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The Congregation: Place of God's Presence  
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# The Congregation: Place of God's Presence

By MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN

EDITORIAL NOTE: The following study was prepared by the author at the request of the Faith Forward Committee of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. We are happy to cooperate with this program by making the article available to the ministerium of this body. It will also be read with profit by Christians in every denomination.

## I. WHERE IS GOD?

Jerusalem lay in ruins. Its temple had been destroyed. In distant Babylon God's people hung up their harps and sat down to weep. Where was God now? To be sure, He might be the Lord of the universe; but what was the point of this if His people were left to languish in exile? He had been present for them in the temple on Mount Zion; where could His people now seek His face?

Here is a question that has often troubled His children. God may, indeed, be beyond the stars, in nature, in the sunset; but then He is also in the storm, the hurricane, the flood. He is the Lord of history, as Israel well knew; but then why should he condone defeat and desolation? God had chosen to dwell in His temple at Jerusalem. Then why should He permit its destruction? God's people needed to learn what Luther once put as follows:

That God is there (*da*) and that he is there for you (*dir da*) are two different things. He is there for you when He adds His Word thereto and says, "Here you must find me." . . . Though He is everywhere, in all creatures, and could be found in stone, fire, water, or rope, it is not His will that I should seek Him there without

His Word, throwing myself into fire or water, or hanging by the rope. (WA XIX, 442)

From their prophets the Jews in exile learned that God was present with them in the story of His acts of liberation and judgment. Far from the temple, in an alien land, the record of God's past acts and the promise of His future grace and judgment came to them in the words of Jeremiah and of Ezekiel as well as in their own reading from the Law. God had not left Himself without witness in exile; He was present wherever His people gathered to hear Moses and the prophets, to observe the covenant of circumcision, and to commemorate the festivals. By coming together for these purposes ancient Israel became the assembly of God even in a distant land.

The new Israel, the church, has this same story in Word and Sacrament. We have it in greater detail and in more profound dimensions; for, as we know it, it speaks to us clearly of the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, and the session of our Lord at God's right hand. These are extensions of the prophetic Word under the old covenant; and as we assemble to hear these mighty acts recorded in Scripture, proclaimed and enacted, we show ourselves to be the church of God, the place of His gracious presence. We are the people of the end time, in whom and among whom the Lord of heaven and earth has chosen to dwell as His last great act of self-disclosure before His return in power.

## II. GOD ACTS TO BE PRESENT

The presence of God among men is the major motif of Scripture. The sacred writers tell us by the Spirit's power what God has done to be with and among His people, thereby testifying to Him as a God of grace, of infinite patience, of steadfast love. The apostle Paul speaks of this as God's righteousness: His mighty arm at work to overcome the obstacles that separate men from God. To this righteousness all prophets, apostles, and evangelists bear witness.

The Biblical account begins with the story of creation and of man being made in God's image. He was not created to be autonomous; he was designed to reflect the will of His Maker, exercising dominion on the authority of his Creator. Man, however, chose to try throwing off his limitations; he accepted the proposal of the Evil One to be done with subjection and to be like God: sovereign and free, substance instead of mere image, creator rather than creature.

At this point God might well have withdrawn His presence and left man to his own devices, burdening him with his new freedom. Instead, the Lord mingled judgment with promise. The future was to remain open toward God and His ways of mercy; a day of restoration would one day come. Satan would be crushed by the woman's Seed.

To the patriarchs God came as a passing guest. Rublyev's famous 15th-century icon, "The Trinity of the Old Testament," was inspired by the account of Gen. 18, where we read that, when Abraham saw three men coming toward him as he sat under the oaks at Mamre, he invited them to be his guests. The Lord came with a promise for Abraham and a word of judgment over

Sodom and Gomorrah. In those far-off days God also revealed His presence by means of visions and dreams. And always there was the voice of the Lord speaking of an open future. To Moses He appeared in a flame of fire at the burning bush. He was about to do a new thing: to deliver His people by an individual chosen to be God's agent and mediator.

At Sinai Israel was called to total obedience; and God arranged to dwell among this people in the pillar of fire and smoke, in the cloud of glory, but especially in the tabernacle, known as "the tent of meeting." It was here that God proposed to speak to His people over the mercy seat (Ex. 25: 22), at the altar of burnt offering (Ex. 29: 42), and at the altar of incense (Ex. 30:6). There Moses was privileged to speak to God, and the Lord chose to speak to him, as a man speaks with his friend. This tabernacle was mobile; whenever Israel moved, God went with His people. He was not like pagan deities, limited and bound to a hillside or a cluster of trees or an oasis. Israel's God was the God of His people, a God of movement, leading His nation toward their promised land and pointing them toward a future that He Himself promised to keep open.

