

GOD'S PRESENT



**OF
HIS PRESENCE**

By Pastor Larry DeBruyn

God's Present of His Presence

"I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever . . . he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you."

Jesus, John 14:16-17

"Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

Jesus to Disciples, Matthew 28:20

"The method of grace is precisely the reverse of the method of legalism. The latter is holiness in order to union with God; the former, union with God in order to holiness."

A.J. Gordon (1836-1895)

"True religion is a union of the soul with God, a real participation in the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul. In the apostle's words, it is 'Christ formed in you'."

Henry Scougal (1650-1678)

"Parallel to experiencing God's *presence* is the evangelical emphasis upon *passion*, as if realization of His *presence* depends upon rousing the human soul's emotions, feelings titillated by staging provocative excitements (i.e., music, drama, dance, 'cool' communication, etc.) called 'worship.' If that is how a manifest presence of God can happen, then maybe Pentecost was the first 'passion conference.' But then the original Pentecost could neither be worked down from above nor worked up from below. The inauguration of the Church came not for reason of people passionately desiring God's *presence*, but rather because of God's providence and gracious fulfillment of His promises . . ."

Pastor Larry DeBruyn

Pastor Larry is a graduate of Taylor University (B.S., 1968) and Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M., 1974) where he received the Charles A. Nash Award in Church History. Larry has ministered in local churches and internationally for 46 years. He has been married to his wife Margie for 46 years. They have two adult sons.

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"Emmanuel"—God is with us!

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"The mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations . . . has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"
Emphasis added, Colossians 1:26-27, NASB

Among contemporary evangelicals there's a lot of talk about and publicity being given to "encountering," becoming "intimate" with or seeking God's "presence." Often spelled with an upper case "P," evangelical Christians are now recommending a variety of ways, ancient and modern, to experience "Presence."

God's Presence: Manipulated

Some worship leaders, musicians and singers boldly advertise that their music can escort listeners "through the door of worship, right into the heart and presence of God."¹ To this end, Christian worshippers are classified as "inner court, outer court, or holy of holies Christians, each one needing a certain period of time to come into the manifest presence of God."² So it becomes the responsibility of worship leaders to escort congregants through the outer courts into the "holy of holies" of the divine "Presence."

Other evangelicals practice Soaking Prayer to experience God's "Presence." Though "soakers" deny there's a formula for this kind of prayer, certain steps can facilitate it. To experience God's presence may require getting alone with God (solitude and silence; contra Matthew 18:20), repenting of sin(s), speaking in tongues, presenting one's self to God, remembering God's past workings, telling the Lord, "I want more of your presence," and then waiting for His presence to come. When it arrives, His presence may be *sensationally* manifested by performing miracles, receiving revelations, seeing dreams and visions, entering trances,

¹ Emphasis added. Mary Alessi, (www.maryalessi.com/music.htm).

² Kevin Reeves, *The Other Side of the River* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2007): 159.

traveling out-of-the-body and having angelic visitations; or *subtly* indicated by receiving impressions, hearing whispers or getting nudges. When “the manifesting” doesn’t happen, “don’t worry,” explain “soakers”. A continuing practice of it may be compared to making bank “deposits” over time. Eventually, “the savings” will break forth in a life of supernatural experiences.³

Some congregations name themselves *Church of the Presence*.⁴ Yet other evangelicals *passionately* pursue “Presence” by attending conferences (where in worshipping Jesus, they can “breathe in His presence”⁵), going on spiritual retreats, meditating in solitude and silence, listening to music or employing spiritual disciplines like reading sacred things (i.e., *Lectio Divina*), participating in Taizé or Tenebrae worship, or walking prayer labyrinths. In his book, “*Another Jesus*” *Calling: How False Christs Are Entering the Church Through Contemplative Prayer*,⁶ Warren Smith points out that in her best-selling evangelical book *Jesus Calling*⁷ Sarah Young uses “The word ‘Presence’ . . . more than 365 times . . .”⁸ He notes further that, “the term [presence] is also commonly used in New Age/New Spirituality.”⁹

³ This paragraph summarizes Soaking Prayer as described by Gary Oates, “Soaking: The Key to Intimacy with God,” January 9, 2012, *The Elijah List* (http://www.elijahlist.com/words/display_word.html?ID=10620).

⁴ Terry Teykl, *The Presence Based Church* (Muncie, IN: Prayer Point Press, 2007).

⁵ Louie and the Passion Team, “Story: Passion Exists to See a Generation Leverage Their Lives for What Matters Most . . .,” *Passion2015* (<http://268generation.com/passion2015/story/>). It’s as if the air of the passion conference becomes “transubstantiated” and in yogic fashion, Jesus can be breathed-in. But Jesus comes to reside in believers not by breath from below, but by birth from above (John 3:3, 7; 1 Peter 1:23).

⁶ Warren B. Smith, “Chapter 12— Practicing What Presence?” in “*Another Jesus*” *Calling: How False Christs Are Entering the Church Through Contemplative Prayer* (Eureka, MT: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2013).

⁷ Sarah Young, *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004). We should note the word “presence” in the book’s subtitle.

⁸ Smith, “*Another Jesus*” *Calling*: 88.

⁹ *Ibid*: In addition to *Jesus Calling*, Smith cites other contemplative books highlighting the word presence in their titles—*Practicing the Presence* by Joel Goldsmith (circa 1950s); *God Calling by Two Listeners*, Edited by A.J. Russell

Then some Christians are proposing that a second Pentecost is coming (Compare Acts 2:1 ff.). The current charismatic working of “signs and wonders” signals that heaven is “shaking” and greater powers are about to be released through the church to earth. At any moment the “sound” of a 2nd Pentecost is going to break out enabling “manifest sons of God” to perform mega-miracles. God will give the “sons” control of the quantum zero-point energy field (ZPE) thereby enabling them to perform miracles greater than any ever performed by anybody on earth before. One visionary of this coming planetary Pentecost sees transformed Christians, having fully harnessed the light, energy, vibrations, and frequencies of this sound (ZPE) from heaven, “standing on the shore of an island like Japan” pointing at a coming tsunami, commanding it to stop and “suddenly everything” becoming “still.” By their exercising Pentecostal power, sons of God will defeat *natural disasters* like floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires (presumably earthquakes too) and cure *viral diseases* like Ebola or Aids. The prophetess “saw believers so in love with God and so filled with power [i.e., the sound] . . . that unbelievers would run to them begging to receive” the power (like Simon the sorcerer, Acts 8:9-24).¹⁰ In short, she predicts a coming planetary revival on

(*circa* 1930s); Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (*circa* 1660s). Seeking to experience a divine Presence, whether by medieval monks, New Age spiritualists, or contemporary mystics, is not a novel phenomenon but has a longstanding spiritual history from ancient thru medieval to modern times. One New Age website defines “divine presence” as follows: “The Divine Presence is also known as the I Am Presence, the Higher Presence, the monad, the soul’s soul, the Christ Self, the God or Goddess Self, or the Buddha within, among other names. It is the part of us that exists in the realms of Spirit, the part that is closest to the Divine.” Emphases added, see “What is Divine Presence?” (<http://www.soulevolution.org/divine.htm>). We might add that Quakers too embrace the doctrine of presence. To them the inner light “is understood as the presence of God which provides illumination and guidance to the individual and through individuals to the group.” See “Continuing Revelation,” Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (<http://www.pym.org/introducing-pym-quakers/quaker-faith/continuing-revelation/>).

