God's Special Presence in Worship.

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> *"Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are."(1 Cor. 3:16-17, KJV.)*

Abstract. God has progressively revealed Himself and His purpose to humanity since man's creation. Though God's presence in creation is universal, His special presence has been evident through the years and has shaped how He is worshipped. Though He has spoken through the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, God has made his special presence generally known through the metaphor of light, as in the Pillar of Fire, the Shikinah Glory, that led the newly formed nation of Israel out of the bondage of Egypt's pharaoh. Constructed and maintained under that symbol of God's presence, the Tent of Meeting became the central point of Hebrew's corporate worship. However, the apostasy of the Jewish nation brought about its demise with only a remnant remaining to experience approximately 400 years while God's special presence was not observed.

God's special presence was again observed with the birth of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the Messiah, through whom the old Hebrew covenants were fulfilled, defining the basis for faith in God, and forming the body of the church today.

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Prom the point of the creation of humanity, God has progressively revealed himself, first through His communication with the patriarchs of the faith, including Abraham and his descendents, until His revelation was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament contains a record of much of God's interaction with humanity through the nation of Israel as they were incubated as a nation in Egypt, escaped the Pharaoh's despotic grip, and subsequently matured as a nation, a nation formed from God's promise to Abraham. The book of Exodus contains an account of the formation of this nation, one that is set apart from every other by virtue of that promise to Abraham: that through this nation God would bless all humanity.

When one considers the presence of God, we may come to understand His "omnipresence," His real and effective presence in every point in the universe at all times. However, as God revealed himself to man, He has also has shown His presence in quite visible and graphic ways on specific occasions and in specific places. We may refer to these occasions as examples of God's "special presence" among the people. As God's "chosen people," the descendents of Abraham experienced the special presence of God in many ways, and that special presence shaped their worldview and their very culture. God demonstrated His presence with the nation of Israel like no other as He performed the miracles that delivered them from Egypt, showed His presence to Moses on Mount Sinai and to the people in the pillar of cloud and fire that led them out of Egypt and became a fixture over and in the tabernacle. Since the tabernacle became the focal point of God's presence with the nation, it formed the center of Israelite corporate worship. Though the

Pentateuch devotes more verses to the tabernacle than to any other subject, "it is not the details in the account of the tabernacle that make up its significance, but the underlying notion that God elects to be present with God's people. In both the ritual of liturgy and the commonality of daily life, God's presence is an act of grace, made in sovereign freedom.[1] Consequently, one should not get lost in the details of the tabernacle structure, but rather give due consideration to its purpose as God revealed his presence and His will to humanity.

We first encounter God's special presence in the metaphor of light in the book of Exodus. Moses had already spent forty years as a stepson of the Pharoah of Egypt and forty years as a shepherd in the desert near Mt. Horeb when he observed a fire on the mountain:

> *And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. (Exodus 3:2, KJV).*

This incident marked the beginning of an 800-year period when God's special presence on the earth was marked by light. Often referred to as the Glory of God, or the Shekinah Glory, God repeatedly and consistently made His special presence known through the presence of His Holy Fire. God called Moses to negotiate the release of Israel from bondage under the Pharoah, and with His Holy intervention, obtained their freedom. When the nation was ready to leave the country, God made His presence to them clearly known.

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[1] Klein, Ralph W. p 264.

> *And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: [22]He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people (Exodus 13:21-22).*

Most Christians are quite aware of the Pillar of Fire and its function in the wilderness. To the ancient Israelites, this very visible manifestation because the icon of God's presence with them, and just as the ground around the burning bush was holy, they treated the location of the pillar of fire as holy ground.

> *And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."(Exodus 3:12). And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory. (Exodus 29:43, KJV.)*

Worship at Mount Sinai

> "Indeed, it has been said that in the tradition of Moses, this (Exodus 19:3-6, the Sinai Covenant), is very likely the most programmatic speech we have for Israelite faith."[2]

Though we find the worship of God to be a part of the human experience prior to the exodus from Egypt, (Gen. 22:5), it is His promise to come down and "dwell" with His people (Ex. 3:8), the theophany of Moses on Mount Sinai, and the subsequent promise of the people to be obedient to God that sets the context for their worship (Ex. 19:9-25). When Israel as a nation encountered God on Mount Sinai, the opportunity for the worship of Exodus 3:12 was fully realized. People probably best know the covenant at Sinai through the event of Moses' reception of the ten commandments. (Ex. 20:1-17). Worship would find expression in a variety of rituals and activities including a religious