## III. GOD'S PRESENCE IN TENT AND TEMPLE

God proposed to be Israel's King; His people, therefore, was created as a theocracy. In time, however, it rebelled at being different; it wanted to be like other nations, with a king of its own. And still God continued His presence among His people. The tabernacle remained. David even brought it to his own city, Jerusalem. On that day, choirs sang:

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is the King of glory?  
The Lord, strong and mighty,  
the Lord, mighty in battle.

(Ps. 24:7, 8 RSV)

Israel's second king was troubled in heart. He himself lived in a palace; but God's presence was to be found in a tent. He resolved to build a temple as a residence worthy of the Most High. Nathan, however, was sent to remind the king that God had never yet lived in a house (2 Sam. 7:6,7); He had always been a God of movement. In this way the Lord discouraged David from building a permanent sanctuary. He promised David, instead, that He, the Lord Himself, would make the king a house, would give him descendants, among whom He would live and move and have His being. (Cf. 2 Sam. 7:11, 12.)

Here we have a play on words, of course. "House" can mean both a *building* and a *family*. Solomon was to fulfill both sides of this promise. He was David's son and built a temple, from which God proposed to rule as King in Israel. The Lord's royal presence among His people was to be embodied in its kings, who were expected to worship regularly at the temple, representing the people before God in sacrifice and ritual.

Of the tabernacle God had shown Moses a blueprint (Ex. 25:40; cf. Acts 7:44). The basic pattern of the temple was to be the same. But Solomon engaged Phoenician architects to elaborate the ground plan. These proposed to build an edifice facing five degrees south of east so that at the spring equinox the sun might shine through the front gate all the way to the

Holy of Holies. They knew the movements of the heavenly bodies that well and had previously designed other temples to honor the sun as god.

Solomon was determined that his temple should not honor the sun but Him who had created that planet. Hence he began his dedicatory speech (1 Kings 8:12 ff. RSV) with the words:

The Lord has set the sun in the heavens,  
but has said that He would dwell in thick  
darkness. . . .

But even as he uttered these words, he was reminding Israel that the temple was not God's final answer to the problem of His presence. For in speaking of God's "dwelling in thick darkness," Solomon used the nomad verb for staying overnight. For this reason, too, we read that the glory of the Lord filled the temple in such a way as to make it impossible for priests to enter (2 Chron. 7:1). Something like that had once happened at the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34, 35), symbolizing the fact that the presence of the Lord in fact transcended the tent of meeting and now the temple.

The temple served to remind Israel that their God was not One about whom men were to speculate and philosophize. Nor was He the God of mystic absorption. Instead He was the God of His people, who had acted for His nation and would continue to do so. This God men could worship properly at the place of His presence, where priests brought the sacrifices of forgiveness and choirs sang of God's mighty acts of deliverance. The temple was His residence, even though, as Solomon observed, the heaven and the highest heaven could not really contain Him.

Solomon, of course, turned out to be a disappointment. To please some of his

many wives he began to erect pagan temples. Israel, too, began to assume too much. The prophets came to criticize and condemn God's people for engaging in mere ritual and entertaining the false hope that the mere presence of the temple assured Israel of life and prosperity. "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord,'" thundered Jeremiah (7:4). Israel failed to repent, and the temple was destroyed.

#### IV. GOD'S PRESENCE IN SYNAGOG AND NEW TEMPLE

In Babylon the prophet Ezekiel reminded the Jews that God Himself was their temple (11:6) and their real King (20:33). Like Jeremiah he looked forward to a new day when God would act again to make His presence known among men. The former spoke of it as a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34); the latter as a new temple and a new Jerusalem, whose name would be "The Lord is there." (Ezek. 48:35)

The promise that had once been given to David lingered on in Israel. God would create a royal house. What did it mean? Those who returned from the exile rebuilt the temple. But the sacred vessels had been lost, and anyway those who remembered the splendor of Solomon's edifice broke down in tears at their own disappointing efforts at erecting a sanctuary for God.