¹⁰ Judy Franklin, “Introduction,” *The Physics of Heaven: Exploring God’s Mysteries of Sound, Light, Energy, Vibrations and Quantum Physics*, by Judy

a magnitude never before observed in human history. God's kingdom is about to come to earth as the church, the now incarnated *presence* of Christ, exercises miracle working powers greater than Jesus'. The church will halt disease and disaster dead in their tracks.

In short, "the new evangelical spiritualists" are advocating methods by which to manipulate the divine presence to come to earth. The exotic and esoteric means for experiencing this presence are other than *believing* the Gospel and *cultivating* the spiritual life by reading Scripture and praying to the Father in the name of the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit (John 14:13-14; Ephesians 6:18; John 15:26). So in view of the cacophony of voices hyping "experiencing the Presence," Bible believers ought to know something of what the Scriptures teach about the subject. They should allow His Word to inform them as to whether the methods being advocated by evangelicals to experience God's presence are legitimate or illegitimate, authentic or synthetic, or worse, demonic.

God's Presence: Mentioned

The subject of God's presence with people on earth is a biblical theme from Genesis thru Revelation. The infinite, holy and transcendent God of the universe is love (1 John 4:8, 16), and He desires to become known by and fellowship with people on earth. The first stated mention in Scripture of His presence with man occurs in Genesis. When they heard God walking in the garden after they had sinned, Adam and Eve "hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:8). Revelation records the last stated mention of God's presence when a heavenly voice declares, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them" (Revelation 21:3). So to comprehend the meaning of God's presence, the Bible must be our guide.

Far and Near

We may begin by understanding that God's presence is both far and near. That He is far or transcendent means "God is

separate from and independent of nature and humanity.” In other words, *God is not present*. He is distant from us. That God is immanent means He is near and active “within nature, human nature, and history.”¹¹ In other words, *He is present*. God is near to us. Christians must hold these two aspects of God’s being in balance. The weight of the balance must not tip to exaggerate one over the other. The tension between transcendence and immanence must be allowed to stretch but not snap. This is how the Bible describes God.

In his Temple dedicatory prayer Solomon exclaimed,

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house which I have built!

1 Kings 8:27

In heaven, God is transcendent. Yet Solomon repeatedly pleads from earth that God, who is above any temple man might build, “would hear in heaven” (1 Kings 8:30, 32, 34, 36, 39, 43, 45, 49). Then upon that prayer’s completion, Scripture records that the cloud of the glory of the Lord’s presence came and filled the Temple (2 Chronicles 7:1-3; Compare 1 Kings 8:11.). As indicated on the occasion of Solomon’s dedicatory prayer, the distant Lord of the universe came near to dwell with His people in the temple. He came near even as He remained far. His farness and nearness were balanced. But there are those who would break the tension.

Deism—God is far.

Exaggerating God’s farness ends in deism, an “ism” which removes God so far from history (time, matter, and space) that people conclude He doesn’t care about what happens on earth. Being outside the system, God is not *omnipresent* (Psalm 139:7-10). While He originally created the universe, he’s letting it run by itself. Humans are left to go it alone. Amidst life’s sufferings and perplexities, don’t expect God’s help (Contra Hebrews 4:15.). Thus, the perception arises that God is neither good nor loving. In his poem *Invictus* William Ernest Henley (1849-1902) reminds us of such a God. It reads:

¹¹ Both quotes taken from Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998): 338, 339.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
 Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.
 I am the master of my fate:
 I am the captain of my soul.¹²

Pantheism—God is near.

In the opposite direction, exaggerating God's nearness leads to pantheism, an "ism" asserting that God "is" and/or "is in" everything. This belief system, which is core to pagan polytheism, sees God to be so involved in the dimensions of time, matter and space that He becomes subject to those dimensions. Because this god's being "is" everything (pantheism) or "in" everything (panentheism)—we might address such a god as *bis immanence*—"he, she, or it" controls nothing.¹³ This god is as much a part of nature as humanity. Because it permeates everything, this deity controls nothing. As the lyrics of one song ask, "What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us."¹⁴ Pantheism answers, "He is!" Because divinity resides in, as well as around and through, everyone and everything, we're all one with "It." To illustrate: When we refuel our vehicles, we put god in the tank, and when we drive, we burn part of god up. Deviating slightly, panentheism, pantheism's paternal twin, believes that a divine soul permeates everything. God is *omni-permeant*. To illustrate: When persons might hug a tree, they are not *per se* hugging God, but rather the divine "Soul" residing in the tree. Lest readers think these "isms" to be irrelevant, they lie behind the environmentalist movement's attempt to create value in nature so that humans will worship and not abuse it.

¹² William Ernest Henley, "Invictus," *PoemHunter.com* (<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/invictus/>). I realize that Henley's assertion may be atheistic, but in the end, the practical difference between deism and atheism in living life really doesn't matter. In the former, God doesn't care while in the latter God doesn't exist. Either way, we're left to go it alone.

¹³ This contrasts to *Eminence*, which is a title of honor.

¹⁴ Eric Bazilian, "What If God Was One of Us" (<http://www.metrolyrics.com/what-if-god-was-one-of-us-lyrics-alanis-morissette.html>). In all fairness to the writer of the song, he does speak of God's transcendence.

To summarize: In a deistic worldview for reason of God being far away in this vast universe (Can a distance of trillions of light years be imagined?), God can't manifest "Presence." He can't come here because *he is there!* He's too far away to make the trip. Oppositely, in a pantheistic or panentheistic worldview which proposes God is "in," "around," and "through" everything, God is present. He does not need to come here because *he is here!* So either way, neither deists nor pantheists need to seek God's presence. In the "ism" of deism he's too far away to be present, while in the "ism" of pantheism he's already present!

Panentheism "in" Evangelicalism

The irony of all this evangelical desiring after God's "Presence" is that many "seekers" betray a pantheistic understanding of God. For example, Jesus privately told Sarah Young, "*I am above all, as well as in all . . .*"¹⁵ Again, *Elousia*, the god of the bestselling evangelical book *The Shack* (Hebrew *El*, God + Greek *ousia*, "being"), told Mack, "Elousia is such a wonderful name. God, who is the ground of all being, dwells in, around, and through all things."¹⁶ So the question must be asked of these pantheistic seekers, why are you seeking a "Presence" that's already "present"? The only answer can be that they're questing after "experiences" with or "feelings" of God because in their spiritual worldview, the Eros of experience equals "Presence." This explains why some pastors employ the mechanics of "spiritual formation" to promote a "Presence-Centered Youth Ministry."¹⁷

So Scripture discloses that at one and the same time God is both far (transcendent) and near (immanent), both present and un-present. God's transcendence protects His holiness ("holy" means separate) while God's immanence demonstrates His love. In His separateness, God is the uncreated Creator. He is far from us (1 Timothy 6:16). He is holy. But in His nearness, through the historical incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is our loving Redeemer. He is also close to us through the

¹⁵ Emphasis added, Young, *Jesus Calling*: 199.

¹⁶ William Paul Young, *The Shack* (Los Angeles, CA: Windblown Media, 2007): 112.