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[2] Frethelm, Terence E. p 229.

pilgrim-feast, sacrifices and burnt offerings, and service.[3]

The substance of the Sinai covenant was largely the ratification and filling out of what had been promised to Abraham for the sake of the nation as a whole.[4] God called the nation of Israel together in corporate worship with a purpose. God called Israel to be a priestly people and a holy nation that, in the midst of nations, in the "whole earth," would bring God to the nations of the world (Ex. 19:3-6). "The Sinai covenant, in contrast to the Abrahamic covenant, seems to emphasize the human obligation to keep the laws ad ordinances so that the covenant would continue in effect."[5] We see, however, that even at this point in the burgeoning nation, the people had a very difficult time demonstrating obedience to such laws and ordinances, challenging their ability to express true corporate or individual worship. Even before leaving Sinai, the people broke their covenant by making a golden calf and bowing in worship to it (Ex. 34:10, 27-28). This spiritual tug-of-war between obedience to God's commands and the people's desire to worship God in their own manner is a constant, recurring theme in the life of Jewish corporate worship, and the state of that battle defined the nation at any given time. Still, the "most conspicuous theme of the Sinai experience is the theophany on the mountain and the response of the people to God's presence (Ex 19:9-25; 20:18-21.)[6]

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[3] Exodus 5:1 et. al.; 3:18 et. al.; 7:16 et. al.
[4] Wright, Christopher J. H. p 86
[5] Smith, Ralph L. p 157.
[6] Hilber, John W. p 178,

Worship in the Tabernacle.

The period of worship at Sinai was short-lived, as God moved the people towards the promised land of Canaan. The people were led by the Pillar of Fire as it would move from one place in the region to another. Understanding the significance of God's presence in the pillar, the nation constructed the tent of the tabernacle under it, a place where God would "dwell." Scripture describes the command to build the tent, but little is actually known about its origin, or when it was first used.[7] Once in place, the tent of the tabernacle, also referred to as the tent of meeting, became the central point of corporate worship. On specific occasions, God showed his special presence by speaking out of the fire, and each year on the Day of Atonement, the fire would descend into the tabernacle itself and consume the sacrifice in a very dramatic and graphic proof of God's presence with man.

If the pillar of fire were to come back today, what would happen? Certainly, it would serve as front-page news for a day or so. People would respond in a huge flow of emotion with numerous testimonies of prophesies. After a week it would be relegated to the second page of our newspapers. After a month there would be occasional articles on the religion page. After a year it would be old news, and most of the world would be disinterested.

A similar circumstance took place in ancient Israel. Record of the pillar of fire becomes sparse through the years, but still, the record exists. "In none of the priestly references to the Israelite encampments following Sinai, with the exception of Num.

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[7] Lewis, Joe O. p 537.

10:11-12, do we find mention of the departure of the pillar of fire and its return.[8] There are several references to the Pillar of Fire and its presence over the tent of the tabernacle in Exodus, Numbers, 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles. It is clear that the Pillar of Fire was present for the entire period of 400 years while Israel worshipped God in the tent.

Then, King Solomon built the permanent Temple in Jerusalem. While the building was taking place, worship still took place in the tent. Upon the completion of the temple, God showed his approval by moving the Pillar of Fire over it. When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple (2. Chronicles 7:1).

Just as the Pillar of Fire, the presence of God in His Tabernacle had been evident for 400 years in the Tent of Meeting, it was also present at Solomon's Temple for a period of 400 years. It had been 800 years now that God's presence was found in the tabernacle, and that presence was in the form of light. Light had become synonymous with God's presence. However, this latter period of 400 years was characterized by the apostasy of the nation. The fall from honoring God in Hebrew corporate worship actually started with the reign of King Solomon who, obsessed with rebuilding the nation, reduced his own commitment to the temple to three annual celebrations (1 Kings 9:25). His efforts to mimic his father, King David, lacked his father's zeal for God. Consequently, he had none to pass to his son, Rehoboam, who drove the nation into a split into Israel and Judah in his effort to mimic his own father. The kings who followed Rehoboam took the nation further away from God and embraced the gods of the world culture. At the same time, a very complex set of rules of access were applied to the temple that excluded

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[8] Frankel, David. p 32.

most of the population from worship.[9] Worship in the temple changed from the worship of God to the worship of pagan gods and idols. By the time of Judah's apostasy, adherence to the law of Moses "had disappeared completely, and only a vague reminiscence thereof had survived."[10] God's special presence in the temple was evident by the pillar of fire, but usually absent from the hearts of those who came to worship. God had promised his hand of protection over Israel if they would continue to obey Him. However, Israel and Judah broke the covenant of obedience that was established at Sinai in their apostasy, God's hand of protection was removed, and the children of Israel would ultimately lose the promised land. First Israel and then Judah were taken into captivity in Assyria and Babylon, respectively.