It was the rise of Cyrus in Persia that had made possible the return. The prophet, therefore, could speak of that king as the Lord's Anointed (Is. 45:1). God had acted to open a new epoch in the history of salvation. Yet those who returned to Jerusalem were few in number. Who would

believe that God was identifying Himself in His eternal purposes with this remnant, unless he remembered that this God is the One who takes things that are of no consequence and makes them great (1 Cor. 1:27,28)? For a time it seemed that Zerubbabel might be the Lord's Messiah (cf. Hag. 2:2-9). He was a descendant of David. There were those who felt that he might be the fulfillment of God's ancient promises. But he was not. God's people settled down for a long stay in their homeland, and the age of Judaism dawned in Israel.

This was the period of the scribe, of the tradition of the elders, of dietary regulations, of strict prohibitions in the matter of marrying outside Israel's religion. Some taught that where two or three were gathered together in the study of the Law, there the Shekinah, the cloud of God's presence, was to be found. The synagog began to grow in size and function, to encourage such study. The temple still remained, however; and its worship flourished.

In December of 168 B.C. the altar in the temple was crudely defiled by a foreign king, Antiochus Epiphanes. He purposed to make a mockery of Judaism by sacrificing a pig in the temple and erecting there a statue of himself, which was "the abomination of desolation" spoken of in Daniel. It took the "sons of the Hammer," the Maccabees, three years to break the control of this foreign power. The stones of the altar were removed to await the coming of a prophet, who might tell Israel whether or not the old altar was to be restored or whether the new one might remain. But even after the temple was reconsecrated to the glory of God, three years after its de-

filement, some felt that the priesthood had become too corrupt and venal. Spurred by the expectation of the Teacher of Righteousness, they marched out into the wilderness of Judah to establish what we now call the Dead Sea community. They called themselves God's sanctuary. For the first time in Judaism we hear of an assembly calling itself a temple, a holy of holies. They did so in the conviction that God was in their midst because they observed the Law more strictly than did Israel in general.

Life at the temple in Jerusalem went on, however. In time, Herod began his renovations, outdoing the splendor of Solomon. And yet the promise to David remained unfulfilled. Around the time that Pompey had conquered Jerusalem, some 20 years before Herod, a group of Pharisees had written the Psalms of Solomon—which survive in the Septuagint—expressing their conviction that the son of David would soon come (Psalms of Solomon 17: 21). But Herod made his peace with Rome and ruled Judah, even though he was an Idumaean, a point which the Jews never let him forget.

#### V. PROMISE AND PRESENCE

Then one day in Nazareth an angel made an announcement to a lowly girl from the ancient house of David, saying, "Thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son; . . . and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David . . . and of His kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:31-33). Here were the words of Nathan again; David's great Son was soon to come. David was about to have the house that had been promised him long ago (2 Sam. 7:13).

This Son would be the One to whom there would apply the ancient promise, "I will be His Father, and He shall be My Son" (2 Sam. 7:14; cf. Heb. 1:5). In Him God's presence "tabernacled" among men. (John 1:14)

As this promised Child grew up, He went to the temple in Jerusalem to be in His Father's house. Later He taught in its porches and instructed in its halls. But soon He spoke of destruction and of rebuilding in three days (John 2:19). Those who heard Him did not forget. Most of them took umbrage at His words. For was not this temple the very center of the universe? In the Holy of Holies was the Stone of the Foundation, where heaven and earth met and from which God ruled in Zion, as the rabbis taught their pupils. Tradition held that this was the stone on which Jacob had slept near Bethel. But Jesus spoke not of that stone but of Himself as being the place where the angels of God would be seen ascending and descending. (John 1:51)

The sacred vessels of the ancient temple still had not been found. Many believed that the Messiah would restore them to the temple. But Jesus spoke of worship in spirit and in truth, neither in Jerusalem nor on Mount Gerizim, as the Samaritans believed (John 4:23, 24). And yet in Zion lay the Stone of the Foundation, where the waters of the deep, the forces of chaos and rebellion against God, were kept under control. Jesus, however, with His own word ordered the waters of the deep to subside (Mark 4:39), revealing Himself as the living Stone of the Foundation.

People could not forget. The temple was in danger. Of all the accusations brought

against Him at His trial, this one held. False witnesses told of having heard Him say that He would destroy Herod's temple and build another one not made with hands. Even on the cross Jesus was not permitted to forget His prediction. "Ah, Thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it in three days," men jeered, "save Thyself, and come down from the cross" (Mark 15:30, 31). But even as He hung there dying, the process of rebuilding was about to begin. Soon Jesus would rise and reconstitute His followers as David's house.

James understood it that way. When the question of admitting Gentiles to the church was raised, He saw in this development the fulfillment of words from the prophet Amos, "After this I will return and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down . . ." (Acts 15:16). God had now returned. He dwelt among men in this new people, the church, comprising both Jews and Gentiles. God was present in this new congregation of the end time.

