

A Place To Hear from Heaven

THE CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS



A Place To Hear from Heaven

THE CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS

Rev. Dr. Ralph Douglas West, Sr.
Pastor & Founder

Dedication



To the members of that part of the body of Christ named *The Church Without Walls*: here you'll find the photographs and mementos of a physical building that houses the church. Yet the church in this vast city indeed has no walls. You are the church. These beautiful new walls are a metaphor representing an even greater beauty: the throngs of people that are the body of Christ in this place and this city. The new lustrous, sacred spaces speak of a church that desires to make all things sacred in every space. Above all else, we wish it to be a place to hear from heaven.





Just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

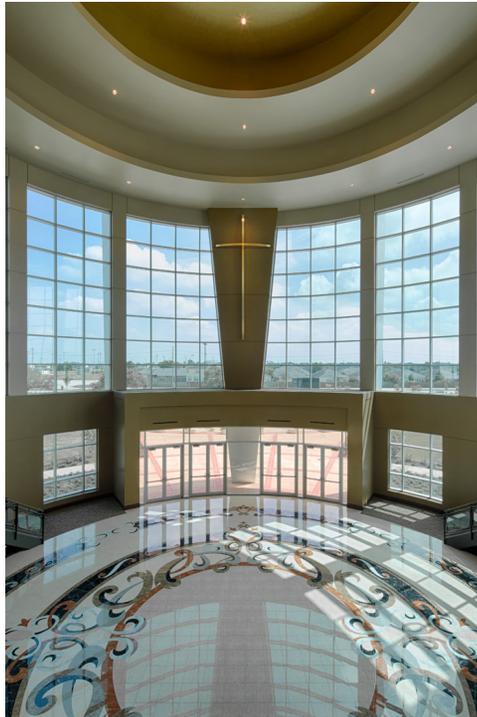
EPHESIANS 5:25-27

May the beauty of this physical structure symbolize to every passerby the surpassing radiance of the church through the ages. Each time we gather, let this be a place to hear from heaven.

—PAS

The gracious entrance of the sanctuary may ever be a reminder that heaven meets earth, all are welcomed, and the transparency of divine grace and luminous hope for God's tomorrow meets us under the sign of the cross of Christ. May you find room to grow here, along with space to reach higher and quietness to hear from heaven.

"I am the door."
JOHN 10:9



A Place To Hear from Heaven

2 CHRONICLES 7:1

ON THE EMERALD ISLE OF IRELAND, you may find some of the oldest of Christian ruins. The Celtic Christians built their houses of worship at what they called *thin places*. They believed such places were *thin* in one arresting aspect: the veil between heaven and earth was thin at that place. In time you could hear from eternity. In a specific place you could hear from the God who is everywhere. Apart from the noise of the crowd, you could enter the silence and hear God. The borderline between here and there, time and eternity, seen and unseen is thin.

As we have entered this sacred space, so also we plead with God that this will always be a thin place—a place where we can hear from heaven. We are not without a biblical record regarding how that may be so.

Solomon, the theocratic king of God's people, has pleaded as a mere earthly, temporal king to the heavenly, eternal king. He has begged to hear from God in the new temple of God. God answered in an unforgettable, unavoidable, and unmistakable manifestation. God demonstrated that this, His new house, would be a place to hear from heaven.



Rev. Dr. Ralph Douglas West, Sr.

God's Holy Fire

*When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven
and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices;
and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.*

2 CHRONICLES 7:1

When you see the word *fire* in the Scriptures, it often refers to theophany. Theophanic moments are those times when God breaks through the natural to reveal something supernatural. During those times, people may say, "I was just walking, minding my own business, and the Lord revealed this word to me," or "When I was reading some book, God gave me a word."

You can trace God's use of fire throughout the Scriptures. The fire burned during the covenant-making with Abraham. Moses approached a burning bush that was not consumed by the fire. Isaiah went into the temple, where he saw burning coals laying on the altar. He told God, "Touch my lips and the lips of those I speak to because we are a people of unclean lips." On Mount Carmel, God's fire burned as Elijah protested against national religious apostasy. And so, this kind of fire refers to God's divine intervention—His theophany.

When fire starts, typically it is an act that is caused from below. But in this case, it is a fire that comes from above, an image that God has divinely initiated. Other fires burned man's offerings on the altar as sacrifices to God. But now fire falls from heaven, and it is consuming things at God's divine initiative. The fire comes at God's bidding to show us that this is *His* power—over earth, wind, and fire. With this display of power, God is saying, "I'm doing these things without the help of





human instrumentality because I want to show you that I do some things that you don't have any jurisdiction over."

