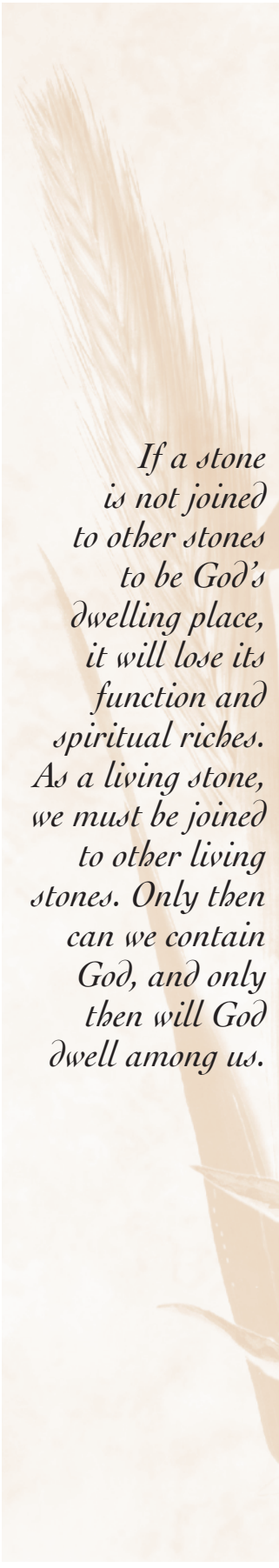
Paul covers both the universal aspect and the local aspect of the church. All the building is growing—this refers to the universal aspect. The believers in a particular locality are being built together—this is the local aspect.

dwelling place of God is in spirit. This indicates that the Lord is one with our spirit and that our spirit is one with the Lord. To be in our spirit actually is to be in the Lord. Also, to be in the Lord is to be in the spirit. “He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit” (1 Cor. 6:17). We cannot separate our spirit from the Lord. Hence, our spirit is the place where the building of the church is. The building is not in our mind, emotion, soul, or heart. The building is absolutely a matter in our spirit.

In order for us to be built up locally, our disposition, our being, must be dealt with. Nothing tests our spiritual maturity as much as this matter of building. Furthermore, the local building is a great help in our spiritual growth. If we are willing to be built into the church in our locality, we shall have the abundance of the growth in life.

The Dwelling Place of God Being Corporate

God’s dwelling place is one of the greatest revelations in the entire New Testament. We should realize that God has a dwelling place on earth. He needs a dwelling place. In the Bible we see the thought of a dwelling place from Moses’ tabernacle to Solomon’s temple, including the later rebuilding and restoration of the temple. In the church age God is making man His temple. God once dwelt in a big building—Solomon’s temple. But today God dwells in the church; the church has now become the dwelling place of God. We have been gathered together to be the dwelling place of God. We as God’s many children have been gathered together by the Holy Spirit to be the dwelling place of God. This is covered in 1 Peter 2:5. We are the living stones being built into the spiritual house. How is the spiritual house built? Solomon’s temple was built with dead stones. But today the dwelling place of God is built with living stones. Peter, whose name means “a stone,” was a living stone. When all the living stones come together, they become a temple. If they are not together, can one stone be a house by itself? No! If no stone is upon another, it is a mark of desolation; this is not a good sign. No stone being upon another is a result of judgment and desolation. As long as we have a house, we have one stone upon another. We thank God that today we are saved and have believed in the Lord Jesus; we are now stones. What use does a single stone have if it is left alone? But when the stones are put together, they become a house. When they are isolated, they are useless. In fact, they may become stumbling stones instead of living stones. Today we are like the accessory parts of a car. When all the parts are assembled together, we have a car that can be driven around. We dare not say that those who are living stones will become dead if they become isolated. But we can say that if a stone is not joined to other stones to be God’s dwelling place, it will lose its function and spiritual riches. As a living stone, we must be joined to other living stones. Only then can we contain God, and only then will God dwell among us. A hundred years ago an Englishman by the name of Mr. Stoeneg said, “After I was saved, a most wonderful thing happened to me. One day I came to realize that I was building material in the dwelling place of God. This is a most wonderful discovery.” The first time I read this, I did not think too much about it. What is so wonderful about being building material in God’s dwelling place? But today, as I ponder over it, I appreciate Mr. Stoeneg’s word. Once such a feeling is in you, you will realize how wonderful this is. Thank God! We are indeed material for the spiritual dwelling place of God. If we, as building material, are detached from the building, we will be useless. At the same time, God’s dwelling place cannot go on without us as stones. Without us as stones, there will be holes in God’s dwelling place, and thieves will get into this building. Since I am the building material for God’s dwelling place, God cannot go on without me. Brothers and sisters, we must see that we are the building material that the Holy Spirit is using for the building of God’s dwelling place. If you are by yourself, you will lose God’s riches. You will not be able to contain God. You must be joined to the brothers and sisters. Only then can you contain God. A wooden bucket that contains and carries water is made out of pieces of wood. If you remove a piece of wood from the bucket, the whole container will no longer hold water. The nature of the individual pieces of wood has not changed, but the riches they contain have changed. Each piece