#### VI. THE SPIRIT AND GOD'S PEOPLE

God had chosen to dwell in the church as being His people. Pentecost made this clear. God poured out His Spirit on the disciples, among whom there were the Twelve. Judas had been replaced by Matthias. There had to be twelve apostles as there had been twelve patriarchs. The church was to be the new Israel, the people of God's presence until the end of time. Here was the new temple, David's house, where God chose to rule as He had once dwelled in Israel.

St. Paul was called to break out of the pattern of the Twelve. He became the apostle to the Gentiles. Yet Jerusalem re-

mained important to him. For its poor saints he gathered gifts from Gentile converts to bring to pass the words of old which said that the offerings of the nations would be brought to David's city. Paul worshiped at the temple; he was quite willing, for example, to follow the suggestion of James that he assume the costs of the four men who had a Nazirite vow to keep (Acts 21:23, 24). And yet Paul was sure that the temple had been superseded. He knew that the church had become the temple of God. In fact, he said so. To the Corinthians he wrote, "The temple of God is holy, and that temple is you." (1 Cor. 3:17)

The apostle chose to be even more explicit in what is known as his second letter to this church. He wrote:

For we are the temple of the living God,  
as God said:

"I will live in them and move among them,  
and I will be their God,  
and they shall be My people.

Therefore come out from them,  
and be separate from them, says the Lord,  
and touch nothing unclean;  
then I will welcome you,  
and I will be a father to you,  
and you shall be My sons and daughters,  
says the Lord Almighty."

(2 Cor. 6:16-18 RSV)

Fully to appreciate the point of Paul's use of words from the Old Testament, we must realize that this is a composite statement, in which he gathers up three different references to the matter of God's presence among His people. The first three lines are an echo of Lev. 26:12, which speaks of the tabernacle and the presence of God among His people Israel. Paul applies that observation to the congregation at Corinth. The next four lines are taken

from Is. 52:11, where the prophet addresses the people returning from exile. Their priests were to carry the vessels of the Lord with clean hands, as in the days of the Exodus and the original conquest of Palestine. Similarly, the church is to be a priestly community, separating itself from idolatry and immorality. The last sentence in the quotation, of course, is a restatement of the words of Nathan to David. Paul sees that ancient promise fulfilled in the church, in the congregation at Corinth. This is the house that God had promised David. It replaces the temple that Solomon had once erected.

The apostle Peter, therefore, did not hesitate to call the church a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). The congregations to which he was writing served as the locale of God's presence. There the Holy Spirit was at work sanctifying not only the individual heart but also the interpersonal relations within the congregations. In their midst they had the "milk of the Word" (1 Peter 2:2), and in the Sacrament of the Altar they had tasted the goodness of the Lord. (1 Peter 2:3)

Still today we use v. 2 of this chapter in First Peter as part of the Introit for the Sunday After Easter. This serves as a reminder of the fact that in the ancient church adults were often baptized on Holy Saturday evening and received their first Communion on Easter. Psalm 34, to which the apostle alludes, was widely used in the Communion liturgy and the instruction of the catechumens. The significance of all this is to be seen in the fact that in these opening verses in 1 Peter 2—where the church is spoken of as a spiritual house—the preaching of the Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper are referred to as the

means of God's presence among His people. Small wonder that the Augsburg Confession speaks of the unity of the church as being there where the Gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are properly administered. (Article VII)

The church, therefore, is that people of God whom He has chosen as His permanent residence. This is the meaning of the word "habitation" (KJV) in Eph. 2:22. There the apostle uses the Greek word for an abiding residence, saying:

So then you are . . . built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief Cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God the Spirit. (2:19-22 RSV)

The Christian congregation, therefore, stands in succession to the tabernacle and to the temple in Jerusalem as the place of God's holy presence. Neither St. Paul nor St. Peter witnessed the destruction of the temple edifice they knew so well. They were certain it would soon be destroyed; for Jesus had so indicated. In less than 10 years after their death, Roman legions laid siege to the city of David and destroyed also the sanctuary on Zion.