Some of you have been to Yellowstone Park, where the fires burn on that mountain. As the sun begins to set, the fires start to blaze. The ranger at the base of the mountain cries out, "Let the fire fall!" A machine pushes the blazing cinders over the crest of the mountain. And when that fire starts falling, cascading down the sides of the mountain, it looks as if the very fire of heaven is falling down to the earth. If that is so on a merely human plane, how much more do we wish it to be on a heavenly plane? Let us look up this inaugural day to heaven itself and cry out, "Let the fire fall!"

Worshiping God is not first about us. As we come into this new holy temple, may we stop worrying about how we look and who's looking at us? Instead, we should lift our eyes up to the hills and say, "Let the fire fall!" And we will know when God's fire falls. It will make us cry when we are not sad, run when there is nobody behind us, and praise God when there is nothing to shout about. Our prayer should be, "Lord, let Your fire fall!"

In the record of 2 Chronicles 7:1, fire fell on a dead sacrifice. Yet in this Christian temple we ought to yearn for Pentecostal fire—God's fire—to fall on us as living sacrifices who daily pray, "Awaken my imagination; fix my mind and heart that I might serve You."

The Lion and the Lamb

The fire falling points to God's power, but 2 Chronicles 7:3 records the response of all the people: "He is good, and His

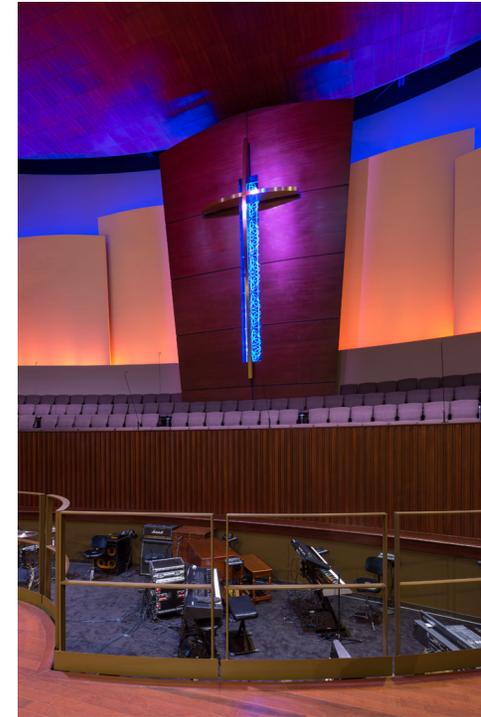
mercy endures forever." So in that temple scene, you have God's power on one hand, and God's goodness on the other. God has unlimited power, but He is also good. Because of His power we should fear Him, but because of His goodness we should also love Him.

In *The Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first book in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, C. S. Lewis captures this duality when the three children see the lion Aslan, who is a Christ-type image, for the first time.

But as for Aslan himself, the Beavers and the children didn't know what to do or say when they saw him. People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so, they were cured of it now. For when they tried to look at Aslan's face they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes; and then they found they couldn't look at him and went all trembly.

This passage was Lewis' imaginative way of saying, "The church in particular and Christians in general have reduced God down to something lame, tame, and domesticated." In the shimmering stained glass of the Exeter College chapel in Oxford is a picture of the Lamb standing on a throne surrounded by living creatures and the seven lampstands mentioned in the Book of Revelation. It is an awe inspiring scene. Jesus is indeed the innocent Lamb one can approach, but He is also the awesome Lamb on the throne of the universe.

God help us today when we think we can come to church any kind of way we want to come, with no reverence for God.





We will enter and leave with the growing realization that God has a design for our lives. All of our lives together in this church will demonstrate the pattern of the body of Christ in this place. Days of light and the shadow of night alike will bring us together in His plan—for each and all.

We have forgotten the true fear of God. We have determined that when we come to church, we and God are going to be on the same ground. But when we really get to know the God of the Bible, the God of history, and the God of our past, we understand that He is a holy God. We just cannot be casual about the holiness of God. When we come into the presence of God, we come with fear and trembling. We must take off our shoes, for the ground that we're standing on is holy ground. At some point, we have to return to a place where we know that God is a holy and righteous God. And we ought not to act just any kind of way in God's presence. But God has a way of humbling us when He brings His purifying fire in our lives. That is why we need a place to hear from heaven.

