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## THE HOUSE BEAUTIFUL

IT IS FELT by not a few in our time that religion is a private affair and a distinctly personal matter. Bunyan would answer quite differently. No doubt there are personal aspects to one's faith in God, but these can never be divorced from the larger, corporate setting which comprises the local church and the body of Christ.

Bunyan very carefully positions this stately palace called House Beautiful at the very top of Hill Difficulty. The Way also runs up the Hill Difficulty but past the stately palace and not through it. This is a very important distinction. Finally, he plants roaring lions on either side of the Way and just before the palace.

The point is this. The House Beautiful is the visible, corporate fellowship of God's people in any locality. True biblical conversion creates a spiritual relationship among God's people unparalleled by any fraternity, club, lodge or association this world offers. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans (12:5), "So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members of one another." The Christian church is unique in all respects from any other organization. Helping other believers out of dire circumstances and difficult situations out of right motives and right reasons is part of the exceptional practice of this body of people.

Second, the Way to the Celestial City goes up Hill Difficulty but also goes *by*, not *through* the House Beautiful. Not exclusive to the sev-

enteenth century, even many sincerely pious in our generation are banking on the church to get them to Heaven. Whether it be church membership, church baptism, church attendance or church duties, there is a confident reliance in these to produce an everlasting entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. These and other works are not what God requires of us:

Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent (John 6:28–29).

Finally, Bunyan places two lions in the Way. We are unable to relate to this in a society that tolerates freedom of religious belief. Many at that time period were fearful of identifying with a visible, local congregation because of state persecution and religious tyranny as there was a price to pay for this kind of identity.

There was no accommodation to the idea that religion was personal and to be kept private, especially out of respect for another man's belief. No, rather, public assembly, public worship and public identification were the order of the day because God Himself was and is building His church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

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