¹⁷ Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students Into Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006).

abiding presence of the Holy Spirit who lives in us (John 7:37-38; 14:15). Through the indwelling presence of the Spirit the Son gives peace to our hearts (John 14:27). As Father, Son and Spirit, God is near to us. We may argue with the seeming antinomy between transcendence and immanence, but this is who Scripture reveals God to be.

God's Presence: Meaning

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for "face" (*panim*) and in the New Testament the Greek words translated "before" (*prosopon* or *enopion*) define the meaning of being in God's presence¹⁸; as for example, when Adam and Eve "hid themselves from *the presence* (*panim*) of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:8), of Jesus Christ who now is "in *the presence* (*prosopon*) of God for us" (Hebrews 9:24; See Hebrews 10:19-22.), and when the angel told Zacharias, "I am Gabriel, who stands in *the presence* (*enopion*) of God" (All emphases added, Luke 1:19). In the Bible being in God's presence implies personal interaction with Him. As indicated by the English word's occurrence in the Scripture, the condition of being in God's presence finds greater emphasis in the Old Testament than in the New and this difference, as will be addressed, is for good reason. But to discover what experiencing God's presence means, whether as an individual or a group, we begin at the beginning. The study of God's presence is profound, and we begin by noting the profoundest sense of it.

God's Omnipresence

Of course, any consideration of "the presence" of God must begin with understanding His *omnipresence*—"the divine attribute that God is everywhere present and with His whole being at all times."¹⁹ As the Psalmist asked, "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (Psalm 139:7) In our reality, there's no where to run and no place to hide from God. Likewise, in this New Covenant era there's no place to run to God. For reason of the Father's omnipresence, there are, according to

¹⁸ When combined with the Greek preposition *pros*, the verb *endemeo* (*prosendemeo*) denotes the believer's arrival in God's presence after death (2 Corinthians 5:8).

¹⁹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999): 46.

Jesus' statement to the Samaritan woman, no sacred places and no sacred spaces (Except in the realm of spirit-truth, John 4:21-24.). So in a sense, there's no need for believers to seek after a "Presence" which by virtue of God being omnipresent, is present.

Yet the hallmark of rebellious and wicked people (like Jonah, Jonah 1:3, 10, and those described by Isaiah, Isaiah 29:15) is their desire to flee and hide from God. They think there is a reality, a shadowy or dark dimension, somewhere on earth where God will not notice them. Scripture does indicate that in addition to other discomforts, hell is place where God does not manifest His presence. Hell will be a dimension of the eternal reality in which unrepentant and unbelieving persons will "be punished with everlasting destruction *from the presence* [Greek, *prosopon*] *of the Lord*, and *from the glory of his power*" (Emphasis added, 2 Thessalonians 1:9). In hell people will no longer "interface" with God. They will live in a dark reality separated from the energy/light of God's power and glory.²⁰ This will be the end for all persons who captained the fate of their own souls.

So the Apostle Paul's statement ends discussion of the derisive question scorners ask of the Christian faith, "Do you think God is in hell?" By an act of His own will, God limits His presence from being manifested there, and the restriction is just. The wicked did not want the light, love and life of God's presence in time (they tried to hide from Him), so why should they want God's presence in eternity? So God gives them over to their wills and wants. Forever the Lord removes them from His power and the glory of His presence. So don't look for God to manifest His presence in hell. It won't happen. He's not in Hades (the jail) now (Luke 16:19-31), and He won't be in hell (the prison) then. But there's another sense to the word presence in Scripture.

God's presence is personal. Stating this does not infer God's omnipresence to be impersonal. It is personal. If God's

²⁰ Some propose that God's omnipresence demands He be in hell. But the Apostle states there's a sense in which He is not. Perhaps the lack of divine presence in hell can be compared to the place of the rich man who in Hades saw Lazarus "far away" in Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man was removed, from God's help. The wording of Paul's statement that the wicked are isolated from *the Lord's presence and the glory of His power* indicates they will be separated from His help.

presence is not personal, then it must be viewed as impersonal thereby suggesting that divinity permeates not only space, but also time and matter. Scripture however, does not indicate that God's being is pantheistically infused into the universe. God is not "in" time, matter and space because He created the dimensions separate from Himself (See Genesis 1:1; Romans 1:19-23.). God is Holy.²¹

God's Presence: Manifested

In Paradise

The story of God making His presence known in the world begins with the creation account, the historical narrative describing how God communed with Adam and Eve in Paradise (Genesis 1:1ff.). But they disobeyed God, lost fellowship with Him

²¹ The word "holy" (Hebrew, *qodesh*, and Greek *hagios*) means "separateness." With the exception of the incarnation of the Lord of Glory (John 1:14; etc.), God is not in matter. If God is, the resultant worldview would be pantheistic (a divine Soul permeates matter) or pantheistic (God is matter). Yet to this point, many Bible versions and theologies do not uphold God's apartness from creation. (See NCV's rendition of Ephesians 4:6, God "is everywhere [i.e., omnipresent—okay] and in everything [i.e., omni-permeant—NOT okay]," or the translation of Colossians 1:17, "in Him [Christ] all things hold together." Comment: If "all things were created by Christ" (Colossians 1:16, KJV) then consistent use of the same Greek preposition *en* demands that "by Him all things hold together" also (Colossians 1:17, KJV). Yet it can be noticed how many versions avoid the consistency of the KJV, suggesting that all things were created "in" Christ even as "in" Him they hold together. Though all things were created "through" (*dia*) the agency of Christ (John 1:3, 10; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 1:2), they were not created "in" Him. To believe that Christ is in "all things" or that "all things" are in Christ, suggests a "christing" of the universe; that nature is infused, permeated, saturated with a quantum I-am-ness. Such a view is idolatrous. Conclusion: while the Lord is omnipresent, He is not omni-permeant. Because God is holy, His essential being is separate from matter before time and beyond space (contra process theology and open theism, which view God to be "in" all three dimensions). As regards the universe, perhaps God's presence can be best explained by His providence over but from outside nature. By His common grace, God cares for the reality in which we live, without which providence life would not carry on. "He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist . . ." (Acts 17:27b-28a, NASB).

and consequently attempted to hide from God's presence in Eden. Losing fellowship with the Lord, they first experienced alienation from God and then with each other. They covered themselves, argued as to who was to blame for the lost bliss and hid from God (Genesis 3:8-13). But God initiated contact with them. They did not seek God (Romans 3:11b). He sought them.

The point: sin hinders anyone from experiencing God's presence (See Isaiah 6:1-6.). When we sin our natural instinct is to hide from God. So how can people who are alienated from God by their sin (that's all of us) experience His presence, both in this life and life to come? (See 2 Thessalonians 1:9.) Can we encounter God's presence by means of mystic contemplation, by conditioning our souls to commune with Him by practicing spiritual disciplines? Or do we enter God's presence by responding in faith to the initiative of divine grace as the Holy Spirit invites us to Jesus Christ? For true believers, the answer is obvious. As illustrated by Adam and Eve, the "presence" of God becomes a game of "hide and seek." We hide and God seeks! Either we respond to His initiative or we do not. The whole of Scripture is the record of and commentary on God manifesting His presence to humanity, both as to its barrier (i.e., sin) and the way to remove the barrier.