Radioactivity is good on the one hand. Scientists have harnessed its power to produce X-rays, which doctors need to be able to look under the skin of those who may have serious medical conditions. This same radioactivity can shrink malign-

ant cancer cells. On the negative side, nations have used radioactivity to develop nuclear bombs to kill enormous numbers of people. So, on one hand, radioactivity is good, but in the wrong hands, it can be really dangerous. The holiness of God is like that. It can bless or blast. Let us never come casually into this new house as if God is nothing but a heavenly homeboy.

In the same way, electricity in the right hands is good. The light produced by electricity can brighten up a dark room. When it's channeled in the right place, it can illuminate darkness. But in the wrong hands, electrocution can destroy people.

Indeed, this is a place to hear from heaven. Heard with faith, the words of God give life. Misused, abused, ignored or disregarded, and the Word of God can blast rather than bless. May God make this a place to hear from heaven.

God is good on one hand—loving, gentle Jesus, meek and mild. But the same God who is good is the same God who is powerful. On one hand, when you are weak and weary and

They were constantly devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

ACTS 2:42



without, God can be good by wrapping His arms around you, but when you come into His presence in an arrogant, pompous manner, He has a way of breaking you down. He can be the Lamb on one hand, but on the other He can be the Lion of the tribe of Judah. But you don't need one or the other; you need both of them at the same time. Sometimes when you're discouraged, you need the Lamb to come by you and be good to you. But there are times when you can't handle your difficulty, so you need God as the Lion to come into your situation.

May your entrance into this holy place always be a reminder from this day forward that God is powerful and God is good. Holiness be unto the Lord. Like radioactivity, holiness can bless or holiness can blast.





The Glory of God

When Solomon was trying to pray the fire fell, and then another supernatural event happened that the people just could not explain. The room got so filled with the smoke of God's glory that the people could not even enter. They were trying to get in, but they could not enter because of the overpowering glory of God. The word *glory* refers to the sum total of God's complete attributes. So when you say "*Glory!*" you are calling on all of God's sovereign favor—the glory of His grace, goodness, mercy, and majesty.

Yet from the very beginning of humanity, we have always tried to jockey with God's glory because we always want what God has. That happened in Genesis 11 when the people started building the Tower of Babel. They wanted to infringe on what rightfully belongs to God. In Numbers 14, God was going to take His glory from the earth, but Moses pleaded with Him not to do that. God affirmed that all the earth would be filled with His glory, as expansive as the waters are in the seas of His creation.

Then, after that, the ark of the covenant was symbolic of God's glory. As long as they had the ark, the Israelites were always prosperous. But as soon as the ark was taken from them, they were always defeated. So when the ark finally came home, David danced because the glory of God was coming back to the house of God.

In Isaiah 6, the prophet went to church and said in so many words, "I'm all messed up; I'm a sinner. I cuss and fuss, and my life's falling apart. I need the fire to fall so You can clean my lips." Suddenly, the angels were crying out, "Holy" on this side

and "Holy" on the other. And the glory of the Lord filled the house until the doorposts of the temple started shaking.

When glory shows up, something's got to happen. When real glory appears, you cannot sit there and act like glory is not there. The sad story of the human race is wishing to be rid of the glory. When Jesus the Word became flesh, He became the embodiment of glory. John 1:14 proclaims, "And the Word became flesh, and we beheld the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

And so people said in so many words, "We're tired of this glory business, so we're going to get rid of Glory." So they hemmed up Glory on a Friday morning, and they nailed Glory to the cross. And everybody was happy because as long as glory is gone, you can do whatever you want to do. You can live any way you want to live. You can act any way you want to act. You're your own god when glory is not around.

They rejoiced, but then they said, "Wait a minute. Let's be sure that Glory never comes back." So they took Glory off the cross, buried Glory in a tomb, and then said, "Burying Him is not enough. We had best close that tomb up because anybody who can open up a Red Sea might be able to roll away a stone." They locked him up in a tomb, and they kept Him there for two days. They said, "We've got Him now, so live any way you want to live. Act the way you want to act. Do whatever you want to do. Don't pay the law any attention. Don't worry about what Jesus talked about."

But while they were sleeping, early on a Sunday morning, there was a rumbling and a tumbling, and a quaking and a shaking. The stone was rolled away, and Glory got up on the first day of the week. And now we will gather here for years





to come on the first day of the week. May that same glory fall upon us and make this a place to hear from heaven.