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can be soaked with a little water, but it will never hold much water; it will lose all the riches. We are God's house, and as soon as we become isolated, we lose all the riches. Brothers and sisters, you may not see it clearly today. But gradually, you will see more and more clearly. As soon as you believe in the Lord, spontaneously there is an inclination within you to contact other children of God. There is a desire within you to look for other materials, other stones. You must go along with this nature. Do not isolate yourself from others through concepts of your own.

The Dwelling Place of God Being a Matter of Life

Since the church is the house of God, those in the church are members of the household of God and are the dwelling place of God in spirit. The members of a man's family are born of him and out of him. They have his life and nature, and they are part of his house. Similarly, the members of the household of God are born of Him and out of Him. They have His life and nature, and they are part of His house. Since the church is born of God and out of God, having His life and nature, the church is the household of God, the dwelling place of God in spirit.

The word *house* in both English and Greek has two meanings. One meaning is that of a household, and the other is that of a dwelling place. The church as the house of God reflects these two meanings. On the one hand, the church is the household of God, and on the other hand, the church is the dwelling place of God. When the word *house* refers to a household in common usage, it does not include the dwelling place itself. With regard to its usage in relation to the church as the house of God, however, *house* refers to both a household and a dwelling place. The church, which is composed of the members of God's household, is the dwelling place of God. Believers are the dwelling place, the building, and the house. All believers are living stones. Living things can grow, but dead things cannot. Every believer has the life of God. We are living, not dead. Therefore, we can grow to become a living building, a living house, as God's dwelling place.

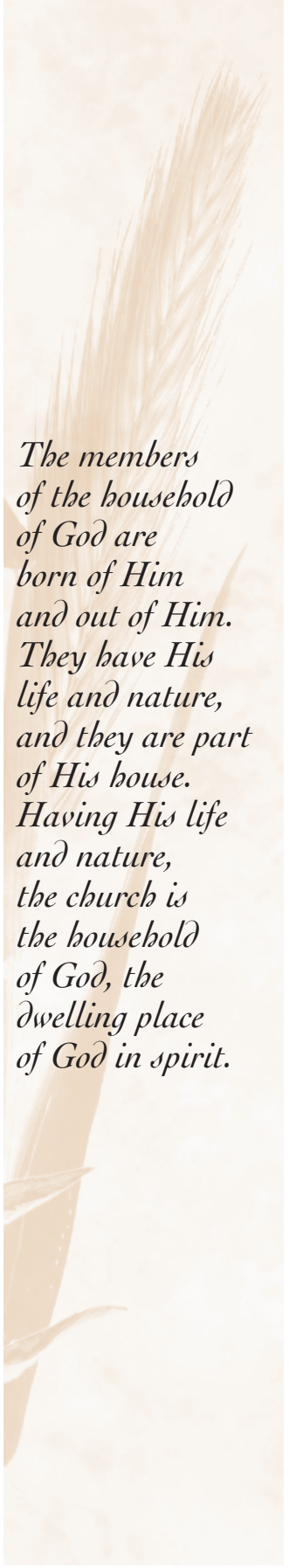
The Church as the Dwelling Place of God Being Realized in Our Spirit

The fact that God's dwelling place is in our spirit indicates that the church is in our spirit. Whenever we are out of the spirit and in our natural mind, we are outside of the church. Because the church life is in our spirit, we all need to learn the lesson of turning to our spirit and staying there. However, sometimes we may leave the spirit and dwell in our natural mind. As a result, we may have questions concerning the church and problems with the church and with the saints. The longer we stay away from our spirit, the more questions and problems we will have. But if we come back to our spirit and stay in the spirit, to us the church life will be wonderful.