To Patriarchs and Kings

After Adam and Eve, the storyline of God's presence continues. He banished Cain from His presence (he went out from the presence of the Lord, Genesis 4:16). He was present with Enoch (Genesis 3:22, 24), with Noah (Genesis 6:9), with Abraham (Genesis 21:22), with Jacob (Genesis 28:15), with Joseph (Genesis 39:2) with Moses (Exodus 3:12), with Joshua (Joshua 1:5), with Gideon (Judges 6:12), with David (1 Samuel 18:14), with Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:7), and more. In all of these instances, God manifested His presence to people according to His providence. God *mediated* His presence to people. They did not *meditate* into it.

With Israel

Having begun with Abraham and continuing with the patriarchs, kings and others, God made His presence known to Israel for reason of having chose that nation to reveal Himself to (Deuteronomy 7:6). The Lord made His presence known to Moses in the fiery bush (Exodus 3:2-6). At the Exodus, God miraculously led Israel out of Egypt and throughout the nation's wilderness journeys—the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Exodus

13:21-22). In the wilderness, God also provided His people with daily food, which provision manifested His presence (Psalm 78:23-24). God led Israel to the Promised Land, to that particular geographical location on this planet the prophets declared to be His land ("My Land," Jeremiah 2:7). To make His presence known, God through Moses instructed the nation to build a Tabernacle for the habitation of His glory in the Holy of Holies, on the Ark of the Covenant's Mercy Seat between and beneath the covering Cherubim (Exodus 25:8-9; Numbers 7:89).

In that land and to those people, God would further make His presence known. He chose Jerusalem as His city and Zion as the holy mount upon which His Temple was to be built (Deuteronomy 12:5; Zechariah 8:1-3).²² That Temple, built by Solomon, the Lord filled with His presence (2 Chronicles 5:13b-14). The *Shekinah* glory dwelt there 24/7. (Though not appearing in the Bible, *Shekinah* derives from the Hebrew word "dwell" (e.g., *shakan*) and describes God's "dwelling presence."). Yahweh dwelt in the midst of Israel, in the Holy of Holies into which only the High Priest was allowed to enter once a year on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). There the High Priest would offer the blood of a sacrificed goat for the sins of the nation before the cloud of the Lord's presence (Leviticus 16:1-34). (The cloud shielded the dwelling glory from blinding the high priest.) The limited access into the Holy of Holies reminded the nation that though Yahweh was immanently with them, He was holily separate from them.

²² "The *Shekinah*, which filled the Temple when it was first constructed (1 Kings 8:11), was regarded as a bright, cloud-like object which *represented the personal presence of God*." Emphasis added, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, Editors, Second Edition (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1989):175, No. 14.49. That Tabernacle of the Lord's habitation was to be built according to the exact specifications which He gave through Moses to Israel. "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it." (Exodus 25:8-9) If the Tabernacle had not been built according to the specifications God revealed to Moses, then it can be assumed that the Lord would not have allowed His presence to dwell there. The whole building project tested Israel's faith in YHWH and His word.

Though He was with them, God was not one of them. The Law demanded that individual Israelites pilgrimage to the Temple of God's presence. This is the sense in which a Psalmist told the people, "Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence [face] continually!" (Psalm 105:4, ESV).²³

From Israel

But it came about that the people did not adore the holiness of the Lord and presumed upon His presence. By their sinful behavior they profaned His name (Ezekiel 20:13-14). As Isaiah records, "For Jerusalem has stumbled, and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, *defying his glorious presence*" (Emphasis added, Isaiah 3:8, ESV). So the Lord's judgment upon the defiant people could take one of two courses. Either He could remove His presence from them, or remove them from His presence. He chose both. He withdrew His glorious presence from the Solomon's Temple (Ezekiel 1:28; 10:4, 18; 11:23). Of the contrast between Ezekiel's visions in chapters one and ten, Stuart comments that, "It links indisputably the departure of the glory from the temple . . . so that no reader can miss the point that as part of His judgment God Himself is actually now abandoning the place where He was once worshipped."²⁴ He removed the people from His presence by exiling the Jews for seventy years in Babylon, the very idolatrous place from which He had extracted Abraham fifteen centuries before.

But having withdrawn His glory from Israel, the day would come when, in the person of His dear Son, God would offer His presence to the Jews again. But before we come to the manifestation of the divine presence offered in the person of Jesus Christ and testified to by the Holy Spirit, what is known as "the 400 years of silence," the period which separated the ministries of

²³ At first glance this verse might be taken as an injunction to seek God's presence. However, another Psalm associates the Lord's "strength" with the Ark of the Covenant (Psalm 132:8, "the ark of Your strength") while another associates the Lord's "face" or "presence" with processions that would occur while either accompanying the ark or pilgrimaging to the ark's location in the temple (Psalm 89:13, "they walk in the light of Your countenance [face or presence]"). The verse is not a call to meditate.

²⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel: The Communicator's Commentary*, Lloyd J. Ogilvie, General Editor (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1989): 96-97.

the prophet Malachi and John the Baptist, must be addressed. The absence of God's presence, this deafening silence, caused Jews to attempt to compensate for the loss by attempting to experience the Lord through mysticism.

The Silence of Lost Presence

After removing His presence from the Temple (Ezekiel 1:28; 10:4, 18; 11:23) and with the death of Malachi (*circa* 5th Century BC), the Lord no longer communed with Israel. In that void (they couldn't stand the silence), Jews may have like Saul "inquired of the Lord, [but] the Lord did not answer [them] either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets" (1 Samuel 28:6, NASB).²⁵ In short, devout Jews no longer had any sense that the divine presence was with them. From the time of Ezekiel and with the death of Malachi, that had been lost. So what would they do? They chose to compensate for the loss by attempting through the occult art of divination to conjure-up divine presences. Astoundingly, they practiced divination even while the Lord's glory dwelt in the Temple (Isaiah 2:6).

One of the means they employed to encounter God was meditation, especially a type of mystical spirituality called *Merkabah* (*circa* 100 BC—1000 AD), out of which tradition a later mystical system called *Cabala* developed (literal Hebrew meaning, "receiving tradition"). During the 12th -13th centuries in medieval Europe, the occult, esoteric and theosophical spirituality named *Cabala* began to stream into Judaism. But leaving aside the whole subject of *Cabala*, which today has many adherents within and without Judaism, we need to note the rise of its predecessor, *Merkabah* or "chariot mysticism."

Sometime during the Intertestamental Period, the four centuries of prophetic silence between Malachi's death and John the Baptist's birth, "Chariot Mysticism" (*Merkabah*) arose, perhaps owing its name to Ezekiel's experience of the heavenly vision (Ezekiel 1:1-28) combined with Elijah's being taken to heaven by chariots (2 Kings 2:11-12). So if Jews wanted to experience the

²⁵ I use the instance of Saul to compare his spiritual mood to that which developed in Israel which the prophets indicted. As Saul sought counsel from the witch at Endor, so the prophets condemned the people and other leaders who sought knowledge through the occult arts.

divine presence, they believed that they could meditate themselves into a visionary state like Ezekiel, and like Elijah experience a “chariot ride” to heaven. If claims by Christians today give indication, this history is repeating itself.

The point: *Merkabah* arose at a dark time in Israel’s history when the Jews lived only in the shadows of the Lord’s former glorious presence which had been removed from their national life. Israel hungered after some sort of manifested divine presence because in judgment God had taken it from them. So with that absence, Judea became a wasteland of spiritualists seeking after supernatural encounters and experiences that substituted for God’s real presence. Occult activity—paranormal, psychological and mystical—thrives when the Word of God is ignored or lost and as a consequence, any sense of His presence also.

