

“I will be with you *always*, even till the end of the age”

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## **Introduction**

While I was asked to write this paper a few months ago, the work in this paper has been brewing for a little while. There are things here that I think brew in all our hearts.

At Israel College of the Bible, my fellow students and I were idealistic at times (OK – a lot of the time) about what a mission or even a church should look like. As we encountered each new concept or person from history we hypothesised what it might be like to apply what they had accomplished today

At one point we arrived at one of the premier apologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Frances Schaeffer. The L’Abri movement was something we knew precious little about. Yet we were inspired by what seemed to be the prophetic words of a man predicting the society we live in today as we watched *How Should We Then Live*. His challenges were profound; his gospel focus seemed almost pure.

It was then that we began talking about a house in which believers would live together. Their tasks would be to learn God’s Word, work to sustain the needs of the community, pray continually, and go out to tell others. It was a dream of young men and women full of ideals. We saw the community of the Book of Acts through romantic eyes.

Despite the long inspired talks, we never followed through. None of us were ready.

A year ago, I was sent to serve the missionaries here in the UK as their leader. While at church one evening I stumbled upon a book called Punk Monk<sup>1</sup>. As a lover of punk music when I was a teenager, an avid reader of Church history as a student, and having been disciplined in the Church of the East, I was intrigued. As I read, the authors of the book inspired me through the examples of Frances of Assisi, St Patrick, Bonhoeffer and others to look to a radical form of faith. This faith finds itself in all the parts of my life as a disciple – not just my life as a minister. It encouraged a life led for community as the ideal life for mission and family.

In this paper I hope to demonstrate that Jesus is with us through his being in each other. In plain English – because God is all believers we can experience His presence through being together. This is particularly true in community where we are together continually and our less desirable character traits are revealed.

## **God and His Servant**

The topic for this paper comes from Jesus saying to His disciples, “I will be with you *always* even till the end of the age”. Well I first ask, “How? What does that mean?” I hear the indifferent priest telling his flock, “Go, and God be with you.” As if God being with me means I don’t have to bore him anymore.

So what did Jesus mean, and how did the disciples understand God's presence? The answer I have come to is incomplete. However I think the answer's importance is accentuated by looking at God's presence with our Jewish people throughout Biblical history.

Abraham spoke with God, and experienced His presence, as a man talking to a king or revered guest<sup>2</sup>. Be it in the encounter with Malchizedek<sup>3</sup> or the angel of the Lord at the Akeidah<sup>4</sup>, Abraham spoke to God directly and often in person<sup>5</sup>. My favourite encounter of Abraham's with God is in Mamre<sup>6</sup>. Abraham experiences the living and personal God who is willing to engage with us in "back and forth" banter. God is not a principal to be worked with, He is the relational God that can be talked with as well as worshipped and praised. This is how Abraham experienced God's presence.

Jacob too experiences God as a person. God engages with Jacob quite physically in a wrestling match<sup>7</sup>. This wrestling gives our people the name we have most been called – Israel. "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed". I find it stunning that God is willing to struggle with us. Here God is present just as He was with Abraham yet God changes experience to suit Jacob.

### **God and the People**

Another man who struggled with God is Moses. In Moses time, God transitioned to having a direct relationship with the entire people. God went from speaking to the "man of God" to the "people of God". Everything, as you know, did not go as smoothly as we might have expected. Nonetheless, even when the people could not stand hearing Him directly<sup>8</sup>, God made the relationship open to all and revealed Himself to them. In Leviticus, we see God going from the mountain where He appeared in flame and thunder, to materialising before everyone at the Tabernacle<sup>9</sup>. It is one of the more dramatic scenes of the Torah. God sparks off the relationship with the people by starting the fire on the altar Himself. From this point on, He dwelt with them through the presence of the ark, at the centre of His people. However God was not easily approachable<sup>10</sup>.