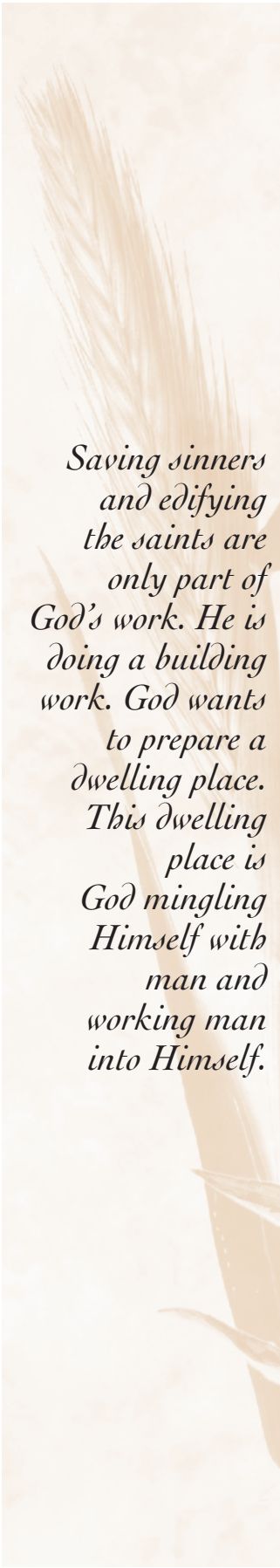
The Dwelling Place of God Being Built and Enlarged

We are the house, the dwelling place, that God is building. We are God's temple, the dwelling place of God through the Holy Spirit. As living stones, we are being built up as a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5). In its completion the temple will be enlarged to become the city. Therefore, there is no temple in the city (Rev. 21:22). The city is the enlargement of the temple.

God's work today is to build a dwelling place for Himself in the universe. Hence, in speaking of the city, verse 3 says that the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them. Saving sinners and edifying the saints are not God's goal. He saves sinners and edifies the saints in order to gain a building on the earth. God's building is a corporate man, not an individual person. This is His dwelling place.



The members of the household of God are born of Him and out of Him. They have His life and nature, and they are part of His house. Having His life and nature, the church is the household of God, the dwelling place of God in spirit.



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John 14 shows what God is doing in the universe. Saving sinners and edifying the saints are only part of God's work. He is doing a building work. God wants to prepare a dwelling place. This dwelling place is a mysterious entity. It is God mingling Himself with man and working man into Himself. This building also includes the element of heaven; heaven is joined to earth. Hence, it is the mingling of God and man and the joining of heaven and earth. This is the work that God is doing today. If we understand this point as we read the New Testament, we will receive much light. We will also understand our goal and purpose in the Lord's work. We are not here simply to save sinners and edify the saints; rather, our goal is God's building, His dwelling place on earth.

God is doing a building work. The Gospel of John, Acts, and the Epistles show the stones for God's building. Acts 4:11 says that Christ is the cornerstone; Ephesians 2:22 says that we are being built together in Him into a dwelling place of God. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul says that we are God's building (v. 9) and that we should take heed how we build (v. 10). "If anyone builds upon the foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, stubble, the work of each will become manifest" (vv. 12-13). Hebrews 11:10 speaks of "the city which has the foundations, whose Architect and Builder is God." God is designing and building a city.

Revelation 21:3 clearly says that the New Jerusalem is God tabernacling with men. It is filled with the element of heaven, and it is expressed on earth. This is the joining of heaven and earth, the mingling of man and God. It is not the blessing of individual spiritual believers. God's temple becomes a city, God's dwelling place. This is what God wants and what He is doing. This is God's goal, His central work.

Our Need for Experience

God dwells in the temple, but more specifically, He dwells in the inner chamber of the temple. His shekinah presence is in the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies is a type of our human spirit. Man is a temple of three parts, and our spirit is the innermost part. If we know how to discern and exercise our spirit, we can realize God's presence, which is His indwelling in the church. If we do not know how to use our spirit, to say that God is in the church is mere doctrine. We must learn how to discern and exercise our spirit in order to experience God's presence more and more in our spirit and in the church. We do not need doctrines but the conscious exercise of our spirit.

In Ephesians there are two prayers. The first prayer is a prayer for revelation (1:15-23), and the second prayer is a prayer for experience (3:14-19). At the beginning of this book, we need a prayer for us to have revelation. Then, after we receive revelation, we need another prayer for us to experience what we see. Paul's first prayer is for us to have a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Christ, and his second prayer is that our inner man would be strengthened with power so that we may experience Christ in a full way, so that Christ may make His home in us, so that we may be filled unto all the fullness of the Triune God. This is the real experience of God being present in the church, particularly in our inner man.

Verse 16 says that we are strengthened not *in* the inner man but *into* the inner man. This means that the Holy Spirit deals with our inner man by working more and more of Christ into it. This requires us to practically discern, know, and exercise our spirit. However, the matter of our spirit is overlooked and even opposed by many Christians today. When we minister to people about Christ in our spirit, many of them are surprised; they have never heard this. Although they may receive much help from Christian workers to know the Word, memorize the Word, and understand the Word, they may never have been told how to exercise their spirit to experience Christ as the Spirit. To exercise our spirit is a very vital matter. **AFC**