Ezekiel was then witness to one of the most profound events in the history of Israel:

> *Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim (Ezek. 10:18). The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it (Ezek. 11:23)*

After 400 years in the tent, and 400 years in the temple, the Pillar of Fire, the Shekinah Glory of God departed. The Prophesy of 1 Samuel had been fulfilled. The name of *Ichabod* was written across the face of the land: The Glory of the Lord had left Israel. This event was the beginning of 400 years of darkness. This is the period of time between the writings of Malachi and Matthew, between the Old and the New Testaments. Unlike the 800 years before, when the priests would bring the sacrifice to the altar, the Pillar of Fire no longer came down to consume it. They had to clean up the bloody mess

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[9] Haran, Menaham. p 191.

themselves, fully knowing that God was not there. The nature of corporate worship in the temple again changed. Israel continued to exist as a nation, through the remnant of Judah that returned from exile, but not as children in relationship with God. There was only darkness.

This 400-year darkness was insidious. During that time there were no prophets, and so, no word from God. Where was He? Though they rejected the idolatry of their ancestors, corporate worship immersed itself in a new idolatry: tradition. Israel turned completely away from God and instead of embracing relationship with Him, turned fully to their traditions to sustain their self-definition. Faith had been replaced by cold and meaningless religious ritual. The commandments of God had been replaced by a system of legalistic written and oral laws. God was gone. Religion was now in the hands of men.

The Special Presence of God in Jesus, the Messiah.

After 400 years of darkness, the Glory of the Lord came back.

> *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9]And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. [10]And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. [11]For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:9-11).*

The Glory of the Lord returned. His light lit up the field where the shepherds were keeping their sheep, and unlike the fire of 800 years ago that came and went without

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[10] Morgensern, Julian. p 160.

much local interest, this time the shepherd were quite scared by this apparition. Israel's hope in the return of God's Glory was in the coming of the Messiah. As the glory returned, the message of the angels was exactly that: today is born the Savior, the Christ. In the ensuing years, we see additional references to the Star of Bethlehem, the light that lit the shepherd's field and later served to lead the wise men to the Christ child, leading them in the same manner that it led Israel through the wilderness.

Through the return of the Shekinah Glory, and the announcement of the angels, it is clear that God's special presence has returned. This time, He has returned through the life of a baby born to the most humble of people. Jesus, as the incarnate Messiah, is now the light of the world, the tabernacle of God: God with us. The ancient Hebrews worshipped the LORD, YAHWEH whose attributes are shared with the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In this manner, Jesus Christ is "Lord to the Christians in the same sense that Jehovah was Lord to the Hebrews,"[11] fully man, yet fully God.

Not only did God testify through His Glory that Jesus is the light of the world, Jesus Himself agreed …

> *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)*

When Jesus speaks of darkness, it is not a reference to the darkness of night. Rather, that darkness is the darkness of sin and death, the absence of God's Holy presence, the absence of His light.

Consider for a moment the battle between physical light and darkness. If we were to close all of the doors and cover all of the windows of a room, and then turn out the

lights, we would be able to observe the room in absolute darkness. Many people have never experience such absolute darkness. When the light it turned on, the power of the light literally chases the darkness from the room. Light proceeds from its source at 300 million meters per second, or 186,000 miles per second, encountering no resistance from the darkness. Darkness has absolutely no power. The light has all of the power in this conflict.

Likewise, this happens when the special presence of God through the Holy Spirit enters. Just as darkness is impotent to the power of light, the absence of the Spirit is impotent to His presence: Satan is entirely impotent when confronted by the Holy Spirit. For example, when Jesus confronted the demon possessed man of Gadara (Mark 5:1-13) no conflict ensued. The demons simply pleaded for mercy: they were powerless against Him.

During Jesus' ministry, He served as the Light of the World. He was the tabernacle of the Lord, the special presence of God among men. Yet, Jesus presence to the disciples, after His resurrection was certainly the cornerstone of God's revelation for all of Christian history. Confounding the calculations of the Jewish authorities, the demoralized and frightened disciples became a band of people with an empowered mission and purpose[12] that would forever change the world.

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[11] Hodge, Charles. p 497.
[12] F. F. Bruce. (1972). p 205.