The transition from one-on-one to one-on-million meant including those hearts that were not yet in line with God. This led to the distance between God and the people who needed the barriers to comprehend the reverence required. Yet God had now come and made his home among the people which meant an intimacy with an entire people for the first time.

As time goes on, God transitions from tabernacle to temple while continuing his one-on-one relationships with men and women of God. It is important to remember however, that God made Himself available to everyone, through the intimacy he gave to the people of Israel by dwelling with them.

### **God-Man**

The next transition to take place in how God is present with His people took place through the incarnation. This event became the first of Jesus' ministries to the entire human race. There are many instances throughout the Old Testament (some of which I have mentioned

above) where God simply took human form to appear in an understandable fashion to ancient Man.

Through Jesus however, God is actually born human. As human-like appearance of God, He is only totally God. In the man Jesus, we have one who is fully God *and* fully Man. All the potential power of God and the potential frailty of Man were in Jesus who brought God's presence to us in a new way<sup>11</sup>. Jesus brought God's presence to a world that knew not how to relate to God as a person. They could understand a power but not the person. As the God-Man, Jesus was fully accessible in a way that God in the tabernacle or temple was not. The Messiah is the walking anointed temple that is open for all to approach.

### **We are His presence**

Jesus concludes His earthly ministry by instructing the disciples to wait in Jerusalem. It was not something new because John the Baptist had told them it was coming at Jesus' baptism<sup>12</sup>. The gift of the Holy Spirit takes this gift of God's availability to the next level; Jesus takes it to the ultimate level. At Shavuot, Jesus gave the community the gift of the presence of God within. God now dwells within us. We are sections of the temple.

It is important to remember that as believers in Jesus we become parts of the Body of Messiah – not the Messiah himself. We are not infallible, neither are we omnipotent, omniscient or any of the other omni's... In truth, rather than pride, I can think of no clearer character trait communicated by the Gospel than humility. The presence of a Holy God within our daily lives should not give us a sense of importance. Rightly understood, God with us should cause a reverence towards our lives, our deeds, and especially our words<sup>13</sup>.

Yet at the same time, we must remember that even as mere parts of the temple on earth, each one of us becomes a vessel through which God is present. Notice that I did not say God may be present but I am assured that He is present by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

So this knowledge that God is present with us through His Spirit, not only the Spirit that dwells within us but the Spirit that dwells in each other should have an impact. In my case the impact has been profound because it asks me to look at each member of the Body of Christ anew. I know that I must humble myself before every member of His body through whom He works, as well as before a Holy God. God is present in manifold ways with us, yet I see too how He is present with us through each other.

### **Community of His Presence**

Community in Messiah is one of the best places to find God's presence. Here in the UK I lead the Jews for Jesus work which bases itself in London. When I arrived, the team and I worked together as colleagues and began to learn about each other. However, as the months rolled by I challenged myself and the team to change the way we look at ourselves and our work. I asked them to adopt a notion that was realised in our midst. I asked them to see our branch as a family.

Is this new? No. Most missions and even some businesses have in their orientation literature the concept that their organisation or charity functions like a family. Do we fail in achieving these goals because unlike a family, we can leave a mission or a job at any time? Nothing binds me to my office for life. So how can our office be different? Should I make everyone sign lifelong contracts? No.

I don't need to. The lifelong commitment I have towards the people with whom I minister is the same lifelong commitment I have to every member of Messiah's Body – the blood of Jesus. I simply asked my brothers and sisters to take seriously who we are in Christ. I will be with you for eternity hereafter, let me commit to you now.

The impact goes further because it has brought me to a place where I question how our methodology in mission should be affected by this. Could we... should we evangelise as communities? It is in community that the Father challenges us; it is community that Jesus supports us; it is community that the Holy Spirit makes us whole.

My brief time in mission tells me that it is something local, organic and dynamic that attracts and stirs people today. Yet in order to meet that need let me submit to you that we should not try to meet worldly needs. We should not fall into the mistake so many churches have by trying to *be* what the world wants to see. We should strive to be what Jesus wants to see. A genuine, radical, mission-centred, communal faith lived out will be the light they will see and come to because Jesus will be shining – not us.