#### VII. THE COMMUNITY OF OUR ASCENDED LORD

Most of the Jerusalem Christians had fled to Pella, in keeping with the directions of their Lord. Josephus tells us that even the Jews heard voices in those days warning Jerusalem that God's glory would soon depart from Mount Zion. They gave little heed to these harbingers of God's judgment. In fact, to the very end some of them believed that the temple would never



be destroyed, since it was the residence of the Most High God. But it was put to the torch, and not one stone was left upon another. This happened some 40 years after the veil between the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies had been torn in two from top to bottom (Mark 15:38), indicating that the temporary residence of God in the temple, to which Solomon had alluded, was now at an end. On Good Friday, and especially with the coming of Easter, the presence of God marched out to the four corners of the earth to gather in those persons that would constitute the new temple, the body of that risen Lord who would soon ascend on high.

To this ascension St. Paul alludes in one of his most eloquent passages. Eph. 4:7, 8, 11, 12 reads as follows:

But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

"When He ascended on high He led a host of captives and He gave gifts to men." And His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. (RSV)

Again, we must observe closely what St. Paul does with the quotation from Ps. 68, the great Pentecost Psalm of temple and synagog. The original Hebrew and Greek texts read "receive" for "give" in the second line of v. 18. It seems that this psalm was used first to commemorate David's victories and his ascent up Mount Zion, there to receive tribute from subject nations. With the exile, however, Israel ceased to exist as a kingdom. Somewhat later, during and for a while after the time

of the Maccabees, the Jews recovered their political independence, but this period in their history hardly matched the glorious achievement of David's reign. The rabbis therefore began to apply Ps. 68 to Moses and his ascent up Mount Sinai, there to *receive* from God and in turn to *give* to Israel the tables of the Law.

Paul, of course, was trained in Jerusalem as a rabbi. He had studied particularly under Gamaliel. It is the rabbinic version he used to make the point that David's great Son, Jesus, the greater Moses, had now ascended up to heaven and had given gifts to His people. But what gifts were these? Not the Law; but apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. And for what purpose? To create a new kind of community where the talents of such men would be used to "equip" the saints for the work of service, in this way building up the body of Christ.

The church is not a community of law, as Israel was. The ascended Lord has endowed His new people with an apparatus of servants, if we may use this expression, to help each congregation in being the place of God's presence, the community of the ascended Lord. And this arrangement will last through all history. Of this we are assured by the Revelation of St. John. When the eternal order begins at ch. 20:1, the people of God, as the place of His presence, will carry over to become the new Jerusalem. Unlike David's city, this heavenly community will need no temple; for, as we read, God Himself will be with them. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, living in the presence of His unveiled splendor (Rev. 21:3). Consummation will then have followed fulfillment.

### VIII. THE PEOPLE OF THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

Until the striking of the final hour the church and each congregation in it has the privilege of being the place of God's presence, veiled as it is in word and promise. It is there that God keeps breaking into our world, keeping open the future, and so saving men from being trapped in the narrow cage of their own existence. This has always been the task of God's people, and without the church men would live without hope and without God, as St. Paul observed.

Men have always lived in terror of a closed universe. It was in such a world that the Gospel was first made known. The skies hung low in those days. Men felt imprisoned by the planets. There seemed to be no escape from a fixed fate. Then God sent a star to cut across the world of planets and lead the Wise Men to a manger. Later Paul could speak of being persuaded that neither height nor depth, no planet at its zenith or nadir, could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus. His life and world were open toward the Creator, who was also the Redeemer. Such is the hope that the church proclaims.

Athanasius understood the issue. His opponent, Arius, was quite willing to say that Jesus Christ was an "architect" of matter, but he would not confess that He was the "creator" of all things. Now Athanasius saw very clearly that, unless God Himself had invaded our existence in the Incarnation, the universe would once more be closed. Then men would live again without hope. They would return to the sadness of ancient Athens, whose tragic chorus observed, "The best thing to have happened

to a man is never to have been born; the second best, to have been born and to die right away" (*Oedipus Rex*). If God was not present in Jesus Christ, and if the church is not the place of His presence, Athanasius well understood, then men have no redemption. This made him insist on the right wording for the Nicene Creed: "of one substance with the Father."

Today we are threatened once more with false religions that propose to shut off hope. Secularism is determined to reduce all of life to the single dimension of our creaturely existence, to make us beings of a single world—*this* one! Communism, too, despite its more complex dialectical analysis of the world, proclaims a this-worldly solution to life's burdens. The stateless society is to develop here, in this world, and the social man is to have his paradise here, not in heaven.

The church counters these threats by proclaiming itself to be the place of God's presence. It is that community where men may receive forgiveness and serve a God who in all ages has taken the initiative in assuring His children that He is present for them in His acts and promises. In this way your congregation and mine help to keep the universe open. For God Himself is present there *for us* in Word and Sacrament.

St. Louis, Mo.

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