But God would return the light of His presence to the Jewish nation. Messiah Jesus came! As Isaiah prophesied, “The people that walked in darkness [would see] a great light” (Deuteronomy 18:15; Isaiah 9:26; Compare Matthew 4:11.).

Among Us Again

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt [Greek, *skenoo*, i.e., “tabernacled”] among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”

John 1:14, KJV

Of this verse, Carson comments:

[T]he Word pitched his tabernacle, or lived in his tent, amongst us . . . the tabernacle where God met with Israel before the temple was built . . . God has chosen to dwell amongst his people in yet a more personal way, in the Word-become-flesh.²⁶

Need anything more be said about the meaning of Christmas than, “*Emmanuel*, God with us?” (Isaiah 7:14) In the person of the Lord Jesus, God again offered His presence. As Charles Wesley wrote in his well known Christmas carol: “Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.” But the Jews also rejected that divine presence. Tersely, John records Jesus, “came unto his own, and his

²⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991): 127.

own received him not" (John 1:11). But during the time of His rejection and before His crucifixion, The-Word-Made-Flesh (Philippians 2:6-9) prayed for and made a promise to His Disciple/Apostles regarding His continuing presence with them.

Jesus' Prayers

At this juncture of the revealed history of God's presence in the Bible, we are introduced to the subject of the Lord's permanent presence in, with and among Christian believers, to the union and the communion they have with Him and the Father through the Holy Spirit. Believers not only personally share this intimate relationship with Christ, but also with each other in His body, the church. Individual believers are one with Jesus and His Father. This condition of being "unionized" with the Lord is one of the profoundest spiritual conditions we could ever contemplate (in a good way) in Christian living, yet it can go unnoticed by many if not most of the Lord's people. And furthermore, it's a union which is appropriated by faith. But Jesus both prayed for and predicted our spiritual union with Him and the Father, a union the Holy Spirit would draw us into by faith. The condition of being in union with Yahweh was unknown to believers living under the Old Covenant, but this presence ought to be known by Christians.²⁷ We can know of this union by listening in on Jesus' prayers.

I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for *he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.*

Emphasis added, John 14:16-17

Neither pray I for these alone [His followers then], but for them also which shall believe on me through their word [His followers now—that's us]; *That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us* And the glory [His participation in our lives] which thou gavest me I have given

²⁷ Confession: To my shame, my union in Christ by grace through faith was unknown to me during the formative years of my Christian life. I do not remember hearing about it. But if I did, and by faith did not appropriate the truth of it, it was because of my own carnality and insensitivity to the teaching of it.

them; that they may be one, even as we are one: *I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one*; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me . . .

Emphasis added, John 17:20-23

Jesus' Promise

Jesus promised that after His departure He would not abandon His disciples to be orphans in the world. He promised to send to them another Comforter to be as equally present with them as He had, the marvelous difference being that while Jesus had been *with* the disciples, the Spirit of Christ would be *in* them! However, the Spirit's indwelling presence would not occur until after Jesus' resurrection, ascension and glorification in heaven. Then Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit as His proxy presence. Through the Holy Spirit who proceeded from Him and the Father (John 15:26, "whom I will send unto you from the Father"), the Lord Jesus Christ would infuse both individually and collectively His abundant presence into the lives of those who belonged to Him by faith.²⁸ As Jesus stated and John interpreted:

In the last day, that great day of the feast [The Feast of Tabernacles], Jesus stood and cried, saying, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)

John 7:37-39

Jesus did not compare the coming presence of the Spirit to a well, a creek or a stream, but to "rivers of living water" (plural), the supply of which might be likened to the Mississippi River and all its

²⁸ Did the Spirit "proceed" from the Son, the Father, or both? The controversy played out in church history. Here Jesus states "I will send from the Father" indicating that both He and the Father were involved. Subordination has not to do with any inferiority amongst and between the persons of the Tri-unity of the Godhead, but merely to the timing of the Spirit's coming to testify of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit proceeded to publicize Jesus!

tributaries. But unlike the Mississippi, His divine presence would not be polluted, but pure—it would be living water.

Questions: Why are Christians seeking a divine presence that Jesus promised would abundantly flow in them? What is it that some Christians are seeking after that the Spirit of Christ does not already abundantly supply? What's the deficiency? Why do they need another voice, another visitation, or another vision? Why unthankfully, do some Christians desire "something more" than what they've already been given in Christ? Why is it that in their souls they do not experience the peace of His presence? (See Hebrews 4:9-10.)

Promise Fulfilled: Pentecost

To return to God's supply of His abundant presence—Acts records that in fulfillment of John the Baptist's prediction (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33) and Jesus' promise (Acts 1:5). The Holy Spirit descended upon the Pentecost crowd and "filled" them with His presence as Christ came to spiritually dwell with and in them. Even though a mixed group of people, Jew and Gentile, had rejected and crucified the Lord of Glory, the Lord in His goodness offered His presence to them again as He came to individually and corporately dwell not only with them but in them. (That's why in his letters Paul refers to New Covenant believers as "saints"—Ephesians 1:1). This explains why God's presence is no longer, as in the Old Testament era, associated with sacred places (i.e., a land, a city, a mount, and a building), but with a collective people called the church, the Lord's body which would spread over the whole planet (John 4:21-24; Acts 2:1-4; 11:16; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). And this indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ will never be withdrawn from those who approach God by repenting of their sin(s), placing their faith in Jesus' atonement for their sin(s), and believing His resurrection from the dead (John 3:16; Romans 10:9-10).

The point: Under God's Old Covenant administration over Israel (originally, it was a theocracy, but by popular demand became a monarchy under Saul), His personal presence was provisionally with Israel. But with the establishment and commencement of Jesus' New Covenant (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23), His presence resides personally and permanently in all believers who together constitute the Church.

This constitutional presence however, does not include the institutional church which supposes that God's presence can be manipulated down via administering sacraments, invocations, baptisms, altar calls, music, smells and bells and other rituals that it is superstitiously believed, infuse some with the divine even as others voyeuristically feel thrilled at observing the pageantry which induces experiencing the Presence. The common elements of the Eucharistic bread and cup do not become a divinized essence of Christ (transubstantiation). In an alchemical way, the materiality of the bread and cup do not morph into divinity, which priests then distribute to Eucharistic participants to transmit a part of god to them. In an exceptional way, neither do the elements invite Christ's presence to hang around in a special way (consubstantiation).

The Lord's Supper memorializes and remembers Christ's death for our sins period, though its observance is a serious time for the spiritual life of any congregation. Believers, not the Eucharistic bread and wine, are the real "hosts" of Christ's presence. The Spirit of Christ lives in people, not the Eucharistic elements. Christians are the people of Christ's presence.

