

The Dwelling of God

by David Orton

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And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us ... John 1:14

God's purpose has always been to dwell with men.

From the beginning of time to its culmination, from Eden to the New Jerusalem, this has been his singular desire.

In the Garden, it was God's habit to come down and commune with the first human community, most probably at the close of each day (see Gen 3:8). Adam, in his rebellion, ran from God forsaking this intimate communion, cutting himself off from the presence of God, and plunging his progeny into its present darkness.

With this tragic failure, God intervened, calling Abraham and his seed, to whom he said, "...*have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them*" (Ex 25:8). Likewise, Israel rebelled time-and-again, forsaking the devotion of her youth, until finally her house was left to her desolate (see Jer 2:2; Mtt 23:38).

But God, in whom there is no variance, pursues with passion his purpose to dwell with men. Through redemptive history he has lived a peripatetic life, his manifest presence moving from the Garden, and then from one dwelling to another looking for a permanent place to live. As the Lord explained to David, "...*I have not dwelt in a house since the day that I brought up Israel to this day, but I have gone from tent to tent and from one dwelling place to another*" (1 Chr 17:5).

The God-Man

And so, finally, at the climax of history God declares of his own Son, the true Zion, "*This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it*" (Ps 132:14). The eternal word has finally found a permanent repose in human flesh, and "*dwells among us*" (Gr. *Skunoo* - 'to tabernacle'); God in Christ, becoming the fulfilment of all that the Old Testament dwellings foreshadowed. He is now the "dwelling of God", made without hands, and we have "beheld his glory". The *shekinah* glory (Heb. 'dwelling') no longer dwells in temporary tents and temples made by men, but now abides eternally in the God-man, Jesus Christ. The glory of God's own presence has settled into a human breast. And in his death, as the last Adam, he has terminated, once-and-for-all, the failure of the Adamic race to maintain communion with God. Rising, as the second man, he is the beginning of a new order—a race of king-priests whose redeemed and perfected humanity becomes the dwelling place of the living God. Blazing the trail into the presence of God, he has irrevocably joined, in himself, the human and the divine.

As the first and the 'last' (Rev 1:17) the *eschaton*, the end, has been realised in Christ. He is God's final word. As the writer to the Hebrews shows, "*God in these last days has spoken to us by his Son*" (Heb 1:2). In his humanity he has become, "*the radiance, the shining forth, of the Father's glory and the exact representation of his nature*" (Heb 1:3). He is the climax of all God's outshinings and the full manifestation of all that he is and does—"For in him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Col 2:9). In his person he has become the "*one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*" (1 Tim 2:5)—remarrying the human and the divine.

The prototype of a new humanity

Even so, the fullness of God is not found in Christ alone, but in the mystical union with his body, the church—"And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead...For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Col 1:18-19). As mentioned earlier, the God-man, Christ Jesus, has become the firstborn of a new order, the prototype of a new humanity.

And so, like Christ, his body now becomes the dwelling of God:

21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:21–22 ESV

The organic joining of the head and the body, of Christ and the believer, is integral to God finding a place in which to dwell. The outshining of God's glory is manifest from the head, through the body.

Consequently, *corporate* life will only flow from *inner* life. This is why any attempt to build church life without the Spirit is doomed to failure. And by this, I mean failure in God's eyes. Many build churches, which by man's estimation are successful, but in heaven's eyes have failed. What Christ obtained as the forerunner of the new order, as the firstborn from the dead, and as head of the body is only ours through vital union with him.

Identification with Christ

This happens through our identification with his suffering, death, and resurrection; first, through repentance and water baptism, and secondly, through our faith-appropriation of all that this signifies death to sin and rising to live in newness of life (see Rom 6:1-14). This is both objective and subjective. Objective, in that regardless of our personal experience Christ has died once-and-for-all to sin—he has both borne its penalty and broken its power which is an unchanging, historical, redemptive fact. Subjective, in that by reckoning on the objective fact I am experientially set free from the law of sin and death—set free to live under the new law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (see Rom 8:1-2).

This brings us to suffering. Paul taught that we are co-heirs with Christ of all the fullness of God, but that our full enjoyment of it was contingent on one thing – suffering – “...we are heirs—heirs of God and co- heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom 8:17).

Blazing the trail for us, Christ's own humanity was perfected through suffering—“*In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God...should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering*” (Hebrews 2:10). However, in the next breath the writer underscores the identification between Christ and the believer: “*Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same...*” (v 11). We are made holy through identification with Christ and his sufferings. And so, Paul cries out, “*that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead*” (Phi 3:10-11). Only as we are conformed to his death will we enter the full manifestation of his life.

Now, how does this work in practice?

Conformed to his image

In the context of Paul's discussion of our “*present sufferings*” and the consequent “*glory to be revealed in us*” (see Rom 8:18) he explains, “*...that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers*” (Rom 8:28-29).

Put very simply, all the circumstances of life, including suffering, are ordained of God to change us into the image of his Son – to reveal his glory in us. Depending on our response, the painful things either *turn* us or *twist* us. If we love him we will die to self, turning to him in humility and surrender, more closely identifying with the death of Christ, and thereby entering his life. If not, we become bitter, harbouring resentment toward God and those who have offended us.

Through the seeming minutiae of daily life God is raising up a new humanity in the image of his own Son. He is restoring them to perfect union (and communion) with himself, and with one another—“*for it is God who works in you both to will and do of his good pleasure*” (Phil 2:13).

As we surrender to the workings of God in the inner man the word is made flesh, the indwelling Christ is formed, and therefore, many will “*behold his glory*”.

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Revelation 21:3–4 ESV

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