God's special presence in the New Testament era.

> *Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. (Matt. 5:14)*

Jesus stated these words to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. If we understand the role played by the Light of the World up to this point in history, we find that the light of which Jesus speaks is the special presence of God, a presence that has the power to defeat Satan. It was God's plan that people who live in a wicked and sinful world would turn to Him and appropriate this power.

> *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).*

The dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the heart and life of every true believer provides that power in the life of a Christian. When the Holy Spirit draws one to faith in Christ, He serves as the promise and seal of the salvation that such a testimony engenders. It is the Holy Spirit, who tabernacles in the heart and life of the believer, that is the source of power against Satan, sin, and death. Just as Satan has no power when confronted by the Holy Spirit, he has no power when confronted with a Spirit-filled Christian. What must a Christian do to defeat Satan?

The nature of worship has subtly changed since that experienced by the patriarchs of the Old Testament due to the change of the location of God's special presence.

> *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:7)*

Believers in Christ are now the light of the world. God dwells in them, just as he dwelt in the tent, in the tabernacle, and in the Spirit of Christ.

> *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; (1*

Corinthians 6:19)

Jesus describes the Christian as a "city on a hill." A city on a hilltop is visible from all around. During the day, its structures are evident. At night, its lights are visible for many miles. Likewise, when the Holy Spirit lives in the life of a faithful believer, His presence is evident like that city on a hill. The regeneration that took place in a Christian's life has changed his/her world view. Desires have changed so that one no longer seeks sin. Instead, the Spirit-filled Christian seeks to repent of the sins experienced in life. The Holy Spirit makes His presence known as God's agape love, a love that inspires compassion, mercy, and love for all people. That compassion and mercy will produce fruit, just as a vine produces fruit, as a Christian's nature will be to love others.

This worldview is alien to the world, but just as the city on a hill cannot be hid, the Holy Spirit within a Christian cannot be hid. Therefore, Christians carry an incredible responsibility in the world. God has chosen to make his special presence known to the world through the hearts and minds of Christians: hearts and minds that are obedient to the indwelling Holy Spirit.

> *And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory. (Exodus 29:43, KJV.)*

Worship no longer takes place on the mountain or in the temple because they are the tabernacle of God. The tabernacle is now in the heart of the believer, a place that has been sanctified by God's glory. When Christians gather for corporate worship, they are not going to the "temple" to meet God there. When Christians gather, they *are* the temple. Consequently, worship is no longer defined by legalistic and traditional ritual, but rather by the longing in one's heart for God. Where we would recognize the worship

of ancient Israel as a consistent, repeated ceremony, the worship of Christians is varied and spontaneous. It is interesting to note that Oscar Cullman, a "pillar" of New Testament scholarship, said the early church knew only two forms of ritual in the early church, those of the common meal (Eucharist) and baptism.[13] Cullman does not find any Jewish influence in early Christian worship, except for the Jewish prototypes upon which the Eucharistic service and Christian baptism have been developed.[14] Consequently, there is little similarity between corporate worship in ancient Jerusalem and corporate worship in the churches of the world today. Both the Eucharist and baptism, though applied in ancient religious practice has taken on a dramatic and fulfilled meaning. Both have come to "involve sharing the common life in the body of Christ with all other believers, and carry with them serious ethical corollaries which Christians ignore at their peril."[15] New Testament worship has become the fulfillment of Old Testament worship, not its continuation or replacement.

New Testament worship is characterized by the expression of personal adoration of God through any means that glorifies Him. Grudem states that New Testament worship is "the activity of glorifying God in His presences with our voices and hearts."[16] Christians tend to gather into groups with similar worship preferences, but the method of worship is not as relevant as the purpose of worship. Whether we worship God with ritual and liturgy, whether we worship God with music and dancing, whether we worship God in silent prayer, God's special presence in the heart of every believer empowers that

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[13] Cullman, O. p 30. Cited in Bebis.
[14] Bebis, George S. p 137
[15] F. F. Bruce. (1977). p 295.
[16] Grudem, Wayne. p 1003.

worship. Though current liturgical similarity to corporate worship with that of the ancients may be limited to baptism and a more narrowly applied Eucharist, the foundation of that worship is still based upon the covenants that God made with the ancient Jews. We can go back to the covenant at Sinai and find that as we affirm with faith in God the Ten Commandments and serve this world as a "nation of priests," the church is found fully-grounded in God's purpose. The task of the church is accomplished as God's special presence is expressed in the heart of each believer who worships Him, loves the people of the world that He created, and shares God's love with them.

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