Christ's presence is real and abiding in believers. As one great hymn puts it:

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

By Thomas O. Chisholm (1866-1960)

"Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow—
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!"²⁹

This is "the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). In Christ, the Holy Spirit, who "is the earnest [down payment] of our inheritance," has "sealed" [stamped] us "until the redemption of the purchased possession [The whole person, body and soul.]" (Ephesians 1:13-14). Our eternal destiny involves His presence until our redemption is completed. As Jesus told His disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). Although Jesus

²⁹ Daniel W. Whittle, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," *Hymns of the Christian Life* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1978): 576.

would no longer be physically present with His faithful followers, the Spirit whom He would send to take His place would be. By faith we realize that presence now! The Spirit of Christ is both with us and in us! (Romans 8:9b) As did Jesus, Hebrews tells the people of this promise, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5). In this light, Jude's benediction becomes glorious.

"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and *to make you stand in the presence* [Greek, *katenopion*] of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."

Emphasis added, Jude 24-25, NASB

Question: Of this pledged-permanent presence, I would ask, "How can we experience ourselves into it?" The answer is, "We can't!" By faith God gives it (Galatians 3:2). For this reason, I never pray for the Lord to be "with" me. He already is!

Jesus' Anticipated Presence: the Parousia

But even as personal as His spiritual presence is to us now, Jesus' physical presence will be manifested in the future. This presence will be revealed not only to earth at the time of His Second Coming but before that, to believers when they are translated to be with Him.

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming [*Parousia*] of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and *so shall we ever be with the Lord.*

Emphasis added, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

The New Testament employs three nouns describe Jesus' return—"coming (*parousia*) . . . appearing (*epiphaneia*) . . . and revelation (*apokalupsis*)."³⁰ The first word, *parousia*, means "presence . . . Jesus'

³⁰ Verbs used in the New Testament to designate Jesus' return include various forms of "come" (*erchomai*, Matthew 24:42; Revelation 22:20) and "appear" (*phaino*, Matthew 24:30; Titus 2:13).

personal presence on earth again.” As was the case with His birth, Jesus’ coming again to this earth will be in glory (Compare Luke 2:9; Matthew 24:29-30.). His earthly glory, perhaps we can call it the *Shekinah* of His Second Coming, was except for the instances of His birth (Luke 2:9) and transfiguration (Matthew 17:2), veiled to those who observed Jesus in His humility. By the way, our present humiliation will be lifted when Jesus comes again and as His children we will be glorified with Him! (See Colossians 3:4.)

Two witnesses in white told the disciples at the time of His ascension,

Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.

Acts 1:11

Just as Emmanuel was present at the first Christmas, so shall Emmanuel be present at His Second Coming when a demonstrable and invasive presence at the end of this age (which nobody will be able to deny, control or manipulate) will be manifested. “*Maranatha!* O Lord, come!” (1 Corinthians 16:22)

The time of Jesus’ coming has been set by the Father (Acts 1:7), and even though presently believers live, move and have their being in His spiritual presence, they shall not experience being in Christ’s physical presence until either they die or are “caught up” to Him (i.e., translated, 1 Thessalonians 4:17), after which they will be given resurrected and eternal versions of their mortal bodies (Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

“We are confident, I say, and willing rather *to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.*”

Emphasis added, 2 Corinthians 5:8

Death

For believers, “to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain” (Philippians 1:23). In the text just cited, the equating verbs are present tense and italicized (meaning they’re not in the Greek text, but supplied). By ignoring the verb *is*, the reader can observe that

Paul pictures a believer's life to be so coalesced with Christ that death is of no consequence. We are in Christ, and He is in us.³¹

In continuum believers possess resurrection life from the moment of regeneration unto glorification (John 3:7; Romans 8:28-30). As we face the demise of this life, we must realize that because life is Christ, death just means more of Him, more of His presence. As John Gamble (1711-1771) poetically stated:

And when I'm to die,
"Receive me," I'll cry,
For Jesus hath loved me, I cannot say why.
But this I do find,
We two are so joined,
He'll not live in glory and leave me behind.³²

Review and Summary

By way of review and summary, allow these applications regarding God's presence to be made.

Promised Presence

We can bank on Jesus' presence. To His disciples He guaranteed continuation of it throughout this evil age until He personally returns to this earth again. After His resurrection He told His disciples, "Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). His presence with His followers will abide until "the end of the age" (NASB). Jesus set the sequence of two ages. First, the present evil age began with the fall of man in Eden and will end when Messiah reigns on earth, which will be the age to come (See Matthew 12:32). In other words, Jesus promised His disciples His spiritual presence for the duration the present time period before the "age to come" commences. As His Disciple-Apostles knew and wrote about Jesus' *Parousia*, His bodily presence on this earth again will mark the end of this age (Matthew

³¹ Christ remains Christ even as Christians remain human. See Larry DeBruyn, "On Theosis, or Divinization: What does it mean to be 'partakers of the divine nature?'" *Guarding His Flock Ministries*, January 11, 2012 (<http://guardinghisflock.com/2012/01/11/on-theosis-or-divination/#more-1989>).

³² John Gambold, "Poems and Hymns—O Tell Me No More of This World's Vain Store," *The Works of the Rev. John Gambold, A.M.* (Glasgow, Scotland: Chalmers and Collins, 1823): 200.

24:3b). At that time people will no more need to seek His physical presence then as they need to seek His spiritual presence now. By the Spirit, Christ dwells in and is with every believer for the duration and until the end of this age.

The only persons Jesus is not spiritually in/with during his present evil age are unbelievers. As Paul wrote the Romans, “But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him” (Romans 8:9b). According to His promise, He is present in/with true believers already. So why are some Christians so intent on seeking a divine presence that according to God’s word is already present? Is it because the Holy Spirit is not in them and they do not experience God’s daily presence?

Proactive Presence

Jesus’ presence comes to our hearts because by grace God initiated it. His presence comes to us by the condition He has set, and that is “by faith,” not works (Ephesians 3:17; Galatians 3:2-3). Before the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son to reside in us, there is not, as new spiritualists commonly believe, a dormant Christ or Buddha spirit perennially residing in everybody, merely awaiting the awakening unto divinization. For example, Eckhart Tolle, a bestselling author whose writings Oprah Winfrey highly recommends, teaches that all humanity is indwelt by an immanent Christ-spirit. He has stated: “Jesus speaks of the innermost I am, the essence identity of every man and woman . . . Some Christian mystics have called it the Christ within.”³³ The Christian union with Christ is not like that. It’s neither universal nor perennial.

As the High Priest could only enter into the Lord’s presence in the Holy of Holies once a year through the blood of the sacrificed goat (Leviticus 16:1ff.), so the Spirit of Christ comes to be present only in individuals who trust that the blood of God’s sacrificed Lamb Jesus will make them fit for divine habitation (1 John 2:2). Only through the blood of Jesus Christ do persons become fit hosts for His holy presence. The error of the new spirituality is that it assumes that God’s presence can be ginned-up by erotically arousing human emotions and passions. But Scougal reminds that this union with the Lord “is not a sudden start or

³³ Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2005): 71.

passion of the mind, even if it should rise to the height of a rapture and seem to transport a man to extraordinary performances.”³⁴

Rather, Jesus' presence in us depends upon His propitiation for us—that He died for our sins to make us a fit temple for His residence (Romans 6:3-11). Christ graces sinners with His presence when they respond to the Spirit's conviction of sin by faith and receive the cleansing His shed blood provides unto a person's soul (John 3:3, 7). As per the goal and claims of mystic spirituality, we cannot *ascend* into a divine presence. Rather, that presence can only *descend* to us through faith in Christ's sacrifice for our sin (John 3:13, 16). Jesus illustrated the descent when He compared the presence of the Spirit to a wind blowing upon the human soul (John 3:8), and we can no more control the presence of the Spirit than we can control the wind. Union with Christ is reactive and interactive. God initiates, we respond. As to this important distinction, A.J. Gordon (1836-1895) wrote that,