As I said earlier, I read Punk Monk which spoke of the saints of old and their radical discipleship. I did not mention that I went on from there to *The Celtic Way of Evangelism and How the Irish saved Civilisation*. It is in these writings that I have been inspired.

Hear the clear call of Duncan Campbell who led revivals in small places like the isle of Lewis as he said: "A baptism of holiness, a demonstration of godly living is the crying need of our day." It is a holistic and holy approach to life that I believe will demonstrate how Jesus is with us – as a community - till the end of this age. I am convinced that is not attempts to fabricate community that we need to achieve these goals, but radically living for Jesus that will develop the communities we need.

AW Tozer gives this great example: "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers meeting together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become unity conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship. Social religion is perfected when private religion is purified. The body becomes stronger as its members become healthier. The whole church of God gains when the members that compose it begin to seek a better and a higher life."

Below are three ways that striving for this goal of radical discipleship has led our London work. I have little experience to recommend these to you.

**Prayer and the Word:** We all need to commit and re-commit to prayer in a radical fashion. While my heart leans me towards 24hr prayer, I have no idea how to see that through. We re-committed to more prayer than before and we continue to find more place to pray as a family. I am sure we will need to re-commit in the future.

The Word has found its place in our community through the studying and teaching of the parasha each week. It was as we were working through *parashat shemini* that some of this material came together. To add to that, I have personally been given a task that has forced me to think through scripture more closely. I am copying out the book of Deuteronomy. These communal and personal aspects of devotion have been a blessing.

**Evangelism:** This also requires our radical commitment. It can be in any kind of context. I remember a Northern Irish Pastor challenging me to a daily dare. The idea is that at some point during your day you approach a person that God shows you— everyday. I remember completely failing the first time it happened. I was on a train going into London from my home. I was getting closer to the office when the man next to me pulls out his little chumash (a small copy of the Torah). As he begins to read I know that this is the man I need to speak to. I dreaded it.

All of a sudden the train stops. I said to myself “oh well, it is my stop, I’ve got to go Lord, sorry”. As the train pulled out of the platform I looked at the station name on the wall, I had left the train a stop early. This was a humbling experience.

**Life:** Our families, our homes, our gardens (as I am finding out here in the UK) all require discipline, love and humility to take care of. It is here that the importance of an interdependent community at work becomes real. Sharing and rotating tasks can be by far the more edifying form of life. We all do those things we dislike as well as those we enjoy in order to be part of a whole.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus is present with us always through His Spirit, His Word and through each other. Despite all the ways people have failed Him; despite all the ways we have failed Him. Let us take on this radical new life with him and work for Him. How? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Action springs not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility.” Are we ready?

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<sup>1</sup> Authored by Andy Freeman and Pete Greig. ISBN 978-1-842913-30-7

<sup>2</sup> I am starting with Abraham rather than Adam because I believe the fall changed the nature of our relationship with God. I did not want to get into the theological implications and speculations surrounding pre and post fall relationships with God.

<sup>3</sup> Gen 14 (He was Abram then)

<sup>4</sup> Gen 22

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<sup>5</sup> That is to say that Abraham spoke with God as he saw Him.

<sup>6</sup> Gen 18

<sup>7</sup> Gen 32

<sup>8</sup> Ex 20:19

<sup>9</sup> Lev 9:23

<sup>10</sup> It took very little time for the people to see that they needed to be reverent before God when Nadab and Abihu were punished. I believe that their problem was excessive drinking before the service which I think is evidenced by Lev 10:8-11.

<sup>11</sup> If you have never read Ethics by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the author makes a lot of the importance of the incarnation in understanding our relationship with God and the world.

<sup>12</sup> John 1:33

<sup>13</sup> James 3:5-6