A Place To Hear from Heaven

More than anything else, may this holy house be a place to hear from heaven. If Christ shall tarry, generations and generations will pass through these sacred walls. I shall go, and others will stand here. You shall go, and others will sit there. Children unborn, weddings not yet held, home-going celebrations of transition to the life beyond, holy communions, baptisms and countless other things will come to pass in this sacred space. In all of them and in each of them, more than anything else we need to hear from heaven. We need to encounter His holy and wholly otherness, just as that moment when the fire fell in Solomon's temple. We need to see and hear from heaven. When the weary of this city come into this space, jarred by life, marginalized by prejudice, fearful of life and yet more fearful of eternity, this place needs to be a place to hear from heaven.

May every seat in the sanctuary, every pew in the chapel, every table filled with little children, every corner embracing youth, and all the spaces together be sanctified as a place to hear from heaven. From the moment people walk into this space under the great Cross towering over them all, may they hear a word from that Cross. May the feeble be empowered, may the wanderer find the way, may the misled find the truth, may the unstable find the Rock, may the thirsty drink and the hungry be fed—all because this is a place to hear from heaven. ❖

Throughout these sacred spaces, every point of gathering will be a place to hear from heaven. We will sing and celebrate, and we will also hear and educate. With generations not yet born from families not yet formed, we will fill spaces to teach and learn. A generation not yet here will teach a generation beyond that. We did not build for a moment, but for the century.

—PAS



A Bridge from Yesterday to Tomorrow

Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD: look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.

ISAIAH 51:1

Behold, I make all things new.

REVELATION 21:5



On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."

JOHN 7:37-38





All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.

MATTHEW 28:18-20

The first Christians baptized under God's heaven in the outdoor pools of Jerusalem. The first known baptism by immersion in Texas was that of an African-American girl in the Brazos River. We too shall baptize publicly and openly for all who go by this way as a witness to our Lord in the name of the Holy Trinity.

—PAs





They ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.

ACTS 2:46-47

For the generations to come, our people will break bread together in this place. We shall have spiritual bread as we hear from heaven, and we shall break material bread in both days of glad celebration and memorial recollection. Face to face around the tables, we shall deepen the bonds dearer than life.

—PAS



*I am the light of the world. He who follows
Me shall not walk in darkness but have the
light of life.*

JOHN 8:12

This place reveals the light. The nature of light is not to conceal itself but to reveal itself. The very architecture of the building proclaims to everyone coming in and going out that we are to walk in His Light.

—PAS



We have planted a shade tree that others will sit under. The reminder of the generations to come appears nowhere more clearly than in the welcoming spaces for our precious children. Here Jesus will come to them, embrace them, and whisper to their tender hearts. Through these welcoming doors, future pastors, missionaries, deacons, ushers, choir members and educators will come to know the LORD they will serve long after our day is done.

—PAS



And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men.

LUKE 2:52

For the children of our city, we will be a center of growth intellectually, physically, spiritually, and socially. We will raise up a generation of children who will receive ministry from a wholistic church that will prepare them for responsible life in this city and service to the world.

—PAS





We wish to educate our children in an environment that is second to none in this city. Why should the provision of the church take second place to any other place when it comes to the care of young lives? These rooms will speak for themselves to our children: essentially they say, "We value you and have given you the best."

—PAS



We have provided a space for our youth to hear from heaven, where they will not *have* to be but where they will *want* to be.

—PAS







A proverb of architects suggests that form follows function. Our great congregation needs a space of closeness for those days when we start life together and then transition to the high life to come. Here is a space to hear from heaven in an intimate setting where the scale suggests our closeness and the beauty proclaims His creativity.

—PAS





Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding.

JOHN 2:2

At the beginning of His ministry Jesus made a good wedding even better by His presence and provision. We have set aside a space forever held in precious memory on the day of days in the lives of the young women of our congregation. This beautiful bride's room will be a major part of a treasured legacy enjoyed by generations for many years to come.

—PAS



And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.

JOHN 12:32

You cannot enter the place where you will hear from heaven without confronting the Cross. From the shape of the sacred desk, to the towering Cross outside and luminous Cross inside, you must see the Cross.

—PAS



*Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.*

*God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.*

— JAMES WELDON JOHNSON



Photography
Gary Zvonkovic

© 2015 Rev. Dr. Ralph Douglas West, Sr.
The Church Without Walls
All rights reserved.

www.churchwithoutwalls.org

The Church Without Walls
5725 Queenston Blvd
Houston, TX 77084

ISBN 978-1-4675-3277-8

Printed in China

Citations of Holy Scripture are variously from:

New King James Version © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.
Used by Permission. All right reserved.

Revised Standard Version of the Bible, © 1946, 1952, and 1971
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

New Revised Standard Version Bible, © 1989
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

THE CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS





THE CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS

Rev. Dr. Ralph Douglas West, Sr.
Pastor & Founder