The method of grace is precisely the reverse of the method of legalism. The latter is holiness in order to union with God; the former, union with God in order to holiness.³⁵

We cannot achieve Jesus' presence by doing disciplines. This *union* of His presence comes only by Holy Spirit baptism (1 Corinthians 12:13). In the aftermath of the Spirit's baptism, the joy of *communion* with the indwelling Christ can be facilitated via *reading* the Bible (the Scriptures and the Spirit do testify concerning Christ, John 5:39; 15:26), *meditating* on Scripture, *praying* in the Spirit, *confessing* personal sins, *witnessing* the Gospel, *singing* “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” in our hearts (private worship) and to each other (public worship), *thanking* God for His blessings, *submitting* one to another, *observing* the Lord's Table together, *doing* good unto others, etc. (1 John 1:9; Acts 13:48-52; Ephesians 5:18-21).

Personal Presence

Employed hundreds of times by the Apostle Paul in his epistles, no phrase bespeaks the infusion of divine life into a human soul more than the little phrase “in Christ.” “Therefore if

³⁴ Henry Scougal, *The Works of Henry Scougal: Containing The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002): 3.

³⁵ A.J. Gordon, *In Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, n.d.): 11.

any man is in Christ, he is a new creature” (2 Corinthians 5:17a). The uniting of our soul to Christ is personal and intimate. That we are “in Christ” communicates our union and communion with Him. To cite Henry Scougal (1650-1678) again:

True religion is a union of the soul with God, a real participation in the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul. In the apostle’s words, it is ‘Christ formed in you’.³⁶

Protective Presence

Christ protects us. When musing, in a good way meditating, on that little prepositional phrase “in Christ,” our tendency might be to compare our standing/state to a circle inside of which we are in/with Him. As such, the circle, much as “the city limits” might define those who are citizens a certain municipality, defines those who are in Christ’s presence. But A.T. Pierson (1837-1911) suggested that being “in Christ” might better thought of as sphere than a circle; that God’s protection is impenetrably above, below and around us. Pierson explained:

A circle surrounds us, but only on one plane; but a sphere encompasses, envelopes us, surrounding us in every direction and on every plane . . . Moreover, the sphere that surrounds you also separates you from whatever is outside of it. Again, in proportion as such a sphere is strong it also protects whatever is within it from all that is without—from all external foes or perils.³⁷

Permanent Presence

Once we’re sealed into this union, it’s effective for the rest of this life, through death, at the resurrection of the body, in our appearing with Him at His glorious Second Coming, and into eternity. We are “sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13b-14, NASB). “For [we] have died and [our] life is hidden with Christ in God [and] When Christ, who is our life, is

³⁶ Scougal, *Works*, 3.

³⁷ Arthur T. Pierson, *In Christ Jesus—the Sphere of the Believers Life* (Amazon Kindle): 48-51.

revealed, then [we] also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:3-4). We are identified with Christ ("baptized into Christ") in His death (Romans 6:3b, 5a), His burial (Romans 6:4a), His resurrection (Romans 6:4b, 5b), His ascension (Ephesians 2:6b) and coming glorification before this world (1 John 3:2). Holloman defines that the union is, "The identification of believers with Christ and Christ with believers through the Holy Spirit in a dynamic, permanent spiritual relationship."³⁸ These poetic words, written by Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), portray what it means to be in God's presence for reason of our being "in Christ."

A Mind at Perfect Peace
So near, so very near to God,
I cannot nearer be;
For in the person of His Son,
I am as near as He.³⁹

Conclusion

We began this writing by citing evangelical Christians who are attempting to experience God's presence. Seemingly, they want to "feel" their way into it. Yet, the Bible teaches that our experiencing God's presence depends upon His initiation. We can no more manipulate God's presence in us than resurrect ourselves from the dead or seat ourselves with Him in heaven (Ephesians 2:1-10). This wonderful union can be appropriated only by faith in God's word, out of which feelings grow.

Yet pervasive throughout our erotic and pantheistic culture there resides the existential notion that, as Oprah Winfrey put it, "God is a feeling-experience, not a believing-experience!" This idea of "God-as-feeling" results from believing that God dwells immanently below, not transcendently above. Belief in divine immanence eclipses belief in divine transcendence, and when that happens, "nature eats up grace."⁴⁰ All that's left is the existentialism which embraces God as "feelings."⁴¹

³⁸ Emphasis added, Henry W. Holloman, "Union with Christ," *Kregel Dictionary of the Bible and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2005): 560.

³⁹ Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), "A Mind at Perfect Peace," *Cyber Hymnal* (<http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/m/i/n/mindaper.htm>).

⁴⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, "Escape from Reason," *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, Volume I (Westchester, IL:

When this happens, the only request that can be made to *his immanence* is not “Help me!” but “Thrill me!”⁴² God becomes a sensation as the spiritual life comes to rely on passion. So parallel to experiencing God’s *presence* is the evangelical emphasis upon desiring God or *passion*, as if realizing His presence depends upon the emotions and desires aroused in large gatherings, feelings stimulated and manipulated by staging provocative worship excitements featuring rock music, drama, dance and cool sermons from hip speakers. But if that is how a divine-manifest-presence can happen, then maybe Pentecost was the first “passion conference.” So the question becomes, is “the faith” (Jude 3) now being thrown into an existential dump by a mass of evangelical Christians? If trends in the culture being adopted by the church give indication, this is the case.

But the real Pentecost could neither be worked down from above nor worked up from below. The inauguration of the Church came not for reason of the passions people felt, but for reason of the promise of God, who ordained the baptism/filling of the Holy Spirit which Ezekiel *predicted* (Ezekiel 36:26-27), which John the Baptist and Jesus *promised* (Matthew 3:11; Acts 1:4-5), and which *proceeded* from the ascended Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:33; Acts 2:4).

A major seminary hosted a conference (2013) dealing with God’s presence. The website that advertised the conference contains this statement by one of the seminary’s professors:

The theology of divine presence is profoundly simple and yet it is simply profound. It is a topic of inquiry at the highest level of scholarship but, more importantly, it is a promise for everyday life and living. The reality of God’s redemptive, sustaining presence in our lives is our source of hope, consolation and joy

Crossway Books, 1982): 231.

⁴¹ One attractive young lady testifies for Mormonism: “When I read *The Book of Mormon*, I feel closer to Jesus Christ.” Warning: A faith that becomes cultured easily becomes cauterized; that is, like the branding of skin, insensitive to genuine moves of the Spirit of God in human soul.

⁴² I can only note the pervasive emphasis on pleasure and passion amongst evangelicals these days—passion conferences, books on pleasuring or being pleased by God, etc. Is this happening because God’s transcendence has been sacrificed upon the altar of immanence? The trend includes liberals, Charismatics and Neo-Calvinists.

amidst the victories and trials of life. We don't have to 'go it' alone; he is with us. He is our Emmanuel.⁴³

Though biblical in so far as it goes, the statement is deficient in one major aspect. Not only is God "with" us, but under terms of the New Covenant, He's "in" us! By His grace, He's present in/with us at all times and through all the experiences of life, death and eternity. That is why the Lord Jesus described His gift to believers as "eternal life" (John 3:15, 16, 36; 6:40; 10:28; 17:2-3). In continuum, the Lord's presence resides with/in believers forever, and the presence is initiated by God's grace, appropriated by man's faith, and cultivated by living in the Spirit. "Emmanuel"—Christ in us, the hope of glory!

Christ Liveth In Me

By Daniel Whittle (1840-1901)

As lives the flower within the seed, As in the cone the tree,
So, praise the God of truth and grace, His Spirit dwelleth in me.
Christ liveth in me, Christ liveth in me;
Oh, what a salvation this, That Christ liveth in me.⁴⁴

⁴³ Gary Pratico, "God with Us: the Theme of Divine Presence in Scripture," *Gordon Connell Theological Seminary*, October 17-18, 2013, (<http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/Divine-Presence.cfm>).

⁴⁴ Daniel W. Whittle, "Christ Liveth in Me," *Hymns of the Christian Life* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1978): 500.

Appendix

*Strange Encounters: Do people really see Jesus today?*¹

“Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Jesus, John 20:29, NASB

Now and then, people claim to have physical sightings of, close encounters with, and mystical visions of Jesus. Once upon a time, evangelist Oral Roberts saw Him. He claimed:

I felt an overwhelming holy presence all around me. When I opened my eyes, there he stood—some 900 feet tall, looking at me. . . . He stood a full 300 feet taller than the 600-foot-tall City of Faith. There I was face to face with Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.²

A Texas man reported Jesus visited him in a motel room while in Oklahoma. “He looked like his picture,” said George Wood, “but when you’re talking to the man for three hours, you forget the details.”³ Another person reports her visionary experience.

Hello,
My name is _____. I have had encounters with Jesus Christ . . . My first vision was when I woke one day. I looked over at my alarm clock and saw that I still had a minute left before the alarm was set to go off, so I closed my eyes and thought “great, I’ll get one more wink.” Then I felt sort of paralyzed and saw Jesus Christ’s eyes looking at me! They were his eyes only. They were green with a hint of yellow and twice the size of a human’s eyes. . . . I cannot say how

¹ Though updated, the substance of this appendix was first published in *Christianity Today* magazine. See Larry DeBruyn, “Those Strange Encounters: Do people really see Jesus today?” *Christianity Today*, July 15, 1983, p. 48.

² St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, February 19–20, 1983.

³ St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, February 2, 1983. Though reported a generation ago, publicized claims like these incidents continue to epidemically proliferate. People, even children, profess to have journeyed to heaven and seen Jesus, or that Jesus has personally and physically appeared to and conversed with them, the conversations they then report in books.

long it lasted because it seemed that time had stopped. The next thing I know I opened my eyes and saw that my clock still had one minute left!¹

These “close encounters” with Jesus Christ raise issues about the present nature and appearance of His body, its current location, and the meaning of His second coming.

Jesus is the sinless God-man (Philippians 2:5-8). A church father remarked, “He remained what He was. He became what we are.” In His humanity, Jesus stood a certain height, weighed a number of pounds, possessed particular color hair, eyes, and complexion, walked in a particular gait, and exercised mental faculties and bodily functions like those of the rest of humanity. But Isaiah wrote of the Messiah’s appearance, “He has no stately form or majesty / That we should look upon Him, / Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him” (Isaiah 53:2b, NASB). In the body of His humility, and as the Lamb of God, Jesus suffered and died for our sins.

But Jesus the Son of God lives! His bodily resurrection is the *sine qua non* (Latin, “without which nothing) of the faith (1 Corinthians 15:12-23). The resurrection body of Jesus was both different from and similar to the body of His humiliation. It could pass through walls, yet bore the scars of crucifixion (John 20:25-27). No scriptural evidence exists that His appearance was drastically altered as a 900-foot-tall apparition or appearance of a pair of disembodied, enlarged and serpentine-colored eyes suggests. If Jesus veiled His glory, there is no reason to believe that an appearance of Christ would differ from those recorded after His resurrection manifestations. If Jesus did not veil His glory, it is doubtful His body could be seen (Acts 9:7-8; 22:11; Compare Matthew 17:2.).

Two apostles recorded encounters with Jesus after His ascension. In four instances, Paul met Him on the road to Damascus, heard Him speak in both a vision and a moment of ecstasy, and was encouraged by Him after a heated debate with the Sanhedrin (Acts 9:5; 18:9-10; 22:17-18; 23:11). In another instance, John saw Jesus (Revelation 1:12-20).

¹ “Visions of Jesus Christ,” (<http://www.angels-online.com/iso.html>).

In difference to those claiming visions and sightings of Jesus on earth, John saw and heard Him in heaven. Paul saw and heard Him from heaven. Acts 23:11 appears to record an exception when it says “the Lord stood by” Paul, but uses a Greek participle referring to His reassuring appearance to the apostle in a dream at night. After Jesus’ ascension in Acts 1:9, there is no evidence that the Lord’s feet ever touched this terrestrial planet again.

The Bible teaches that the risen and glorified Christ has a corporeal presence, not on earth, but in heaven. According to the apostle Peter, Jesus Christ “has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (1 Peter 3:22, NIV). The author of Hebrews agrees (Hebrews 4:14; 8:1). Jesus said He was going to that place (John 14:2-3).

The Bible promises Jesus’ spiritual presence with believers on earth (Matthew 28:20), but precludes His earthly physical presence until His Second Advent, which will be personal, physical, visible, and public. At the time of His ascension, two men in white assured the disciples, “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). This promise starkly contrasts with the report of a private and casual visit with Jesus in an Oklahoma motel room, to a personal vision of His 90 story high standing presence, and with the mystical apparition of a pair of ghoulish green-yellow eyes.

While they were facing adversity, the Apostle Peter encouraged suffering believers that though tested by trials, the “proof” of their faith will “result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and *though you have not seen Him, you love Him*, and *though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him*, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls” (Italics mine, 1 Peter 1:6-9). To Peter, faith was not sight, believing was not seeing.

In light of Peter’s statement that Christians had not seen the ascended Lord Jesus Christ then, it can be deduced that people are not seeing Him now. In a post-resurrection encounter with doubting Thomas, Jesus asked him, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed?” But regarding the many others who would not and did not see Him, the Lord stated, “Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (John 20:29). In His statement to

Thomas, Jesus set His divine approval upon believers who believe in the One whom they have not seen. If this is the case, why would Jesus deny such blessing to believers by appearing, willy-nilly, to them?

We live in an increasingly irrational, experiential and mystical age when people are fascinated with UFOs, ancient astronauts, extra-terrestrials and visitors from outer space. Claims and reports of alleged sightings of Jesus condescends His person to the spirit of our day. At the time of Jesus Christ's revelation, when He comes again, not only will Christian believers be personally constituted like and publicly identified with Him (Colossians 3:4; 1 Peter 1:13; 4:13; 1 John 3:2), but also "every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him" (Revelation 1:7).

I conclude that, if the New Testament's language is meaningful and authoritative for our faith, and it is, reports of physical sightings and mystical experiences with Jesus are strange encounters of the incredible kind.

Pastor Larry DeBruyn
Guarding His Flock Ministries
www.guardinghisflock.com